Notes:
1. Below are informal notes taken by a JHU/APL staff member at the Seminar.
2. Video and audio versions of the Seminar are available in the Video Archives

Dr. O’Hanlon began by noting that his talk would cover the area where politics meets defense. He explained that in the campaign season messages tend to get blurred. His intention was to identify the specifics that the candidates have provided and highlight which concepts were more aspirational. His talk would also look at what might happen in Syria and Iran since any discussions of defense budgets need to take into account the possibility of the enormous costs of a potential war.

Views from the Presidential Debates & Speeches
President Obama said that Governor Romney wants to spend $2 trillion ($2T) more than DoD wants
• Romney has not rebutted this, but he probably could
• The President used certain assumptions about Romney’s plans to get to the $2T figure

Both candidates can be said to be against sequestration, but...
• Obama supports the first round of cuts of $487 billion ($487B) from the Budget Control Act
  o But that it is measured against the previous Pentagon plan which for allowed growth
  o The real figure should be more like $350B measured from the Congressional Budget Office baseline which only adjusts for inflation
• Romney has said that he would reverse the Obama cuts
  o Assumes that means the $487B relative to the previous plan
  o With no identified specifics this may also mean cuts announced by SecDef Gates
    ▪ Gates originally kept the topline the same and only reallocated funds
    ▪ In a second round Gates cut about $100B over 5 years or $200B over 10 years
• Bottom line: Over 10 years can identify a difference of about $400-600B – not $2T

On the Romney campaign website (not in speeches) the defense team called for an “aspirational” goal of linking defense spending to GDP and keeping it at 4% indefinitely
• Budget currently running slightly over 4% of GDP in outlay terms but will be falling
• In Obama plan the budget, only rising with inflation, would dwindle to about 3% of GDP
• “Aspirational” is always a nice idea but it largely equals: “I don’t really mean it” or “We won’t have the money to do it”
Romney has indicated in his speeches that he does care about the deficit
- He also recognizes that calling for significant cuts in entitlements is not good politics
- Romney is trying to soften up talk of entitlement reform in rhetoric
- Obama is avoiding the topic all together
- Both talk about whose entitlements will be cut more, not about deficit reductions
- Bottom line: any defense budget plan that is preceded by *aspirational* is close to meaningless

Obama’s defense budget can use Romney’s website plan as the start of his comparison to get to $2T
- But Obama doesn’t factor in decreasing war costs, which it should, to make a fair comparison
- Real difference between the two plans would be only about $500B not $2T over 10 years
  - Still a real difference between them but with only a 10% differential
  - Not as big a difference as the candidates want people to believe

Congress and the DoD Budget
Once a president’s budget is established, it must be submitted to Congress – then theory meets reality

If Obama wins (probably about a 55% chance at the moment), the Democrats will probably hold the Senate, but not the House
- Obama would probably try to settle budget issues in the lame duck session, but would be willing to go over the fiscal cliff in January
- Obama needs the tax cuts to go away at least temporarily on their own
- Republicans, even those who signed the no-tax pledge, would then have to negotiate
- Obama starts with a clean slate in January
  - Could then give a little in early negotiations
  - Could also berate the Republicans in public because he did win
- Obama’s stand would be that he holds 2 of the 3 parts of the government so a compromise should be 55-65% on his terms and 35-45% on that of the Republicans
  - Might include the idea of doing this for a 4-10 year period to eliminate these fiscal crises
  - Obama would want to solve these issues while he has some sway after the win
- Obama would then be willing to do a deal that might include accepting some more defense cuts beyond those of the initial 2011 Budget Control Act
  - Cuts would still be much less than Sequestration
  - Proposals have been made for cuts of about $100B beyond the $487B plan
- Bottom line: Democrats would probably be comfortable with at least $100B beyond Pentagon planned cuts but much less than the $500B of Sequestration
  - Hawks in the Republican Party should take this deal if they can get it
    - Given all the other cuts that will be required throughout the government
    - DoD’s budget would still be 45% of global defense spending
  - This is a combination of analysis and political speculation

