

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3319
July 21, 2011

How Defense Budget Cuts Impact the Military and Make America Less Safe

Mackenzie Eaglen

Today, America is asking its military to do more than ever before. In the past 24 months alone, U.S. military forces have conducted their 10th year of combat operations in Afghanistan, wound down operations in Iraq, started a new no-fly zone in Libya, dramatically escalated counterterrorism operations in Yemen, maintained counter-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia and elsewhere, sent troops to aid in disaster relief in Haiti and Japan, and even maintained the commitment to keep 1,200 National Guard troops along the south-west border—to name a few things keeping the military busy these days.

As long as politicians continue asking the military to shoulder ever-increasing burdens in pursuit of America's national interests, Washington cannot expect those in uniform to simply get by or “make do” with lower budgets.

Trying to Repeat 1990s Defense Cuts When the World Is Much Different, Risks Growing. Defense cuts in the 1990s led to direct consequences and casualties when America went to war after 9/11. When U.S. forces were sent to Iraq without adequate body armor protection or up-armored vehicles, the country was outraged. Families were forced to mail body armor to soldiers overseas, troop transports lacking modernized armor were left unnecessarily vulnerable to roadside bomb attacks, combat operations were doubled in length and possibly cost lives, and conditions at medical centers such as Walter Reed reached inexcusable levels.

Moreover, America's ground forces were too small to prosecute well both Iraq and Afghanistan simultaneously. The result was a shift in focus on Iraq while U.S. forces tried to hold the line in Afghanistan. The cost to the taxpayer was a dramatically lengthened operation, and the cost in national treasure is still being paid.

Unfortunately, all of these outcomes were entirely predictable and their roots formed in budget-driven decisions made by Congress and the President just a few years prior.

Implications of a Half-Trillion-Dollar Military Cut, for Starters. Booms and busts—that is the typical funding pattern for America's military. And it almost never saves money in the long run. Trying to force another “bust” while the military continues fighting is much riskier today. The Reagan buildup created a cushion that allowed defense investment to be deferred in the 1990s and even in this decade while military operations escalated.

But defense budget increases since 9/11 have generated little cushion. They have largely been consumed by current operations, not on future preparedness. Exacerbating the strain is the fact that the war in Iraq was not preceded by a mobilization.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3319>

Produced by the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

In April, President Obama denounced his own 2012 budget request sitting on Capitol Hill and called for \$400 billion in security cuts over the next decade. One of the first consequences of \$400–\$500 billion in military cuts would be to slice soldiers and Marines from the force and return the Army and Marine Corps to their 1990s levels. These personnel levels would allow the nation to sustain only one protracted operation overseas, but they would be insufficient to conduct two simultaneous ground efforts. This would eliminate the Pentagon's long-standing two-war force planning construct through the back door. Most worrisome, this size force would immediately reduce options available to the commander in chief if a crisis arises while American forces are already committed elsewhere.

This level of cuts would also see the elimination of many overseas bases that serve as stops on a global highway the U.S. military needs to access forward assets and evacuate and treat the wounded from the Central Command region. This would increase the cost and length of time to surge forces from the continental United States.

These cuts would also see the cancellation of what is left of the Pentagon's meager modernization plans for future military equipment. Some of the many pending long-term projects crucial to winning future conflicts—as well as deterrence, which saves money—such as a new bomber, next-generation stealthy helicopter, new nuclear submarine, and various space, satellite, and missile defense capabilities could become victims of this plan.

Not only would this effectively turn the nuclear triad into a diad or worse, but it could essentially leave submarines as the only realistic long-range strike platform to confront the growing threat of anti-access and area-denial capabilities. Since submarines face long trips back to port after firing their missiles, the sortie generation rate of a long-range strike force consisting almost exclusively of submarines would be extremely low. In this kind of scenario, the United States could easily be “locked out” of the vital Asian littorals.

Implications of Up to \$1 Trillion in Defense Cuts. As in the \$400 billion scenario, Army and Marine Corps end strength return to 1990s levels, reducing capabilities to conduct any opera-

tions, including humanitarian aid and allied partner capacity building.

Many other vital elements of force structure would also disappear, such as one or two Navy carrier strike groups. A large part of America's missile defense program would be scaled back as well. This means not only cuts to missile sites on U.S. soil but also to sea-based missile defense platforms, such as Aegis cruisers and destroyers needed to maintain America's nuclear umbrella.

Nuclear forces would be a major casualty under these reductions. Not only would the nation see drastic reductions in stockpiles of ground-based nuclear weapons, but nuclear modernization programs—like those promised as part of a deal to pass the New START treaty—would be left behind. It would become ever more likely that the Air Force's next generation bomber would be eliminated entirely, along with the Navy's Ohio-class replacement submarine.

The so-called Bowles–Simpson plan implicitly assumes that the U.S. will be engaged in one medium-sized conflict in 2015 and does not achieve savings by end strength reductions. Instead, most of the cuts come from modernization accounts or procurement and research and development.

This plan, along with several others like it, reduces procurement spending by 15 percent through 2015. Much of this is achieved through the cancellation of the Marine Corps's Maritime Prepositioning Force, the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, and the V-22 Osprey.

Procurement of the much-needed F-35 Joint Strike Fighter takes a large hit, as well. The Air Force and Navy versions of the F-35 are cut by fully one-half, while the Marine Corps version is outright cancelled—even though this is the only aircraft set to replace three different Marine air capabilities today.

These cuts would only increase the looming technological gap between the United States and others, such as India, Russia, and China, all of which are seeking to build fifth-generation-plus tactical fighters. Even before the introduction of China's stealthy J-20, multiple simulations of air combat scenarios in the South China Sea have the United States losing to China because of a sheer disadvantage in numbers.

The F/A-18E/F Super Hornet is a stop-gap capability but cannot serve as a next-generation air superiority and strike fighter in combat environments where stealth is increasingly rendered less effective. The F-18 is not organically stealthy, and it lacks the electronic warfare suite of the F-35.

Ironically, these types of program cuts are typical of those policymakers should want to keep if they are trying to save money. President Eisenhower cut defense spending and the size of the Army in the 1950s, but he bolstered America's strategic nuclear arsenal. He knew that the deterrent factor of nuclear weapons would cover for the military's reduced force levels. The strategy behind defense cuts today is of opposite and dangerous logic: cut end strength, eliminate long-range strike, and slash the offensive and defense strategic forces arsenal.

Unkind Cuts. The sheer magnitude of these additional defense cuts would undercut everything from the number of people in uniform, to readiness

and training, to base facilities and infrastructure. Weapons systems alone will not come close to meeting these cutting targets for the military.

Washington must remember that those who demand scaling back military size, structure, and capabilities in the name of fiscal prudence ignore the fact that the nation will have to spend more later to rebuild.

Unfortunately, it does not take a "hollow force" to harm national security. Even comparatively small cuts in defense—if applied to the wrong areas—can harm America's capacity to project power abroad, guarantee the defense of its allies, and meet international commitments.

—*Mackenzie Eaglen is Research Fellow for National Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*