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Pentagon: An Institution Resistant to Change
By Frank Oliveri, CQ Staff

The Pentagon is such a sprawling, complex organization that tracking everything it's doing at home and around the world is almost impossible. So when veteran staffers on the House Armed Services panel received a recent briefing from military officials, they were surprised to learn that the U.S. military is spending millions of dollars every year to help relatively wealthy European nations wage counterdrug operations, mostly by providing intelligence and reconnaissance support.

POWER CENTERS: Panetta and the Armed Services panels have been scrounging around to find savings in the defense budget, but the push for fiscal discipline has not led to a fundamental re-evaluation of the military's many missions. (WIN MCNAMEE / GETTY IMAGES)

The European operations are, in fact, a small part of the approximately \$1.7 billion that the Pentagon spent on targeting global narcotics trafficking in fiscal 2011 — a figure equal to 80 percent of the Drug Enforcement Agency's entire budget.

The Pentagon has been a major player in the drug wars since the 1980s, but Christopher A. Preble, a defense expert at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, says it is “absurd” for the military to be so involved. “The Department of Defense should do what it says it does: defend the United States of America,” he says.

With the rest of Washington defending every penny of its budget from efforts to slash the federal deficit, it would seem as though the Pentagon would be subject to the same level of scrutiny. Indeed, the anti-deficit effort could even be an opportunity to rationalize the enormous range of missions given to the Defense Department, many of which remain little changed since the Cold War, and others which have been piled on as the military budget has nearly doubled during the past decade.

In a time of austerity, it would seem, every defense dollar should stand up to two questions: Does it serve a core military mission? And is it being spent efficiently?

One major category that would come under scrutiny is the substantial amount the Pentagon spends on what are arguably non-core missions — from performing counternarcotics operations in Europe to running elementary schools in the United States for servicemembers' children to supporting the military's growing diplomatic roles around the world. Another area would be the Pentagon's spending on core operations,

such as its expensive strategy for nuclear deterrence, which dates largely from the Cold War, or the Marine Corps, which has grown larger and larger with what some critics consider too many duplicative capabilities.

But few expect Congress or the Pentagon to seize this opportunity.

“I think it is not just that we are going to do everything that we are doing today, but we are going to do it the same way we have always done it,” says J. Randy Forbes <<http://www.cq.com/person/8090>> , a Virginia Republican who sits on the House Armed Services Committee. He predicts the Pentagon and Congress will probably make decisions that lead to a military that still resembles a Cold War construct, although smaller.

Indeed, both entities seem likely to become obstacles to any major changes.

“There are a lot of Republicans concerned about crippling the Defense Department,” says Utah Republican Sen. Orrin G. Hatch <<http://www.cq.com/person/493>> , who is skeptical of the notion of a broad transformation. “As much as we don’t like it, we have worldwide responsibilities.”

‘Turning the Titanic’

CONTRABAND: U.S. Customs agents offload bales of cocaine from a U.S. Navy ship. The Navy seized the narcotics during counterdrug operations. (DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE)

As one former Defense Department official puts it, changing the Pentagon “is like turning the Titanic.” Calls for the Pentagon to slim down — or at least modernize — its gigantic portfolio are not new.

In 1999, Ralph Peters, a retired Army lieutenant colonel turned conservative author, lamented the Pentagon’s inability to adjust to the end of the Cold War. “Ours is a disproportionately small force relative to its requirements, yet disproportionately expensive relative to its capabilities,” he wrote in *Parameters*, the journal of the Army War College. “It is expensive because we buy the wrong systems with such enthusiasm. We prepare for our ideal missions, while the real missions must be improvised at great expense to readiness, unit integrity and the quality of life of our servicemembers.”

Writing after a period in which the U.S. military budget had been slashed, Peters said more funding was needed but worried that the money would not be well-spent. “While a very real personnel crisis continues to deepen, the military refuses to make hard organizational and acquisition choices,” he wrote. “It is likely that only Congress has the capability to force change at this point — yet Congress bears much of the blame for the

current situation, as the Hill continues to favor defense procurement over military personnel and meaningful reform.”