If Romney wins, he would have to reverse some of the Obama cuts because he said he would
- But unless Republicans take both houses of Congress, he would probably leave some of the cuts
  - Would have problems with the deficit no matter what
- If you do the math on the two budget plans, neither looks good, but Romney’s is a little worse
  - Based on neutral think tank analysis efforts
- Romney will have deficit problems but has said “of course” he would balance the budget
Because he has always balanced budgets before
Lots of governors have thought the same way but found out differently when president
Still doesn’t want to upset too many people by radically cutting entitlement

- Predictions if Romney wins:
  - He also won’t worry about getting agreements in the lame duck session
    - Fiscal cliff in January would help his negotiating position, too
  - Won’t want to reverse all the Obama cuts
  - Will say eliminating the Obama cuts was his goal but then go into negotiations and reverse some but not all the cuts because of deficit concerns

Budget bottom line: even rhetorically the difference between the two candidates is much smaller than either makes it sound

- Their differences in governing would probably be even less
- No matter who wins, the Defense Budget will be under some pressure

**Budget Specifics**

President Obama’s plans are known because of his recent defense plan documenting the $478B in cuts

- Used alternative force posture and weapons modernization plans to get there
- Like every plan in the past this one also called for $60B in “efficiency savings”
  - Never really works
  - Example: DoD tried privatization in the 1990s but that went too far
    - Didn’t save that much money and caused severe unintended consequences such as with the switch to large numbers of private security firms in Iraq
  - Always find some new fad, most have some utility but never really save enough
  - Plan does not even try to identify these savings options, just says they will be found
  - See 2002 CSBA study *Promoting Efficiency in the Department of Defense: Keep Trying, But Be Realistic*
    - Discussed the difficulty of finding $100M here or there in efficiencies
    - Now DoD expected to find $60B in such savings
  - The figure of $60B would be bigger if the plan did not assume that all weapons costs will stay the same in future – everything will be built at the budgeted funding
    - But studies have shown that the FDIP is always underfunded

- President Obama will have hard time even getting to $478B in reductions but will try by:
  - Bringing ground force (Army and Marines) numbers down by 100,000 troops
    - Both services would still be slightly larger than they were in the 1990s
    - Could debate whether this is a sufficiently austere number
  - Cutting a few weapons systems (latest Global Hawk, C-27, etc.) that weren’t performing as well as DoD had hoped
    - Also stretching out some modernization efforts
    - Generally, not hurting systems that are well supported in DoD
    - Should be able to go further in such cuts
  - Reducing military pay increases and other personnel costs
  - Making some modest reductions in force structure by retiring a couple of Navy ships and a few Air Force squadrons

Governor Romney has said he would reverse most of the Obama cuts

- Major efforts would involve
  - Definitely reversing cuts and returning ground force to their 2007-2009 levels
Wants a bigger Navy with more carrier presence in the MidEast region
• Had few specifics to work with since Obama did not cut all that much, only nibbled away
  o Romney could not say that he was bringing back production of big ticket systems recognizable by the public because none were cut
• Romney is calling for building 15 Navy ships rather than Obama’s 9
  o Expect to get to the 315-325 level depending on the speeches of recent CNOs
  o Sounds like Romney is serious about the Navy and would likely build these ships
    ▪ But ships take time to build – wouldn’t see increases until the end of his term
• Romney may want bigger Navy to get tough with China
  o But China as a military threat does not get much play in Romney speeches
  o Romney does talk about China as an economic issue
  o Some of his team are worried about China
  o Called Russia our top geo-strategic threat
  o Avoiding military issues with China may be both good politics and a good strategy
• Romney only really talking about a change in MidEast operations for the Navy
  o Wants a carrier in the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf most of the time
  o Now: average of about 1.6-1.7 covering these areas so Romney wants to go to 2
• Bottom line: Differences between these candidates on defense are not like the big differences between Nixon and McGovern, but also aren’t trivial on size of ground forces, Navy, budget
  o Can’t say much more because the candidates have not said much on these subjects
  o Could itemize similarities but that would just be listing current policy

