



Countdown to Sequester: Would Cuts Make U.S. a ‘Second-Rate Power’?

By Devin Dwyer Feb 26, 2013

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. — Two days before those deep automatic spending cuts take effect, President Obama visits Newport News Shipbuilding to highlight where the “meat-cleaver” spending cuts of sequestration will be felt most: the military, defense contractors, suppliers and their families.

He will paint a dire picture. Roughly half the \$1.2 trillion in cuts over the next decade hit the Pentagon budget, meaning layoffs, furloughs, trimmed operations – and even the delayed deployment of an aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf.

Republicans have suggested the White House is embellishing what the effects of the cuts will be in order to get more revenue – tax hikes – in a potential deal to cut the deficit.

“The president is master at creating the impression of chaos as an excuse for government action. Do nothing, fan the flames of catastrophe and then claim the only way out is more government in the form of higher taxes,” said Senate Minority Leader McConnell on the Senate floor Tuesday.

There’s no question the belt-tightening will mean real pain for some workers and families. But is a 9-10 percent reduction in the military coffers, after a decade-long spending spree, really going to “hollow out” our force, making us a “second-rate power”?

The answer is not cut and dry. Here’s a look at some of the potential impacts of the defense cuts, and important caveats about how serious they will be.

THE CUTS

Furloughs: 800,000 civilian employees at the Defense Department face 22 unpaid days from April to September (the rest of this fiscal year), amounting to a 20 percent pay cut. Virginia alone will see approximately 90,000 civilian furloughs, reducing gross pay by \$648 million, according to the White House.

Layoffs: At least 43,000 temporary Pentagon workers will lose their jobs. That process already underway, with roughly 7,000 laid off so far.

Delayed Deployment: The aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman and guided-missile cruiser USS Gettysburg were delayed to Persian Gulf on Feb. 6. The Pentagon cited “budget uncertainty — including a Continuing Resolution and the looming potential for across-the-board sequestration cuts.”

Delayed Repairs: Here in Virginia, the military has cancelled maintenance on 11 ships in Norfolk; deferred four projects at Dahlgren, Oceana and Norfolk and delayed other modernization and demolition projects, according to the White House.

Suffering Suppliers: Newport News Shipbuilders, the sole builder of U.S. aircraft carriers, says it’s supplier base across all 50 states could bear the brunt of the cuts.

Roughly 5,000 contractors, many of which are small businesses, are at risk of closure if more projects get delayed or canceled.

Curtailed Operations: Top military brass at each of the armed services have detailed what Sequestration will mean. **Army:** Possible force reduction of 100,000 soldiers. Potential cuts to 3,000 small business contracts. **Navy:** Delayed construction of carrier JFK. Shrink Navy fleet to 220/230 ships, losing 2 carrier groups. **Air Force:** Cut 200,000 flight hours. Training curtailed; loss of readiness.

THE CAVEATS

Some Republican critics of the administration — and staunch defenders of the military — say the impact on defense programs is overblown. “The reality is that this is just part of political theater, part of the campaign,” Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal told ABC’s Jonathan Karl of President Obama. “He’s trying to scare the American people. He’s trying to distort the impact.”

To say, “well...we’re going to be hollowing out our military’... If that were really the case, the president should take my suggestion of postponing new spending programs,” Jindal said.

Ongoing Operations, Troops in Combat — Spared: Officials say the cuts will not directly impact operations in Afghanistan or other theaters, or in nuclear deterrence. Most war funding comes through “supplemental” spending measures which aren’t part of the base budget or subject to the sequester. The Pentagon will exempt from furloughs deployed civilians, those in combat zones, and those directly required to maintain safety of life or property.

Booming Civilian Ranks at DOD: The number of civilian employees at the Pentagon has skyrocketed over the past few years, up 17 percent since 2002 – with most of the additional hires occurring since 2008, when Obama took office. Defense spending on civilian personnel grew 21 percent over the past decade, according to the Government Accountability Office.

Only Back to 2007 Levels: The total budget trims in the Sequester would return military spending back to 2007 levels, which are still higher than the average spent during the Cold War, according to the CATO Institute.

‘Second’ to Who?? Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said the cuts would put the U.S. at risk of becoming a “second-rate” military power. But annual U.S. defense spending dwarfs the rest of the world — more than the next 10 military powers combined.

Still, caveats aside, and despite the White House’s previous commitment to streamlining the military and making it more agile and nimble, spokesman Jay Carney insists there is no silver lining to Sequestration.

“The President agrees with his Secretary of Defense,” said White House press secretary Jay Carney last week. ” He agrees with the numerous Republicans who have said on the record that the onerous cuts in the sequester to defense — the across-the-board, indiscriminate cuts to defense will harm our national security interests; will reduce our readiness; will result in a reduction in flight hours; will result — have resulted already in changes in our rotation for aircraft carriers to the Persian Gulf.”

“I don’t think the issue here is the language you use to describe it, because every characterization you make of it, if you’re being honest about it, is negative,” Carney said. ” The impact will be negative. It will harm our national security. And that is a problem.”