More than a decade — and hundreds of billions of additional dollars — later, some things haven’t changed. The military still suffers a form of paralysis when it comes to prioritizing needs, abetted by a permissive Congress. When the Pentagon’s last quadrennial review of its missions and requirements was released, in early 2010, it was widely criticized by outside experts for failing to make any tough choices. Few missions have been shed in recent years while new ones have been added, from nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan to fighting pirates off the Horn of Africa.

In the coming weeks, the Pentagon will wrap up an almost-yearlong comprehensive review of its overall strategy aimed at implementing a \$450 billion reduction in planned spending over the next decade. The cut was mandated by the August debt limit law, although former Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates launched the review after President Obama said earlier this year that the Pentagon could save \$400 billion over 12 years. The Defense Department could face even deeper cuts under a plan produced by the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction or under automatic budget cuts that would be triggered if a deficit-cutting measure is not enacted.

The worst-case scenario of so-called sequestration, according to the Pentagon, would be a 20 percent cut to the more than \$5 trillion that it had hoped to spend over the next decade. Some experts have concluded that the effects wouldn’t be quite that severe, but Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta <<http://www.cq.com/person/603>> has said that the outcome would be disastrous. Even so, in percentage terms it would be notably smaller than the military drawdown that Panetta oversaw in the 1990s as director of the Office of Management and Budget under President Bill Clinton.

The bigger question is whether even those cuts would force the long-overdue re-evaluation of the Pentagon’s missions. A few optimists say the political timing might be just right. “Politicians will get around to this, and the election will help,” says Frank Hoffman, who until June 2011 was a senior Navy capabilities and readiness executive and now is at the National Defense University. “The American people will get engaged in this at some point in time.”

But few lawmakers are so optimistic.

Forbes says the Pentagon’s inability to complete a financial audit makes the problem even worse: “How in the world can we determine how much money the Pentagon needs if we don’t know how much they are spending and where it is going?”

Within the traditional military complex, most of the arguments simply perpetuate the current U.S. military orthodoxy.

“I just don’t know who can possibly rejigger the missions and capability sets of the U.S. military so we can perform only the ‘vital missions’ while leaving all the others, and we

can do that by spending a trillion dollars less than projected over the course of the next decade,” says Max Boot, a conservative at the Council on Foreign Relations. “The reality that I think will happen, the most likely outcome, is we will try to continue performing all the same missions that we are performing today. We are just going to do it with a lot less capability.”

Of the voices that have called for far-reaching changes, most have been on the edges of the Beltway mainstream (both the left and the right), many of whom view Cold War orthodoxies as extravagances.

But a few moderate voices have called for a fresh approach. “We don’t have to build a force that imagines a toe-to-toe war with China,” said Adam Smith <<http://www.cq.com/person/520>> of Washington, the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, in a speech last month at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. “We do have to build a force that enables us to continue to be present in Asia and to discourage China from bad behavior. We need a major strategic review that admits that we could possibly spend less money and still have a stronger national security.”

Tempting Target

A Military Footprint: Click here to view chart

<<http://www.cq.com/graphics/weekly/2011/11/21/wr20111121-44defense-cht.pdf>>

One place where lawmakers are starting to challenge a pillar of military orthodoxy that dates from the Cold War is the large U.S. force in Europe. The United States currently has some 80,000 U.S. troops there, predominantly Army and Air Force personnel. This commitment has drawn increasing criticism across the political spectrum, from lawmakers frustrated in part by NATO nations’ anemic military spending.

“For our economy, it’s better for those troops to be in the United States spending their wealth and creating tax growth for the local communities and jobs,” Alabama Republican Sen. Jeff Sessions <<http://www.cq.com/person/12>> told Ashton B. Carter during his September confirmation hearing to become deputy Defense secretary.