Missile Defense and Nuclear Weapons Policies
Candidates have not been very specific, so can only infer their views

Nuclear issue: See the debate on the new START treaty in the lame duck session of 2010
• Romney was very much against it and wrote a strong Washington Post op-ed piece
• Nearly all former Republican Secretaries of State and Defense considered it reasonable
  o May not have been that enthusiastic
  o May not have considered it that important but Romney did
• Russia’s Putin was not happy about it either

O’Hanlon’s recently published The Opportunity: Next Steps in Reducing Nuclear Arms makes the case that it would be in the interest of both US and Russia to reduce numbers
• Cuts should come from both tactical and surplus weapons
  o Would bring tactical numbers down to about 2,500 and strategic down to about 1,000
  o Would save money for both and preserve parity while keeping great superiority over any other potential adversary
• Can be sure that Putin doesn’t want any more arms control no matter who wins
• Candidates certainly aren’t debating the issue
  o Romney would not call for reconverting subs back to SSBN missions
  o Can only infer from debates of 2 years ago so can’t make too much of it

Missile Defense in Europe – the new phased adaptive approach
• Obama starting to deploy the system in 4-stage increments through 2018
• Final increment would be deploying interceptors and radars to Poland, Czech Republic – the element that the Russians really find objectionable
• Obama Administration plan not that much different than the Bush plan
  o SecDef Gates said that this was just a better plan as it evolved
  o Not really a decision of either Presidents Bush or Obama
  o New plan gives the US a little more technical capabilities early on, makes Russians less angry – at least for awhile
  o Republicans and Democrats did not play a big part in developing the plan
• Problem: President Obama was heard telling Medvedev in Korea recently that he would have more flexibility after the election but has not explained what he meant
  o Romney responded in Convention speech that if he wins, Russia would see more US backbone on this topic
  o Must assume that both are talking about the fourth adaptability increment but neither says what flexibility toward Putin really means
• Bottom line: the real differences are not as great as the candidates make out in their rhetoric

**Looming Potential Military Interventions**
Can’t talk about the budget without taking into account potential wars
• Wars cause great damage to any planned budget
• A war could cost $20B to $200B per year – not to mention the national security aspects
• Still looks like the differences aren’t that great
  o Obama likes to say: I’m the guy who killed bin Laden but I’m also ending the wars
  o Romney says: No energy left in Obama’s foreign policy and can’t even protect diplomats; so I’m the real hawk and he’s the wimp
• Candidates want to make it sound as though they are having the national security debates of old, but not they are not making their cases

**Syria**
• Romney team members have said in the past that if Romney wins, he would arm the opposition
  o Obama has not wanted to arm them
  o Opposition getting some weapons from Saudi Arabia; US may be doing some training
    ▪ US doesn’t want to get too involved – wants to be able to be the negotiator
    ▪ This is a standard US tactic when it does not want to get involved
  o Even this mild difference was too much and the Romney campaign pulled back so the official campaign position does not go that far
• Romney does not want to get too far beyond what Obama has been doing
  o Doesn’t talk about the US arming the opposition – get the allies to do it for us
    ▪ May still be a meaningful difference
  o Given all the interventions that the US has been involved in over the last few decades, it is interesting to see what a narrow range of the spectrum is being debated
    ▪ Neither really wants to arm the opposition
      • Obama wants the allies to do it with the US providing some training
      • Romney wants to try harder to get the allies to do it
    ▪ Nor does either candidate want to:
      • Set up a no-fly zone
      • Support the Turks in establishing a safe zone at their border
      • Put American boots on the ground
• What the candidates would do if elected:
  o Romney might be more assertive but not talking about it now
• Maybe would go further with no-fly zone, etc. — if first efforts fail
  o Obama might feel some guilt over seeing Syrian civilians get slaughtered
    ▪ He did take pride about activity in Libya and the bin Laden raid
• Bottom line: either candidate might easily be pushed into doing more over time once in office
  o Hard to tell which one would be more likely to go further
  o Not enough to go on – both show elements of resolution and constraint

