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Panetta Plan for Lean, Agile Military Reflects a Tighter Budget

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Jan. 27 (Bloomberg) -- With an eye on Asia and a constrained wallet, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta offered a plan to create a “smaller and leaner” military that will be “rapidly deployable and technologically advanced.”

Former President George W. Bush also promised to create an “agile, lethal, readily deployable” military -- until the prolonged ground wars in Afghanistan and Iraq required a larger Army and more heavily armored vehicles.

This time, defense analysts say, fiscal pressures, technological advances, changing threats and an aversion to another land war may make a military transformation more achievable.

“I think the ideas work better now than in 2001,” said Michael O’Hanlon, a defense analyst at the Brookings Institution in Washington, in an e-mail. “The plausibility of simultaneous large ground wars is substantially less than before. Meanwhile, maritime threats have grown greater in the Persian Gulf and the rise of China is even more impressive.”

Panetta’s plan, which will face a divided Congress in an election year, calls for shrinking the Army and Marine Corps by about 100,000 people, while placing greater focus on advanced missiles, new unmanned systems and a new strategic bomber, among other things.

“The days of Iraq and Afghanistan and long counterinsurgency operations are over,” said Gordon Adams, a professor at American University in Washington, in a telephone interview.

With Risk Attached

To be sure, any plan to shrink the military comes with risk, said David Maxwell, associate director of the Center for Peace and Security Studies at Georgetown University in Washington.

“I don’t think anybody can predict whether we’ll be in another ground war again,” Maxwell said.

Leading Republicans in Congress were quick to criticize the planned drawdown as reckless.

“The defense budget that the Obama administration will propose ignores the lessons of history that we have learned time and again,” said John McCain of Arizona, the senior Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Still, the prolonged U.S. occupation of Iraq and the “deepening quagmire” in Afghanistan “will significantly decrease the likelihood that we choose to become involved in this type of war going forward,” said Christopher Preble, a defense analyst at the Cato Institute in Washington, which advocates for limited government.

Hedging his bets, Panetta said the Army will retain more non-commissioned and mid-grade officers and make only “marginal” cuts to the Army Reserve “to regrow the force quickly” if needed.

Risks Considered

“These risks have been fully considered,” said General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who presented the plan with Panetta at a briefing yesterday. “I am convinced we can properly manage them by ensuring we keep the force in balance, investing in new capabilities and preserving a strong reserve component.”

The Pentagon’s shift to forces focused on Asia and the Middle East “is actually budget-driven,” said Adams, an official in the White House budget office during the Clinton administration. “We would not be having the conversation would it not be for the fact that the resources are being driven down.”

Panetta acknowledged that much of the downsizing was prompted by the need to trim at least \$487 billion from projected future growth over the next decade to help reduce the nation’s budget deficit.

Reducing the Deficit

“This will be a test of whether reducing the deficit is about talk or action,” Panetta said.

The key to successful military operations will be the ability to gather intelligence on potential adversaries, according to Adams.

“The biggest thing to be prepared for the future is intelligence,” he said.

Panetta is emphasizing the use of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft, the use of advanced sensors and increased reliance on special operations forces.

The Pentagon’s Asia and Middle East emphasis also reinforces the need for a new long-range stealth bomber, sustaining 11 aircraft carriers with 10 air wings, as well as large-deck amphibious assault ships, Panetta said yesterday when he disclosed the outlines of a \$613 billion defense budget proposal for fiscal year 2013, which starts Oct. 1.

Submarine Warfare

“Modernizing our submarine fleet will be critical to our efforts to maintain maritime access in these vital regions,” Panetta said.

The budget plan calls for modifying the Navy’s Virginia- class attack submarines, built by General Dynamics Corp. and Huntington Ingalls Industries Inc., to carry more Tomahawk cruise missiles and developing an undersea, non-nuclear “strike option” as an alternative to intercontinental ballistic missiles. Raytheon Co. of Waltham, Massachusetts makes the Tomahawk.

Huntington Ingalls of Newport News, Virginia, is building the three-ship, \$40 billion Gerald R. Ford class of aircraft carriers, which will be equipped with a new electromagnetic catapult system built by closely held General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc.

“You are not talking revolution in military affairs,” Anthony Cordesman, a defense analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said in an interview yesterday. “These are very gradual, evolutionary plans.”

Precision Strike

The technology for the new precision-strike capabilities for the Virginia-class submarines has yet to be developed, and it could be years before it is operational, according to Cordesman.

Even so, the strategy shift, however evolutionary, is already under fire.

The Republican chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Representative Howard P. “Buck” McKeon of California, criticized President Barack Obama for abandoning “the defense structure that has protected America for two generations.”

While unmanned systems and agile Special Forces are “vital,” McKeon said, “They are insufficient to meet the manifold security challenges America faces.”

Panetta was quick to acknowledge the resistance he will face in seeking to transform a long-stressed military.

“This is a tough challenge,” he said. “No one ought to underestimate just how difficult it will be.”

--With assistance from Tony Capaccio in Washington. Editors: John Walcott, Jim Rubin.