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Defense cut damage viewed as overblown

Analysts across spectrum see room for reductions as the war winds down

By: Bryan Bender – March 3, 2013

The warnings only grew more dire as the deadline approached. Automatic cuts to national defense, Pentagon leaders insisted, would be a “disaster,” amounting to “assisted suicide” and “a major step toward creation of an unready, hollow military force.”

But now that the cuts known as sequestration have been triggered, an unlikely meeting of the minds is taking place among some liberals, libertarians, and Tea Party conservatives: They say the US defense budget, which is larger than that of the next nine largest militaries combined, can and should be cut significantly — and that doing so will not harm national security.

“It is not like we have Soviet tank divisions at the German border poised to launch a sneak attack,” said John Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org, an independent research group in Alexandria, Va. “It is not a question of readiness. It is a question of readiness to do what? The defense budget is twice what it was before Sept. 11th and we have half as many enemies. A lot of this is theater. Let them sequester and they will see that nothing happens.”

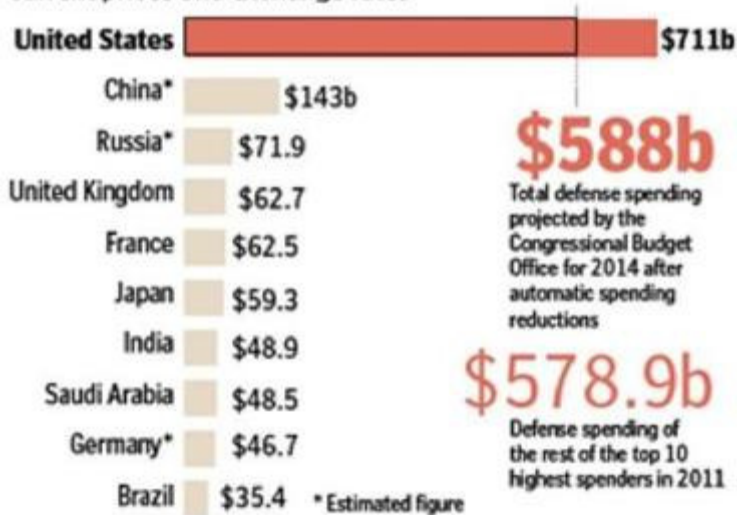
That, of course, is not the message coming from the commander in chief, most of the top brass, and members of Congress, many of whom are concerned about job losses or smaller profit margins for defense contractors in their states.

Last week during a swing through Newport News, Va., where many of the Navy’s warships are built, President Obama said the cuts “will weaken our military readiness.”

In testimony before a House panel, the chiefs of the military branches sounded similar alarms about the combination of the sequester cuts and the failure of Congress so far to pass a complete budget for this year.

Highest defense spenders

Data in billions of dollars from 2011, in current prices and exchange rates



SOURCES: US Department of Defense, Stockholm Peace Research Institute

CHIQUI ESTEBAN/GLOBE STAFF

“We will curtail training for 80 percent of our ground forces,” the Army’s chief of staff, General Raymond Odierno, predicted.

“By the beginning of next year, more than 50 percent of my tactical units will be below acceptable levels of readiness for deployment to combat,” added the Marine Corps commandant, General James Amos.

The Air Force chief of staff, General Mark Welsh, noted that with reduced training two-thirds of combat units will “drop below acceptable readiness levels, by our definitions, by mid-May.

“Most will be completely non-mission-capable as a unit by July,” Welsh said.

They all insisted that in addition to the size of the sequestration cuts — nearly \$500 billion over the next decade — it is their across-the-board nature that is especially damaging.

Yet a number of close observers from across the political divide say that the Pentagon can withstand the hit and even benefit from the discipline imposed by a budget cutting process that military leaders have derided as a “meat ax.”

“Over the entire 10-year period covered by the sequester, defense spending would average roughly \$100 billion more each year than we spent at the height of the Cold War,” said Michael Tanner, a budget specialist at the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington. “This is hardly a crisis.”

Tanner also noted that the defense cuts — beginning with \$46 billion for the remaining seven months of this fiscal year — will only reduce Pentagon spending to the 2007 levels, when the nation was fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The cuts are already being incorporated into military planning: one of the nation's 12 - Navy aircraft carriers will remain in port instead of joining another on watch in the Persian Gulf; the repair of more than 30,000 pieces of Army equipment will have to wait; and thousands of civilian Pentagon workers have been put on notice they could be furloughed.

Yet a recent analysis by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service indicated that the Pentagon has the flexibility to minimize the negative effects.

The report concluded, for example, that despite the across-the-board nature of the cuts the Pentagon "would have discretion to allocate funding" to higher priority areas and take steps that "could limit reductions to the services' readiness-related" programs.

Others agreed that the rhetoric from top military officials about the threat to the nation's combat edge is exaggerated.

Last Thursday, it was a group of fiscal conservatives and government watchdog groups saying that.

Senator Rand Paul, Republican of Kentucky, said in a Tea Party response to the president's State of the Union address last month that the sequester cuts should be allowed to take effect, including in the Defense Department.

"It is time Democrats admit that not every dollar spent on domestic programs is sacred," he said. "And it is time Republicans realize that military spending is not immune to waste and fraud."

Representative Mick Mulvaney, a South Carolina Republican and a leading voice of the Tea Party movement, said that while he believes the across-the-board defense cut is not the best approach, the sequester cuts are better than "having no cuts at all."

The warnings about the impact of the cuts were also dismissed by a number of budget watchdog groups that participated in a conference call last week about the sequester.

"A whole bunch of Chicken Littles are running around," said Steve Ellis, vice president of Taxpayers for Common Sense. "The reality is we can do this level of cuts. If we can't defend the country on half a trillion dollars [a year] then we are doing something wrong."

Democrats such as US Representative Niki Tsongas of Lowell, who serves on the Armed Services Committee, agreed.

She said the sequester formula is not the most effective way to make spending cuts, but also said she believes the US military will maintain its technical edge even if the cuts take effect as scheduled.

"As we draw down from Afghanistan and Iraq, there is room for savings in the Defense Department," she said. "I feel confident that given the extraordinary capability of the defense companies that they are very well positioned to provide for technology that will help us address emerging threats – even in an environment of fiscal constraints."

Those who believe the sequestration cuts will hamper some Pentagon operations agree that Congress could lessen the blow by giving the Department of Defense even more flexibility in applying the cuts.

Michele Flournoy, who served as undersecretary of defense for policy during Obama's first term, said that over the longer term, the sequestration cuts "would reduce funding to the point where you have a real readiness crisis that could affect the options available to the president or how quickly US forces are able to respond to a crisis."

But, she added, "If you get a budget deal, the Department [of Defense] can limit some of the damage because it would buy the leadership some discretion to choose where to take cuts. They could have the ability to protect their highest priorities."

In a statement that many saw as going off the administration's script, the new secretary of defense, Chuck Hagel, also sought to assure the public in a Friday press conference that the cuts will not make the nation more vulnerable.

The United States, he said, "has the best fighting force, the most capable fighting force, the most powerful fighting force in the world."

Asked about the impact of the sequestration cuts, he insisted that the Pentagon "will manage these issues."

"These are adjustments. We anticipated these kinds of realities, and we will do what we need to do to assure the capabilities of our forces."