**Afghanistan**

• May be more difference here that with Syria
• In the Vice Presidential Debate Biden kept saying that the US would be out in 2014
  o Not exactly the Administration policy
  o President signed a treaty in Afghanistan about staying on longer in different capacity
    ▪ But still no status of forces agreement
    ▪ May never get one and would be in the same situation as with Iraq
      • US wanted to stay longer but could not agree on the terms
  o In any case the mission will change in 2014 to be more about support, training, etc.
    ▪ But Biden said the US would be out
  o Biden was aware that Americans are tired of the war so for political reasons wanted to be as emphatic as possible
    ▪ Ryan did not push him on the concept
    ▪ Biden probably won that point
• Neither side has said how fast the US should pull out
  o General Allen said the question needs more analysis but he would prefer to stay longer
  o Romney not ready to commit
    ▪ Says: I’ll listen to my generals – at least more than Obama does
    ▪ Avoids talking of any numbers
• Romney does appear to be a little more resolute and hawkish on this
• Those supporting the Afghan effort worried that Obama would have cut more forces by now given that the last cut was in mid-2011
  o Good that Obama has let this play out and is waiting for Allen’s analysis
• Neither candidate will be concrete about numbers until after the election
  o Obama: showing more patience than his rhetoric indicates; wants to sound like ending it
  o Romney only saying that he will wait to talk to his commanders
• Bottom line: Really not much difference between the candidates on Afghanistan

**Iran**

• There are big differences here
• If there is a war, the opponent would be the biggest since the US fought China in Korea
• Romney is slightly more hawkish
• Obama doesn’t want to be the next big US “preempter” of MidEast WMD since he ran against the Bush foreign policy legacy on this in 2008 – would be ironic
  o Bush stopped Israel from striking Iran so presume that Obama would stop them, too
• Obama has said that an Iranian nuclear capability would be unacceptable
  o Has said containment is not an option
  o Used active voice to say that “we will prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon”
    ▪ Sounds like not just asking Israel to do it but maybe just rhetoric
• Romney may have sounded even more emphatic and hawkish on this
o In Israel said that he would not interfere with their sovereign right to conduct military operations they believe are necessary for their own state security
o Did not propose any US action only that it might be acceptable for Israel to act
o May not be the entirety of his thinking on the subject
  ▪ Might still have the US take action in certain situations
• If list all that both candidates have said about Iran:
  o Would still be hard to make sense of their real views
  o Would be hard to tell who is the more hawkish
• O’Hanlon said that his position may be more left of either of their views
  o Not sure that it would make sense to preempt Iran unless they kicked out the IAEA inspectors and go to 90% enrichment and did so over a couple of months
  o Most of the talk doesn’t presume that the inspectors are kicked out and assumes that enrichment remains at 20%
    ▪ Not clear that preemption would be the best choice then
  o Really a conundrum for both candidates
    ▪ Don’t want war with Iran
    ▪ Don’t want an Iranian nuclear weapon
• Can hope that the sanctions squeeze will lead to negotiations
  o Either candidate is probably more willing to compromise here than he is letting on
  o Might let Iran keep some centrifuges and some enriched uranium if could cap how much more they developed
    ▪ Would want to get out some of the existing centrifuges and uranium
• Bottom line: still not much difference in policy on Iran between the two candidates

Conclusion:
• Very little difference between the candidates on any defense or foreign policy issue
  o Probably least difference between presidential candidates than has been the case for several decades
• Make your presidential choice on the basis of domestic or economic policy since there is not enough difference between the candidates to decide using defense or foreign policy alone