Obama has said he does not want to further reduce the U.S. commitment in Europe. Then-Deputy Defense Secretary William J. Lynn III said in October that the Pentagon is considering reducing global commitments elsewhere, such as in Latin America. Commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan also are expected to be greatly diminished in the coming years.

The European bases have many defenders, who say they represent not only an important strategic jumping-off spot to other points on the globe but also a diplomatic bulwark.

They also help bind the NATO alliance, which has taken on broader roles in recent years, mostly recently leading the intervention in Libya.

Lt. Gen. Mark P. Hertling, the commander of U.S. Army forces in Europe, notes that his troops have been involved in about 8,000 partnering engagements of different kinds in the span of about a year. He has also deployed troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as to smaller operations supporting the tense peace in Kosovo.

“When we’re not training our own forces, we are training other nations’,” Hertling says. “We have a unique opportunity in Europe to train with the kinds of forces we will be deploying with. These are the same kinds of forces we would be fighting alongside of in Afghanistan.”

Hertling also makes the case, echoing Panetta, that U.S. forces in Europe provide an important diplomatic opportunity “to build strength with our European partners.”

Beyond Core Missions?

ELDERS: U.S. Marines meet with tribal leaders in Afghanistan as part of a counterinsurgency mission. (MAURICIO LIMA / AFP / GETTY IMAGES)

The growing diplomatic roles of the U.S. military have, however, drawn lots of fire from critics, who say the Pentagon is straying too far from its core functions and trampling on other agencies in the process.

Carl Conetta, from the liberal-leaning Project on Defense Alternatives, argues that as combatant commanders — whether in Europe, the Middle East or the Pacific — grab for bigger and bigger roles in areas such as diplomacy, they also begin to command resources that throw the force structure out of whack.

“There is this sort of broad category of environment-shaping,” Conetta says. “Now they call it engagement. A lot of that edges into diplomatic activities. Our military has turned out to be our premier diplomatic service, not the State Department. State has the mission, but it is the military that has the resources. There are all sorts of reasons why that is a problem.”

The principal reason, he says, is that U.S. diplomatic relations should not have the face of the most powerful military on the planet. Second, anything the military does is expensive.

“Combatant commands have at least 50,000 soldiers, contractors and civilians that can be reduced if in fact we start saying the role of diplomacy should fall to the State Department,” Conetta argues. “When you put the military anywhere, there is always a provocative element. These are uniformed personnel whose specialty is violence.”

Gordon Adams, who helped oversee defense budgets during the Clinton administration, says one reason the military can reach for such missions is because it is the only agency in the U.S. government capable of strategic planning, largely because of its deep, deep pockets.

“Defense is the 800-pound gorilla, and State the 96-pound weakling,” says Adams, who teaches foreign policy at American University and is a fellow at the Stimson Center, a nonpartisan think tank. “By default, Defense creeps into mission after mission. That isn’t to say Defense does it well. These are not core missions.”

Adams says that if the United States is going to assist governance in other countries, axiomatically that is a civilian function. Foreign aid and development assistance, he says, should be handled by civilian diplomats.

Citing Afghanistan, Adams says that by the military’s own definition roughly 80 percent of counterinsurgency activities there are non-military expenditures.

“By definition, then, 80 percent of what DoD is spending on the counterinsurgency should not be a military mission, but the military far and away controls most, if not all of, the effort,” he says.

To a great degree, Congress isn’t in a position to properly oversee the diplomatic and military missions, because it lacks the ability to think strategically. Riddled with committees that have overlapping interests and political parties bent on opposition, Congress lacks a global-engagement perspective, many foreign policy experts say. Thus the Pentagon has enormous power to sway its authorizing committees.

“Defense employs lots of people, builds infrastructure, funds high-tech development and employs people in industry,” says Thomas Mahnken, a Pentagon policy official from 2006 to 2009, “whereas the State Department doesn’t employ lots of folks, the people it employs are overseas and the infrastructure it builds is overseas. There is no mystery why Congress takes an interest in defense and increases defense spending.”

