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Sequestration Will Undermine U.S. Interests in the Middle East

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The report on sequestration released last week by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) sheds little additional light on how these cuts will affect national security. Even as the President claimed that the U.S. will maintain military superiority, the OMB report states that sequestration will hinder national security capabilities. President Obama has declared throughout this debate that he will veto measures to stop sequestration unless they include tax increases.

Considering the recent violence directed at the U.S. in the Middle East and the looming January 2 deadline for sequestration, it would be imprudent for Congress to remain idle. Waiting to address the military's budgetary concerns until it is politically easier or until a decision is forced by a direct conflict is irresponsible. This is especially true given

the strained resources with which the armed forces are already operating around the world. Members of Congress need to act now to stop defense sequestration and support robust national security funding.

Cutting an Already Weakened Force. Sequestration refers to the automatic cuts in the federal government's operations mandated by the Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA). This legislation requires an automatic, across-the-board \$1.2 trillion cut in federal spending. National security funding suffers the bulk of these cuts—roughly half a trillion dollars. The Department of Defense has already shrunk by roughly \$800 billion through efficiencies measures in 2009 and the first portion of cuts from the BCA.

While the OMB report does not indicate which military capabilities will be reduced under sequestration, the House Armed Services Committee has made stark projections. The cuts will cause the smallest Navy fleet since before World War I, the smallest ground force since before World War II, and the smallest Air Force in its history. These reductions will hinder the U.S. military's ability to perform its varied missions throughout the world on a daily basis.

Implications for U.S. Security.

What will these defense cuts mean for U.S. security and interests in the Middle East? The recent engagement in Libya provides some answers. The U.S. eventually had to take the lead in this conflict because European NATO forces were inadequate for certain missions, such as enforcing a no-fly zone. If NATO forces become engaged in a similar scenario with a more capable adversary, the U.S. may not be as confident in a leadership role.

The aging U.S. Air Force F-16s and Marine Corps Harriers that flew over Libya are set to be replaced by the fifth-generation F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). However, under the President's fiscal year 2013 budget request, the nascent F-35 fleet will shrink by 179 aircraft over the next five years. Furthermore, sequestration could eliminate the entire fleet for the Marine Corps JSF variant. This has implications for American allies as well. The United Kingdom has staked its entire future fighter jet force on the Marine Corps variant, and allies such as Israel, Canada, and Japan also intend to buy the fighter.

The U.S. Navy maintains an important presence in the Mediterranean Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean. Through this

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presence, regional maritime choke points such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles, and the Suez Canal remain open shipping lanes. If any of these vital shipping lanes were disrupted, there would be significant economic consequences. The Strait of Hormuz is particularly vulnerable given its extremely narrow passage and proximity to Iran.

The Navy's presence would also be important if the U.S. were to engage in a conflict similar to the one in Libya. Aircraft carriers host a variety of critical air assets such as F-18 fighters, surveillance aircraft, and, in the future, the F-35. Each carrier hosts an air force rivaling that of most nations. However, one ship cannot be in two places at the same time. Under sequestration, the Navy will reduce its fleet of carriers from 11 to 10.

U.S. Special Operations Forces will also be affected. The President has regularly touted Special Forces as low-intensity tools for his foreign

policy ends, exemplified by their successful strike on Osama bin Laden and deployments in Afghanistan, the Middle East, and North Africa for various other missions and training exercises with local forces. However, even if Special Forces retain robust funding, the cuts in conventional forces will hinder them. SEAL teams embark from Navy vessels, and reducing conventional manpower end strength also reduces the pool from which elite troops are selected. Furthermore, modernization accounts such as the V-22 will be used for irregular and unconventional missions.

Provide for the Common Defense. The ideal solution is for the Administration and Congress to solve the budget impasse today, as each additional day of delay makes it more difficult for defense suppliers and military leaders to plan ahead in a very risky world. If that cannot be done, then Congress should offset sequestration for just 2013 with

spending cuts elsewhere. Then the new Congress could work with the President next year to solve the rest of the defense sequestration problem.

While the Obama Administration continues to sacrifice national security forces to achieve other goals, Congress should focus on its constitutional responsibility to provide for the common defense. Congress already has all the tools needed to agree on a real budget. Members need no new devices to do this but only the will.

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