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Military cuts a step in the right direction

By BENJAMIN H. FRIEDMAN / Contributing Writer

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Even by Washington standards, the wailing that greeted the Obama administration's proposed 2015 military budget has been impressively theatrical. By the time the White House released the actual budget Tuesday, critics – prepped by the previous Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel offered – had already been blasting it for a week.

Republicans attacked the proposed reduction in the size of active-duty Army to 450,000 next year, saying it “guts our defense.” Congressional leaders in both parties complained about possible reductions in subsidies for military housing, shopping and health care. Naval boosters lamented the reduction in the planned purchase of littoral combat ships. Hawkish pundits warned of “retrenchment.”

Such bipartisan consternation obscures two things. First, the proposed cuts should not come as a surprise. They are a predictable realization of existing law. Second, the changes won't hurt U.S. security. In fact, they might even improve it.

With this plan, the Pentagon is simply implementing – partially, while kicking and screaming – spending levels that bipartisan majorities in Congress and the president enacted.

The Murray-Ryan budget deal passed in December, which amended the Budget Control Act, the 2011 deficit deal, raised the 2015 military spending cap to \$520 billion and lowered caps in the remaining years covered by the law. Across-the-board sequestration occurs only to enforce those caps – if spending is under them, there is no sequester.

No one that has paid attention should be shocked. Military leaders have long urged Congress to slow the growth in military pay and benefits. Since the Budget Control Act's passage, experts have said it would require cuts like those now offered. Media reports that they were in the offing have appeared for months.

Congress, in other words, is decrying its own handiwork. That takes chutzpah, the Yiddish term for brazen nerve – a quality that brings a man that murdered his parents to plead for mercy in court because he’s been orphaned.

But maybe that’s what cutting spending takes. Everyone likes frugality in theory, where it comes from waste and overlap. But real savings target expensive and thus popular programs. Unable to magically reduce spending, Congress forces its own hand. It requires agencies to reach austerity targets without specifying how, denounces the cuts proposed to reach the targets and then votes for them while blaming someone else. The process is ugly, but the defense cuts it is yielding are long overdue.

Critics should relax. First off, the Army remains bigger than it seems. In 2015, Congress will likely continue to fund Army personnel partly through the war budget, keeping manpower higher than 450,000. Also, the Special Operation Forces, which Hagel proposes to grow to 70,000, are becoming a specialized third ground force.

More importantly, military might is measured compared to enemies, not absolute numbers. Under this plan, the U.S. military will still account for roughly 40 percent of global military spending, with the bulk of the rest coming from allies. No U.S. enemy has the capability to take advantage of the proposed reductions. Russia’s foray in Crimea had nothing to do with the U.S. Army’s size. The capability to bomb Iran, Syria or North Korea remains, even simultaneously. A few less ships barely affect the massive superiority our Navy would enjoy against China in the East Pacific.

Actually, the real problem with the cuts may be that they keep too many counterproductive options intact. They are unlikely to force a reconsideration of U.S. military overextension. We will still manage to defend all the rich allies that can afford to defend themselves. We will still send ships and training missions to every corner of globe, pretending that stability there depends on it.

A smaller army will have less ability to occupy another state that resists, like Syria, Iran or Pakistan.

Given our recent experience with such wars, that is a benefit. If these cuts make us less likely to launch such military adventures, then we should cut more.

Benjamin H. Friedman is a research fellow in Defense and Homeland Security Studies at the Cato Institute.