



Strategies To Cut the Military Budget: Realistic Options for an Unrealistic Government

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The military budget is going to be cut. That will cause enormous wailing and gnashing of teeth in Washington.

The generals will promote fantastic disaster scenarios. The military-industrial complex will deploy more lobbyists. The Neoconservative Greek Chorus will declaim more loudly. All will insist that the international environment is more dangerous than ever. That America faces greater peril than before. And that the U.S. military must be greatly strengthened. Again.

However, after squandering \$8 trillion on the Global War on Terror the interventionist establishment lacks credibility for a political reprise. Even more important, the money isn't there. The national debt already is greater than the annual GDP, a share now approaching the post-World War II record. And budget pressures from an aging population will only grow. The Congressional Budget Office warns that the debt as a percentage of GDP could hit 200 percent by mid-century.

With domestic discretionary spending only a small share of the budget, controlling total outlays will require taking on major program areas: Social Security and Medicare, Medicaid, interest, and defense. Alas, the warrior-wannabes in Washington are unlikely to convince the elderly to sacrifice their Social Security and Medicare benefits to keep subsidizing the Europeans so the latter can maintain their own generous welfare states. And how to cut Medicaid outlays when the program covers ever more people while providing substandard care for the poor? Interest

payments could be eliminated only by repudiating the national debt, an interesting idea that likely would trigger a globe-spanning financial crisis.

Which leaves the Pentagon on the chopping block.

It is vital to reduce military outlays. Calling them "defense" spending is inaccurate, since most of these expenditures are not about protecting America, but subsidizing prosperous, populous allies and remaking failed societies. The starting point of any military cuts should be foreign policy. Spending on the military advances a policy purpose. Thus, the more a government wants to do in the world, the more it must devote to the military.

Cutting the latter before the former risks a dangerous mismatch. Drawing lots of lines without possessing the force structure, both manpower and materiel, necessary to achieve those ends risks either failure and lost lives, or retreat and lost credibility. Consider what one wants to do, assess the costs of doing so, and decide if the objective is worth the expense. If so, provide the resources and move ahead. If not, drop the effort.

In broad brush, the US should play on its geographic strengths – oceans east and west, pacific neighbors north and south – and worry about problems other states might not be able to handle alone. Such as preventing a single power from dominating Eurasia (that isn't going to happen in today's world, despite concerns over China) and maintaining ocean freedom (threatened by no one in today's world, even China). The many other, largely dubious objectives, such as subsidizing whiny Europeans and guarding rapacious Saudi royals, should go into history's trash can.

The Congressional Budget Office recently published a helpful guide to alternative strategies for what it expects to be lower Pentagon outlays in the future. Explained CBO: "Reducing defense budgets requires some combination of cutting the size of the force, purchasing fewer or less expensive weapons, and reducing the cost to operate and maintain the forces and equipment that remain in service."

The agency relied on the 2017 National Security Strategy but noted that the NSS could be changed. CBO considered a trillion-dollar reduction in military expenditures over the coming decade: "The options in this report illustrate how decision-makers might use the latter approach: starting by examining the military objectives that underlie the NSS and revising those objectives (and the NSS itself, if necessary) in favor of ones that could be achieved with less expansive (and less expensive) military capabilities, perhaps freeing resources to address other national priorities."

Although an important exercise, this analysis remains tightly linked to the status quo. A \$1 trillion reduction sounds like a lot of money, but spread over a decade it is \$100 billion annually, pennies on the national debt. Moreover, noted CBO: "A \$1 trillion reduction in funding over the 2021–2031 period relative to current plans would result in annual budgets that would be smaller

than the amounts spent during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nevertheless, the 2031 figure would be slightly higher than the previous post–World War II peak in defense funding in the 1980s." That is, CBO only imagines America returning to the Cold War – during the Reagan military buildup when the U.S. faced the Soviet Union. A radical reduction a \$1 trillion cut is not.

More significant was the spending reduction after the Cold War ended. Military outlays peaked in 1985, then fell by about 30 percent by 1997. As for now, noted the agency: "Compared with the drawdown of the 1990s, the \$1 trillion reduction considered in this report would change funding by about half as much, 15 percent, by 2031. Likewise, the decrease in the number of service members in CBO's options would be smaller than the 34 percent reduction during the 1990s, ranging from 19 percent to 24 percent depending on the option."

But then came GWOT, and the waste of trillions of dollars.

CBO's first alternative was closest to the status quo and scaled back rather than changed traditional objectives. Explained the agency: "Option 1 retains the 2017 national security strategy of 'deterrence by denial,' which relies heavily on US combat forces to deter military aggression against allies by denying or reversing military gains in regional conflicts. The size of US forces would be reduced in proportion to the smaller budget, retaining the same balance of capabilities."

This approach does not address the biggest issues, Washington attempting to do too much and well-heeled allied states not providing for themselves. Compounding the problem is the strategy/force structure mismatch. Washington would still try to do everything, but with less. It would not be as able to concentrate its forces and strike quickly at multiple contingencies. If the American people want to keep doing everything, they should accept the responsibility, acknowledge the cost, and invest the necessary funds.