Also, the defense authorizing panels are among the last bastions of bipartisanship and relative unanimity in the Congress. They clear an enormous defense authorizing bill annually, encompassing roughly 40 percent of the overall discretionary budget. By comparison, the authorizing panels that oversee foreign policy haven’t cleared a foreign-aid assistance authorizing measure since 1986.

“The Armed Services committees are real committees, and foreign affairs committees are not real committees,” Adams says. “They are broken committees. There is no constituency in Congress powerful enough to bankroll the civilian side of statecraft the way they are willing to bankroll the Department of Defense.”

One area where the Pentagon is likely to step back is the realm of counterinsurgency. In

both Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. military was reluctantly drawn into complicated — and frequently flawed — efforts to reform the political, economic and social structures in those nations. Conetta notes that this is far more challenging and expensive than conflict resolution and threat containment and that it involves the U.S. military forces directly.

After the Iraq withdrawal is completed at the end of this year and after U.S. troops pull back in Afghanistan in 2014, the military will be highly reluctant to engage any more in what Adams calls “counterinsurgency, post-conflict counterinsurgency stabilization and nation-building operations.”

Once the military takes on such missions, they generate a waterfall of costly new requirements, doctrine, training and equipment. Given the nature of the threats the United States faces from al Qaeda, the military is unlikely to walk away from this mission entirely. But Adams, Conetta and Mahnken, among others, have indicated that the nation will think long and hard before engaging again as it did in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Institutional Resistance

EDUCATING: The Pentagon runs schools at a number of U.S. bases, including this one in Fort Bragg, N.C. (DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE)

Many of the mission changes being discussed in think tanks and elsewhere will be strongly fought by the Pentagon and its backers in Congress.

For example, a growing number of outside experts are asking questions about expensive redundancies in the Pentagon — questions that not only challenge the military orthodoxy but also cut at the heart of the cultures within the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.

Andrew J. Bacevich, an Army veteran who teaches history at Boston University, says the military currently maintains two large land armies — counting the Army and Marine Corps — and four air forces, with each service boasting huge fleets.

“The services will make impassioned arguments for why they should be honored in perpetuity,” he says. “I’m a big fan of the Marine Corps, and maybe we do need [an emergency] 911 force, but it could be substantially more modest in size if we are serious about trying to cut.”

The Marine Corps’ main function is as an expeditionary force that can be quickly deployed anywhere in the world. Yet it has a large heavy-armor force with tanks like the Army, and its own air force.

The Marines are resisting efforts to trim the size of their force. At the height of the Iraq

and Afghan wars, the Marines had expanded to more than 200,000 troops. Earlier this year, the Pentagon announced plans to reduce the service's size below 187,000.

This month, Gen. James F. Amos, commandant of the Marine Corps, told a House panel that the Pentagon's current strategic review could lead to a Marine Corps end strength of about 181,000, and he warned that a force of that size creates significant risk.

"We built a Marine Corps using the lessons of 10 years of war, incorporated that in there and came up with a Marine Corps of 24 infantry battalions, 186,800 Marines," Amos said. "If we go to war, the Marines are going to go, and they're going to come home when it's over."

Amos, himself a fighter pilot, is also a strong advocate for the Corps' having its own squadrons of fighter jets, calling them an integral tool for its unique expeditionary capability.

But a deeply troubled fighter program has drawn new scrutiny to the Corps' arguments for having its own jets. The next-generation F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program has been delayed and is significantly beyond projected costs, with the Marine variant, the F-35B, suffering the worst technical setbacks.

The costs associated with the aircraft have prompted many lawmakers to openly question the need for a Marine variant that can take off and land vertically, especially when the Navy already has a robust air force of its own.

