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Caucus candidates disagree on defense spending

BY [HAYLEY BRUCE](#) | DECEMBER 02, 2011

Republican presidential-caucus candidates disagree on whether cuts to defense spending would undermine national security.

Though experts agree budget cuts are necessary to ease the federal deficit, they clash on whether reducing military spending would have a significant effect on the budget.

Benjamin Friedman, who studies defense at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., says the country's overwhelming military might has put the nation's defense spending in a position where there is "plenty of give."

"We have great security, and we don't have any really big enemies, and our military capabilities are vastly superior to all those enemies we do have," Friedman said. "So certainly there is plenty of money given so we could [cut defense spending] without endangering our security."

Since the terrorist attacks on 9/11, U.S. military spending has increased from \$312.7 billion in 2001 to \$698.2 billion in 2010, according to data from the [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#).

Since last April, the Obama administration has pushed for a spending freeze, which it says would cut \$400 billion out of the defense budget in the next 12 years.

But the federal deficit-reduction Supercommittee's recent failure to cut \$1.5 trillion from the budget could lead to even deeper cuts for the Defense Department — something some experts think will threaten the safety and prestige of the United States.

Tim Hagle, a UI associate professor of political-science, said it's hard to say if the United States would ever be attacked on its own soil to the degree it was during Pearl Harbor in WWII. However, countries that have the potential to gain nuclear weapons pose a serious enough threat that the United States need to remain poised for action, he said.

"It all goes back to Teddy Roosevelt's 'speak softly and carry a big stick,' " Hagle said. "The military is a big stick, and those countries need to respect our power. Those countries can make all those threats, but you know they don't have any capacity to back it up — but if all of a sudden the U.S. is attacked, and we don't respond, there's that fear that people will feel free to attack us even more."

Gary Schmitt, the director of Advanced Strategic Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, argues that cuts in defense spending would do nothing for the long-term deficit — driven by growth entitlements and domestic spending — and next to nothing for the short-term deficit caused by an ailing economy and declining tax revenues.

Instead, Schmitt suggests members in Congress should step back and first analyze our country's national-security priorities and adjust military spending accordingly.

"A lot of cuts are being made with too few in Congress and in the White House first asking, 'What role do we want the U.S. to play in the world?' " Schmitt said. "It's that discussion that should drive what military capabilities you need. Instead, we're just cutting and then hoping a strategy will result. Frankly, it's backwards."

And while Friedman said former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney's proposal to increase defense spending from 3.8 percent of gross domestic product to 4 percent is sustainable, it would force him to make cuts elsewhere, likely sacrificing entitlements because Romney has said he doesn't want to raise taxes.

"Unsustainability is not the same thing as dumb, and sustainability is not the same thing as wise," Friedman said. "And we have defense spending that's not only wasteful but actively counterproductive, and we're so busy around the world getting involved in other countries' business that it actually erodes our national security rather than heightening it."

Rep. Ron Paul, R-Texas, former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman, and former New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson have called for large cuts in defense spending, advocating for less involvement in foreign countries and a larger investment in securing the U.S.-Mexican border — an investment Schmitt said, when compared with other federal spending, including defense, is not that costly.

But even if cuts are not made to the Defense Department as a result of the failure of the Supercommittee to reach an agreement, other departments — including the Department of Veterans Affairs — will take a hit.

University of Iowa Veterans Center coordinator John Mikelson said such funding decreases will affect the 500 students using government funds to attend the UI on the GI Bill, as well as the 350 faculty and staff who identify as veterans.

"When the politicians planned for a war, they planned for tanks and bullets and the people to conduct it. They don't plan for the aftermath," Mikelson said. "... And when you start to make the cuts to the [benefit and health-care] programs, it's the 1 percent who have already served who wind up making sacrifices for the rest of the country because we're so disconnected from the rest of the military that, yeah, we can cut veterans first, because I don't know anyone who's serving."