Better was the CBO strategy that amounted to "burden-sharing." That is, the US would no longer do everything. Detailed the report: "Option 2 would shift emphasis from deterrence by denial to deterrence through punishment, a strategy that is similar to the United States' approach during the Cold War. The option would de-emphasize the role of US combat forces in regional conflicts in favor of a heavier reliance on coalition forces in combat operations. It would call for reductions in conventional forces, such as brigade combat teams and fighter aircraft, and increases in long-range strike capabilities, such as cruise missiles, anti-ship missiles, and air defense missiles."

The agency suggested that this approach was a bit of a throwback to the Cold War, when Washington faced numerically superior Soviet forces and could not assume that it would have overwhelming superiority. In a sense, this approach would be more holistic, relying on other aspects of American power. Explained CBO: "the United States would plan to promptly counterattack an aggressor's military forces and follow up with military, economic, and

diplomatic actions designed to force the aggressor to change its behavior. The objective would be to increase the cost of aggression rather than to mount a full-scale defense or immediate counterattack."

While certainly better than the first plan, this option would still risk serious conflict. Comparing the approaches to a Chinese attack on Taiwan, noted the agency, "fewer US ground forces and short-range tactical aviation units would be stationed in regions where conflict was likely, and tactics like anti-ship warfare would be prioritized." Yet the profound challenge facing America is *whether* the US should be ready to go to war with a nationalistic nuclear power over Taiwan, not *how* to go to war

Indeed, this strategy would allow allies to escape responsibilities commensurate with their abilities. Burden-shedding is needed more than burden-sharing, as the second alternative suggests. With 11 times the GDP and more than three times the population of Russia, why can't Europe take over responsibility for its own defense? The continent – most of its governments, anyway – doesn't particularly fear Moscow and figures America will take care of any problems if Russia does act up. Washington needs to indicate that those halcyon days when Europeans could expect to go on vacation while Americans did the fighting are over.

Hence the third choice. Although still activist, it is much more restrained, reflecting the essence of good defense policy, keeping enemies far away. Explained the agency: "Option 3 focuses on maintaining the freedom of navigation in sea, air, and space around the world that the United States currently enjoys. It avoids the use of large ground forces to seize and hold territory in regional conflicts in favor of engaging enemies at standoff ranges."

This strategy better focuses on what matters to America. Washington would not enforce today's inside-out Monroe Doctrine, under which the US attempts to dominate every other nation up to its border, treating the entire world as America's sphere of influence. Rather, explained CBO: "This option would de-emphasize the use of military force in regional conflicts and instead prioritize its use to protect US interests worldwide by preserving the flow of commerce and information in the global commons, in much the same way that the US military does today."

Notably, this would be no retreat to pacifism. Rather, America would be husbanding its power while preparing for action: "This approach, known in the political science literature as command of the commons, would allow the United States to wield economic power in global affairs while maintaining its ability to send logistics and combat forces to aid its allies in conflicts. Although military force would be de-emphasized, US enforcement of no-fly zones would not be ruled out. De-emphasizing the use of ground forces in combat operations abroad would free resources for maintaining primacy in the global commons."

Critically, Americans would no longer be responsible for the security of their allies and friends. Washington would not be indifferent to threats against them, but instead of military action the

US"would threaten to grow small regional conflicts into complex global problems, making the consequences of aggression outweigh the gains."

This strategy still would imagine a major American role and expensive military. But Washington would no longer be expected to be superior everywhere. Noted CBO: "Option 3 would narrow focus from overmatch in all situations to overmatch in the global commons, continuing the current US military posture for the commons. Among the objectives set out in the 2018 NDS: that the United States should get "vastly more military use" out of sea, space, and air than other nations, that it credibly threaten to deny use of the commons to other militaries, and that opponents believe they would lose a military contest if they attempted to deny use of the commons to the United States."

America's current foreign and military policy is unsustainable, both economically and politically. Today the Blob is fighting tenaciously against rising calls for "restraint." The foreign policy establishment's slogan might as well be: "Global primacy now and forever, irrespective of the cost!"

However, any short-term success in delaying reform will only speed long-term crisis. Americans no longer can afford to do everything everywhere and treat peripheral interests as vital. As the budget continues to race out of control, pressure to cut military outlays will increase. Far better to begin rationally adjusting foreign policy objectives today, than to be forced to do so haphazardly amid a burgeoning financial crisis.

The Congressional Budget Office report offers a good starting point for military reform. The US should begin moving toward option three with the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act, now before Congress. However, Washington need not stop there. For instance, friendly democratic states, some of which have sent vessels to the Pacific in an attempt to impress China, could act more cooperatively and systematically, contributing to a free and open global ocean commons. As the world changes, so should US foreign policy objectives and military strategies.

The misnamed "defense" budget should be cut. It is going to be cut. Neither the military-industrial complex nor the Blob will be able to halt the march of fiscal reality. However, there are better and worse ways to make the coming reductions. Adapting now rather than resisting the inevitable until a crisis will yield greater financial savings and improved national security.

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