US House to vote on cutting Pentagon budget

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Until recently, Republicans had seen cuts to the military as out of the question [AFP]

This week, a series of showdowns is expected in the US House of Representatives over the Pentagon budget. House members are expected to vote on amendments to the Defense Appropriations Bill to cut the overall level of military spending, end or limit the war in Afghanistan, and draw down troops permanently stationed in Europe.

What happens in these votes will have a big influence on the expected negotiations over replacing the impending "sequester" automatic cuts of the Budget Control Act with a package of revenue increases and spending cuts. If you want cuts in military spending to be on the table, now is the time to speak up.

Until now, the bigfoot military contractors and their most stalwart allies in Congress have fought with great success to keep real cuts in military spending away from the table. What has mostly happened until now is that most of the previously projected increases in spending have been cut, so that under the President's plan military spending would rise roughly with inflation. It's an important start, certainly, to stop the previously projected increase, but it's not a real cut from past spending levels. If the automatic cuts were to go through, that would cause a real cut in military spending, although military spending would still be above what it was during the Cold War. But the conventional wisdom is that the automatic cuts won't happen; at the end of the day, they will be replaced by a package of revenue increases and spending cuts.

The question is what is going to be in that package. Until now, the GOP leadership position has been that cuts in military spending are off the table.

Which spending to cut?

Until now, the Democratic leadership position has been more murky. The Democratic leadership - and the big Democratic constituency groups - have emphasised the need for revenue increases. But no-one thinks the final deal is going to meet deficit reduction targets with revenue increases alone. That means that there are still going to be cuts, and those cuts are going to be cuts in military spending or they are going to be cuts in domestic spending. Every dollar that isn't cut from the military budget is going to be cut from the domestic budget.

So you might think that Democratic leaders and the big Democratic constituency groups - who don't want to cut the domestic budget - would be very vocal right now about the need to cut the military budget.

If so, so far you'd be wrong. Until now, the Democratic leadership has been mostly quiet about the need for military cuts. What they're afraid of is all the money the military contractors have to throw around on lobbying and political ads. And of course, the military contractors' money is our money - our tax dollars that have made the military contractors fat, money that they are now using to lobby against putting them on a very modest diet.

People often get cynical when they think about all that money sloshing around. What's the point of writing and calling my Representative in Congress? They're not going to listen to me. They're going to listen to the money. You can't beat City Hall.

But the fact of the matter is that you can beat City Hall. It's been done before. The interests of the few will tend to beat out the interests of the many when the many are unorganised and not mobilised. When the many are mobilised and organised they can turn things around. That happened on SOPA and SIPA. It happened on the Tar Sands pipeline.

Eventually it happened on the Iraq war. The narrow interests of the few were defeated by the broad interests of the many.

Why not on the military budget? Let's raise a ruckus and see what happens. Right now, today, we can start to turn this around. If we can get a majority of Members of the House to vote for any cut in military spending at all, that will be a key benchmark for future negotiations. If we can get the majority of the House Democratic Caucus to vote for a deeper cut, that will be another key benchmark for future negotiations.

An amendment to cut $1.1bn - a freeze at 2012 levels - is expected to be offered by Mick Mulvaney [R-SC] and Barney Frank [D-MA]. This very modest amendment stands the best chance of passing. Compared to the Pentagon budget, this would be a very modest cut, a fraction of a per cent. But when you compare it to domestic spending cuts being considered - like spending on food stamps - $1.1bn is real money.

An amendment is expected to cut roughly $7bn to align the bill to spending caps under the Budget Control Act. This will be a key test. Who is really concerned about the deficit, and who is just looking for an excuse to cut programmes that benefit the majority of Americans? There was a Congressional deal to cut spending and the current level of military spending breaks the deal. If Congress can't be held to the level of military spending that it already agreed in the Budget Control Act, that doesn't bode well for the negotiations ahead on replacing the automatic cuts to come. If Democrats can't be held to backing the caps on military spending in the Budget Control Act, that is even worse. But if Democrats can be held to this, then it is more likely that in the negotiations they can be held to the principle that there should be at least one dollar in military cuts for every dollar in domestic cuts. And if we can get a substantial bloc of Republicans to break ranks with the leadership on holding military spending to the Budget Control Act caps, the vote would be close, and the amendment might even pass; that would set a very good precedent for the negotiations.

Protect domestic spending

An amendment to cut $19bn - corresponding to programme cuts proposed by Project on Defense Alternatives and the Cato Institute - is expected from Barbara Lee. If this amendment wins support from the majority of Democrats and a smattering of Republicans, it will put these cuts on the table for serious consideration.

Your Representative, by voting for amendments that cut the Pentagon budget, will be putting Pentagon cuts on the table for the final negotiations. And that will help protect domestic spending.

Then there is the question of the war in Afghanistan

Barbara Lee is expected to offer an amendment to cut all funding for the
war except for what is needed for a safe and responsible drawdown.
Almost the entire House Democratic Caucus and two dozen Republicans are on record saying that they want to end the war. This vote will be a test of how many are now willing to back their demand to end the war by a vote to cut money for it.

Walter Jones and Rosa DeLauro are expected to offer an amendment preventing the use of funds past 2014 in support of any mission that does not have explicit Congressional approval. This will be a test of whether Congress can force the 2014 timeline for when (most?) "combat" troops are expected be withdrawn to become a real deadline for ending the war.

In addition, an amendment is expected to force the Pentagon to draw down troops "permanently stationed" in Europe. How much money this would actually save is a matter of murky dispute; during the wars, a lot of the troops weren't in Europe anyway because they were off fighting the wars. But regardless of how you count the actual savings, the principle is clear cut: seventy years after the end of World War II, we shouldn't be paying for a major permanent deployment of U.S. troops in Europe.

We are in a historically new situation. In the past, the interests of the majority in cutting military spending were not so direct, because the bloated military budget was financed by borrowing. Now a dollar that isn't cut from the military budget is a dollar that will be cut from the domestic budget. If you don't want food stamps to be cut, if you don't want funding for mothers' and infants' nutrition to be cut, if you don't want Social Security benefits to be cut, write and call your Representative and urge a yes vote on amendments to cut the military budget.