



How will they handle the world?

By Julianna Parker

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— Although foreign policy has taken a back seat to the economy in the presidential campaign, the issue is still vitally important, a panel of international and area studies faculty members said Tuesday at the University of Oklahoma.

The professors discussed the foreign policy challenges of that will face the next president and examined the stated and supposed foreign policies of Sens. John McCain and Barack Obama.

Alan McPherson, associate professor of international and area studies and Conoco Phillips chair in Latin American studies, organized the event to address the issues that have been dwarfed in recent weeks by the economic meltdown.

"Foreign policy will occupy a president 50 percent of their time in office," he said. And most decisions the president will make in foreign affairs won't be calculated policies.

"Eighty percent of that time is responding to crises," McPherson said.

Because most of those decisions depend on character and level thinking under pressure, he said, it can be hard to predict what the two presidential candidates would do in office. McPherson said he was skeptical of any plans made by the candidates during their campaigns.

OU students filled the lecture hall in the Physical Science Center Tuesday to hear the roundtable discussion about foreign policy. Zach Messitte, head of the International Programs Center, moderated the discussion and each of the five panelists spoke about an area of foreign affairs they were knowledgeable about.

Eric Heinze, assistant professor of political science and international and area studies, spoke about the two candidates' stand on the use of military intervention on humanitarian issues. Both take about the same stand on it, Heinze said -- offering to support humanitarian issues around the globe but only in cases of extreme need.

Obama, however, is more likely to use the military in humanitarian crises and more likely to get international help in the endeavor, Heinze said.

Young Hun Kim, an expert on Korea, spoke about the differences between the two candidates in their stand on Korea. While both McCain and Obama take hard-line policies against North Korea, Kim said McCain will continue the policies instituted by Bush and Obama has said he will try to open up communication with North Korea. There are dangers on both sides, and neither one is guaranteed to make any headway in convincing North Korea to end its proliferation of nuclear weapons, Kim said.

Joshua Landis, an expert on the Middle East and Syria specifically, said the two candidates' foreign policies diverge greatly in the area of the Middle East. McCain wants to win the war in Iraq, as long as it takes.

Obama wants to pull the troops out of Iraq as soon as possible and put them in Afghanistan.

Obama also wants to open up communication with Iran and Syria, Landis said.

"It's clear that Syrians, as much of the world, are voting for Obama," he said. That is mostly because Obama represents a change from the violent, hard-line policies of Bush, he said. And it's true that his vision of power differs from McCain and Bush, Landis said.

McCain sees foreign affairs from a more black-and-white perspective that is colored with his ideology, as exemplified by his unflinching support of the promotion of democracy, Landis said. Obama, on the other hand, has indicated that he is more willing to take other countries as they are and try to work with them, Landis said. Obama has said the U.S. should be for democracy, but it can't force it on unwilling nations, Landis said.

McPherson spoke about Latin American issues. On this topic, McCain is much more knowledgeable, having been born and spent much time there, McPherson said.

Economic aid to Latin America would be affected by the recent economic crisis, McPherson said. McCain has said he would freeze all spending not related to national defense or social security, so that would mean no new aid to Latin America, McPherson said. Obama originally planned to double the U.S.' foreign aid contribution, but has recently said he would slow that down owing to the financial crisis.

Mitchell P. Smith, professor of international and area studies and political science, spoke last about the two candidates' economic policy.

The two candidates differ on issues of trade, he said. McCain views trade agreements as a reward for countries who support the U.S., Smith said, while Obama views it as an extension of his international humanitarian efforts. McCain recently criticized Obama for not supporting the Columbian free trade agreement. McCain supports it because Columbia has been friendly with the U.S., but Obama opposes it because there aren't enough protections in it for unions, Smith said.

Smith, however, reminded the audience that any prediction of the actions of the future presidents are merely conjecture. Each has their own set of challenges.

If McCain were to be elected president, he would work with a Democratic Congress that would block many of the initiatives he would like to accomplish, like supporting fair trade agreements.

Likewise, Obama would have the support of Congress, but many of his plans would come up against domestic pressure, Smith said. In a time of economic crisis, the business community in the U.S. is going to push him to approve trade agreements.

The financial crisis has affected a lot of the plans of Obama, as well as McCain, Smith said.

Foreign policy goals may fall by the wayside when the economic meltdown is screaming from every front page in America.

"This may be the area that is first to go," Smith said.

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