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION

Re: “Red Lines”
While the President has frequently used the term “red lines” that should not be crossed in many issues (Iranian nuclear weapons, etc.), Governor Romney has used similar language
• Internationally agreed: the Syrian regime’s use of chemical weapons would be crossing a line
• Both candidates agree: Iran’s acquiring a nuclear weapon is crossing a line
• Problem: It is hard to identify the lines that come just before the red lines – really a red zone
  o Hard to decide at what point in a continuum it is time to act
• Romney and Obama are in a similar place on Iran – situation has gone on too long
  o If Israel wants to attack tomorrow, won’t stand in their way – meaning that already uncomfortable with the situation in Iran
  o But Iran has not yet gone over that last threshold for either candidate
• About Strait of Hormuz: any American president over last 40 years would fight to keep it open
• About Syria:
If Assad started using chemical weapons, they would probably be delivered using aircraft and artillery. Any response would involve a no-fly zone and attacks on large equipment:

- No way to tell which shells, aircraft had chemical loads
- Would be like US mission in Bosnia in 1995
- Attacks would also damage Assad’s conventional capabilities, too
- Too late for the US to step back then
  - Can’t say: we’ll attack you until you stop using chemical weapons and go back to using only conventional weapons on civilian neighborhoods
  - Interventions won’t be able to be stopped at that point
- In the end US does pose a creditable threat if Syria has thought it through so this may be a red line that Syria respects
  - About Iran: Red line may not be the right phrase here – unclear what would be the real red line would be

**Re: China and Russia**

*On China* – very little difference in viewpoints

- See Brookings book *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* by Jeffrey Bader written after leaving the Obama Administration
  - Supports idea that the US needs to be throwing more elbows when dealing with China
- Both candidates are talking to a public already uneasy about US jobs and state of the economy
  - They are looking for support to be more economically confrontational with China
  - But both know that there is only a limited amount that a president could do
- Romney says that he would declare China a currency manipulator on his first day
  - But China’s currency value has risen 13% under Obama
  - Not sure that the Romney tactic would do much good

*On Russia* – may see more striking differences

- Obama is taking a Nixon/Kissinger approach – setting priorities in relations with Russia
  - Strategy was written to follow those priorities
  - Russian democracy and human rights are lower priorities
  - Obama really wants Russian help on Iran and Afghanistan, to lesser degree Syria
    - Despite differences Russia allowed US transports through several northern routes to Afghanistan when Pakistan closed their routes
    - Could argue that these open routes were an outcome of Obama’s Reset effort
- Romney and Putin might easily have a bad relationship
  - Putin worries most about the US as a world hegemon
  - Putin was a KGB officer and regards the Soviet collapse as greatest 20th century tragedy
    - Upset when sees US getting UN and allies to help in Libya and now maybe Syria
    - Hates to see the US as the only superpower
  - Romney’s relation with Putin at the start might be bad but could improve
  - Putin could easily be unhelpful on N. Korea, Iran, etc., if he feels unduly challenged by the US

**Re: What if Obama wins but the Republicans take both Houses of Congress?**

This does not appear to be a very likely at this time but if it did happen, the Republicans...

- Would have to be careful when figuring out their messaging
Who really won?
What does the election mean?
What if we had a better candidate?
  • Romney is really a moderate but had to move to the right to get the nomination
  • Moving back toward center made him look like a flip-flopper
  
• Could say: Americans prefer Republicans to Democrats so not going to give an inch
• Could claim that Congress is equal to the President in Constitutional powers
• Would have to decide how confrontational they would want to be with the President
  o Not clear how that would go
  o Look at their earlier claims that their number one priority was to get Obama out
    • Same Republican leadership would likely be in power

