



Obama re-election solidifies military policies

By John T. Bennett - November 6th, 2012

President Obama held off a late-autumn charge by GOP challenger Mitt Romney to secure a second term, etching in stone his plans for a smaller military and policies such as lethal drone strikes against al-Qaida targets.

Though polls showed the incumbent's lead in several key swing states and in Electoral College projections shrinking in the race's final month, Obama wrapped up the 270 votes needed to win the Electoral College around 11:20 p.m. on Election Day.

The president leaned heavily on his foreign policy and national security credentials throughout his re-election bid, touting his decision to green-light the bold raid into Pakistan that killed al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden and what he says is the drone campaign's weakening of al-Qaida.

And he did not run away from his plans to create a leaner, meaner military.

One of the campaign's most memorable moments came during the third and final debate between Obama and Romney. When his opponent slammed Obama's defense plans, the president shot back by lecturing his opponent on how technology has altered modern warfare.

"Our Navy is smaller now than at any time since 1917. The Navy said they needed 313 ships to carry out their mission," Romney said. "We're now at under 285. We're headed down to the low 200s if we go through a sequestration. That's unacceptable to me." (Sequestration is the process under which the \$500 billion cut would occur.)

Obama responded with a veiled statement about how technology has altered modern warfare.

“You mentioned the Navy, for example, and that we have fewer ships than we did in 1916. Well, governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets, because the nature of our military’s changed,” Obama said.

“We have these things called aircraft carriers, where planes land on them. We have these ships that go underwater, nuclear submarines.

“And so the question is not a game of ‘Battleship,’ where we’re counting ships,” the president said, referring to the popular board game. “It’s ‘What are our capabilities.’”

Sources say the national security sector and defense industry had many questions about how Romney would spend the additional funds he vowed to devote to military budgets. The GOP candidate and his surrogates were surprisingly vague about the GOP nominee’s plans.

But analysts say they know exactly what they’re getting with a second Obama term.

“President Obama’s plans for the military are well known,” says Loren Thompson of the Lexington Institute.

In fact, defense firms, consultants, analysts and congressional staffers have analyzed Obama’s defense plans since he sent his most recent Pentagon spending plan to Congress in February. That budget blueprint followed a strategic review, and together those documents brought an end to the post-9/11 era. It proposed slashing the size of America’s ground forces while also stressing the importance of air and naval platforms.

That Obama administration review and budget plan were the collective beginning of what officials dubbed a “pivot” away from the Middle East and toward Asia.

The 2013 Obama defense budget plan safeguarded programs administration officials say would be key in the Asian theater: a new long-range Air Force bomber, an aerial tanker fleet, new destroyers and new submarines. It also kept the bulk of the troubled F-35 fighter program intact.

With the Iraq war over and the Afghanistan conflict set to end in 2014, Obama is sticking by plans to shrink the Army to 490,000 active-duty troops and the Marine Corps to 186,000 Leathernecks over the next five years.

While these are the hardware and end-strength plans Obama has proposed for carrying out his Asia pivot, experts are still scratching their heads about what the shift will look like.

“I think Obama will have to clarify a bit more just what he means by the pivot. He will have to put some substance behind the rhetoric and really explain it early on in the second term,” says Christopher Preble of the CATO Institute. “For example, there are

some serious issues in terms of territorial disputes in the region. There are disputes between Japan and South Korea, and, of course, between China and multiple countries. ... The administration will have to clarify the U.S. position on those sorts of things as part of the pivot.”

Obama pushed European leaders to stay in Afghanistan until the end of 2014, along with U.S. forces. But he also has talked vaguely about some number of U.S. troops staying there to carry out special operations missions and continue training Afghan forces.

“It’s time for him to go beyond saying 2014 will be the end for most U.S. troops in Afghanistan [but] then we will have some sort of an enduring presence,” Preble says. “That’s fine, but what is that presence, and how much will it cost? He’ll have to explain that.”

It is now apparent Obama will be tasked with negotiating with Congress to avoid twin \$500 billion cuts to planned defense and domestic spending over 10 years that would be enacted Jan. 2 unless a \$1.2 trillion deficit-paring plan is enacted.

The president has said he would veto any bill that excludes new federal revenue; congressional Republicans so far have stood firm in their collective opposition to any new revenues. Will Obama give in to avoid the sequestration cuts?

“[Obama’s] strategy for reducing the budget deficit is not [well known],” says Thompson. “Since he shows little inclination to rein in entitlement programs during his second term, I have to assume defense spending will continue drifting downward as the administration seeks politically palatable ways of cutting the deficit.”

Sources expect the Obama win means any large deficit-reduction deal would include some new federal revenues and at least \$20 billion in defense cuts for at least five — or up to 10 — years.