Amos defended the Marine variant at the recent House hearing, saying its special capabilities would give Marines a combat edge for years to come. Further, he said if the Corps is forced to abandon the program, and its ancient Harrier jets begin to age out of the force, the nation would lose the advantage of having 11 light carriers, which use the jump jets. Those ships supplement the Navy's fleet of 11 so-called supercarriers. Without the Marine variant, "our nation reduces its capability to interact around the world by 50 percent," Amos said.

What he didn't say was that China, arguably the biggest military rival to the United States, has only one aircraft carrier, a relic from the Cold War.

In this case, Amos was preaching to the converted. The House Armed Services Committee, led by its chairman, California Republican Howard P. "Buck" McKeon <<http://www.cq.com/person/52>>, has launched a powerful rear-guard action to protect the Pentagon from further spending reductions.

Still, even among the most stalwart Pentagon proponents, frustrations about Pentagon spending practices are rising. During the same hearing, California Republican Duncan Hunter <<http://www.cq.com/person/28668>> ran through his own litany of Pentagon spending missteps. Among the examples he cited was the Distributive Common Ground System, which is the Pentagon's ambitious effort to integrate a broad range of weapons

systems. He called the program inefficient and expensive. He was also critical of the new Littoral Combat Ship, a shore-hugging vessel that he says lacks the proper defenses to serve a useful function. “You can’t operate next to China,” he said. “They would shoot it out of the water in a heartbeat.”

He said, however, that new ideas are not being looked at “because it’s not being done by one of those guys who has a lobbyist who was a former general who was a friend of somebody in DoD. That’s how it works.”

Hunter said money is being spent but that “we are not getting the bang for the buck anymore.”

Fewer Nukes

STEALTH: Ohio-class submarines, like this one moored in the Indian Ocean base at Diego Garcia, make up one of the three planks of the Pentagon’s nuclear triad.
(DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE)

Real changes are particularly hard for the Pentagon to even contemplate when they involve change to an orthodoxy that has governed military planning for a generation or more.

Take the nuclear triad: the Cold War-era military doctrine that says the nation’s nuclear deterrent needs to include land-based, sea-based and air-launched weapons to be fully effective.

Hoffman, the former Navy official, says that people in the Pentagon are privately beginning to ask whether the United States can afford to maintain all three legs of deterrence. He says the U.S. military could afford to give up the sea-based component, which relies on dedicated stealth submarines to launch nuclear missiles.

“The submarine-based deterrent is considered advanced and strong, the most survivable when we are attacked,” Hoffman says. “But since its purpose is to deter attacks, it is most survivable when it’s failed. It has huge investment costs.”

The replacement being developed for the Ohio-class ballistic-missile submarine is expected to cost between \$6 billion and \$8 billion per copy, with the first purchased in the latter part of this decade. Hoffman warns that when the Navy, which now spends about \$14 billion to \$15 billion annually on shipbuilding, starts buying one ballistic-missile submarine a year, it will consume half of that budget over the ensuing 12 years.

“The rest of the Navy is going to shrink and erode, so you are not as present, you’re going to be late, you are going to respond later,” Hoffman says. “So the nation needs to

decide where it needs to place its strategic-deterrent investment.” Hoffman suggests that the land-based and air-based deterrent would be sufficient, noting that nations such as China are already pursuing a “minimalist” deterrent capability.

Within the military establishment, Hoffman’s argument is tantamount to blasphemy. Nobody on the Defense committees in Congress is discussing such a major change — or even exploring the option of a more modestly priced submarine alternative for launching nuclear missiles.

Some lawmakers on the left are pushing for more traditional means of reducing the cost of the nuclear stockpile. Sixty-five House Democrats, led by Edward J. Markey <<http://www.cq.com/person/220>> of Massachusetts, signed a letter to the deficit reduction committee in October, calling for a reduction in the number of missiles in the U.S. nuclear arsenal, saying the current size “makes no sense.”

The United States currently maintains about 5,000 nuclear warheads, with the ability to annihilate entire nations. A single Ohio-class ballistic-missile submarine carries 96 warheads and has the ability to destroy every major city in either China or Russia.

