

# Aol Defense.

## Cut Defense Now, Build Strategy Later

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With defense spending cuts looming, Pentagon leaders and their Beltway boosters are using strategy to stall. They argue that cuts must follow program changes that flow in turn from revised national security strategy. Cutting without a strategy, they say, means cutting foolishly and overburdening the shrunken force. So decide the strategy first and then make the cuts accordingly.

But defense cuts don't require new strategy. Coherent national strategy is elusive, especially, now, when threats are limited. Waiting for a new strategic consensus before cutting means waiting forever, which is what hawks want. And sensible defense spending cuts are already identifiable, new strategy or not.

Strategy means marshaling resources to prioritize among threats. That requires agreement about threats and plans to deal with them. For ideological, bureaucratic and partisan reasons, people disagree about the nature of threats and how to combat them. So they disagree about strategy. Larger threats, like the 1950s Soviet Union, heighten strategic consensus. But even then, discord about how to combat the threat was rife.

Since the end of the Cold War, no such threat has emerged for us to organize against. The post-9/11 hunt for al Qaeda operatives and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq did not engage most of our military. Part of the force deters nuclear war, other elements patrol trade routes, while others train foreign forces. We produce various documents that call themselves strategy, like the National Military Strategy, but they mostly protect Pentagon constituencies and dodge fights about priorities with vacuous rhetoric about threats.

Now with al Qaeda disappearing and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan winding down, it is even less likely that we will discover a galvanizing threat. China's rise is not yet a clear threat to its neighbors, let alone us. Instead, China buys our debt and makes our toys and electronics.

Watching its military growth is important but hardly an organizing principle for our whole military. Similarly, our interests in the Middle-East generate little desire to reverse the current drawdown there. A dozen other problems, from an annoying Russia to drug-stressed nations in Latin America and failing African states, command some attention. None is frightening enough to produce agreement among defense policy-makers.

The shock of the September 11 attacks led us to vastly increase the spending we devote to combating these historically small threats. We have spent more than a trillion dollars on the wars, while the base, or non-war, defense budget has nearly doubled. We can save in both categories.

If we get our forces out of Iraq and Afghanistan as planned, by 2014 we will annually spend \$100 billion less than today on war, as fuels, bullets, and bribes go unexpended. Cutting the base defense budget will be harder, but rolling back at least two thirds of that increase is a reasonable goal. That would save nearly two trillion dollars over the next decade. Already scheduled are reductions of the war-caused expansions in Army and Marine Corps personnel, nearly 100,000 in total. These we can accelerate and deepen. As the wars end, the Navy and Air Force can reduce their operational tempo, reducing repair and replacement costs for ships and aircraft. For the rest of the savings, civilian leaders should simply present the services with lower budgets and tell them to find additional cuts.

Austerity prioritizes better than strategists. With less money, military leaders will choose more carefully among programs, sacrificing less-favored missions and administrative bloat. The resulting bureaucratic fights will spill into Congress and out into the public, generating information about our defenses that civilians can use to make smarter choices about budgets and programs.

American wars are surprises. From Pearl Harbor to Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, and 9/11 we got the pre-war planning wrong. The solution is not better plans but flexible forces that can adjust for we don't know what. The seeming chaos of four services and innumerable subcomponents brawling, compromising, failing and innovating is a better defense against uncertainty than the soundest plan.

With no obvious demon at the door, we can cut defense spending, stay flexible, and focus on the more pressing threat of debilitating debt. When a real threat appears, we can react and call it strategy.

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