Best guess: Congressional Republican majority would try to double-down
• Could consider election a slight mandate for themselves
• Could lead to showdown on issues starting with the budget
  o Plans for both sides don’t add up
  o When sides are fighting over a plan, what usually remains are the worst parts of both
• Both sides likely to overestimate their strengths

Bottom line: Worst possible situation

Re: Romney’s Likely Advisors
• George W. Bush selected both internationalists and neo-conservatives for his cabinet
  o Before 9/11 could not tell which side was stronger given the personalities involved
  o In general, takes a year or so to know which cabinet officers will be most influential
• Most of current foreign policy advisors appear to be smart, moderate, reasonable people
  o Includes Mitchell Reese, Rich Williamson, Cofer Black, Bob Zellick
  o Day-to-day advisor is Dan Senor, associated with early days of the Iraq invasion
    • Was Bush spokesman, where can’t give own opinion
    • Can’t call him extremist because he was a spokesman during an extreme time
• Bottom line: Romney likely to lean more toward pragmatic advisors
  o But will be new at the game to start with
• Obama’s foreign policies have generally been solid, but had few hard choices in his first year
  o Example: did not have to decide about taking out bin Laden that first year
  o A President Romney might very quickly face hard choices: Go into Syria? Strike Iran?
    • Yes or no decisions
    • Obama’s decisions were incremental and, therefore, easier
  o Obama made some mistakes at first – hoping to have a normal relation with Iran
    • Was able to make changes quickly and use a more muscular approach
• Romney’s decision will be to go to war or not – can’t take that back
  o Hard to say if better to stick with the candidate who has had the years of experience
  o A President Romney won’t have much time to learn on the job

Re: How Iran’s Leadership Sees the Two US Presidential Candidates
• In 2008 Iran saw McCain as the follow-on of George W. Bush in foreign policy
• Early on Obama reached out a hand to Iran but Iran slapped it down
  o Saw him as weak
  o However, Obama did a good job building up the coalition for sanctions against Iran
• Iran would be concerned that Romney would want to change things
Might be willing to drop some bombs on their nuclear facilities
Rightly seen as closely affiliated with Israel

- Iranian hardliners who would be willing to accept the risk of having their nuclear facilities bombed might prefer Romney
  - Probably believe that the nuclear program would be set back for a few years, but that they would eventually get a nuclear weapon
  - Know how to compete with this type of America
  - Would prefer this to a situation where sanctions cut 66-75% of oil exports, jeopardizing the stability of the regime and the capability to cause trouble around the world
- Bottom line: Iran might see that they have more to fear from Obama but the differences between the two candidates is not that great

Re: Rebalancing toward the Pacific

- Rebalancing changes in the US position are not that big
  - Military is only one part of the shift – other parts of the government also involved
  - Idea is that working with allies provides a greater sense of unity
    - So far, US is getting in China’s face in just the right amount – not overly provocative
    - Important when China has been something of a bully about disputed seaways while not saying enough about N. Korea’s bad behavior
  - China set itself up for a push back
- Impressive that US got a lot of effect from a minimal amount of repositioning of forces
  - In S. Korea, not really changing much, only moving south, not adding troops
  - In Japan, moving large numbers of troops out to Guam but this is very costly
    - Could save more by bringing troops back to California and do more with prepositioned ships
      - However, this would look like pulling back from the Pacific
  - Not talking about moving another carrier to Japan or putting even one in Hawaii
  - Deploying 2,000 Marines on short-term rotations to Australia won’t mean much against armies in the region with 250,000-500,000 troops
    - Distance to contentious areas are equal to that between Costa Rica and NY
  - Saying that 60% of Navy is in the Pacific doesn’t mean much because Persian Gulf can be patrolled from either the Atlantic or the Pacific
    - As easy to get there from San Diego as from the Atlantic, especially given the uncertainties in Egypt around Suez Canal
- Bottom line: Obama Administration has done quite well with minimal effort
  - Did not want to be more provocative than necessary – right tone
  - Did not want to spend more money than necessary