“Why, then, do we need all of these weapons?” the lawmakers asked.

But Ohio Republican Michael R. Turner <<http://www.cq.com/person/14953>> , the chairman of the House Armed Services Strategic Forces Subcommittee, sent a letter in November, disputing the Democrats’ arguments. “These proposed cuts would therefore have, I’m sure you’ll agree, catastrophic impacts to our national security and global stability,” Turner wrote to the deficit committee.

The Obama administration has recently signaled that it might be open to some tweaks in the current arsenal. James N. Miller, principal deputy undersecretary of Defense for policy, told the House subcommittee that the administration was looking hard at the issue and should have answers by the end of this year.

“The fact is that the costs of these systems are significant,” he said.

The military’s role in the drug war is another example of a program with strong defenders in the Pentagon and Congress. Gen. Hertling, for example, says there is a huge movement of drugs in Europe that the U.S. military is working to counter. He describes a “nexus” between what U.S. forces are confronting in Central and South America and in Europe.

“Europe is one of the big harbingers of the flow of illegal drugs — heroine, cocaine and methamphetamines, especially,” Hertling says. He says the U.S. military brings to the fight unique capabilities that exist nowhere else.

“I would agree it is not a core DoD mission,” Mahnken says. “On the other hand, it is a mission Congress has been interested in and has ponied up substantial resources to do it.”

Non-Defense Missions

Given the forces arrayed in the House, the Senate and industry to protect Defense Department programs, some lawmakers have resorted to looking at some of the farther-flung programs the military runs.

Oklahoma Republican Sen. Tom Coburn <<http://www.cq.com/person/394>> issued a paper in July offering specific reductions that would save about \$1 trillion over 10 years.

A chunk of Coburn's savings would come from areas not considered part of the core national security mission. Coburn, for example, argues that consolidating the Pentagon's grocery and retail stores on bases around the world would save \$9 billion over 10 years.

He also advocates closing the department's elementary schools on U.S. bases. The schools are tailored to serve the transient military community, and they are very expensive. Coburn says they cost on average six times as much per student than local schools but are not as well-run. He says the move would save about \$10 billion over 10 years.

"The rationale for operating schools in the United States no longer exists," Coburn says.

Coburn also wants to use civilians, rather than military personnel, to perform commercial activities, at a savings of about \$53 billion over 10 years. This was originally proposed last year by Obama's fiscal commission. The change would target jobs involving installation support, supply, transportation, communications, morale, welfare and recreation support. Some 339,000 active-duty troops perform these roles, and Coburn suggests replacing about 88,000.

Calling some of the military's bureaucracy redundant, Coburn would save \$2.8 billion over 10 years by consolidating the various medical services under one military medical command. Currently the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and office of the secretary of Defense maintain separate health care bureaucracies.

Less Is More

PARATROOPERS: A member of the 173rd Airborne Brigade looks on after jumping out of a military airplane during a training exercise with Slovakian soldiers in southern Germany. (MATTHIAS SCHRADER / AP)

In the end, despite all efforts to make strategic choices about the kinds of forces and missions the military requires, the tool employed may be the meat cleaver rather than the scalpel.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, a former five-star general, found that the only way to control an insatiable military complex was simply to cut.

A half-century later, Gates, a fellow Kansan, struck a similar chord during a May 2010 speech at the Eisenhower Presidential Library, when he asked whether U.S. national security was at much risk when the U.S. naval battle fleet is larger than the next 13 largest navies combined, 11 of which belong to U.S. allies. Or, that by 2020, the U.S. stealth-fighter fleet would be 20 times the size of China's.

“They are the kinds of question that we must all — civilian, military, in government and out — be willing to ask and answer in order to have a balanced military portfolio,” Gates said.

Pentagon models indicate that a significant portion of the \$450 billion to be saved over 10 years could be achieved by reducing the total active force of about 1.42 million by about 130,000 troops. The calculation is based on military estimates that it costs about \$4 billion to support 10,000 troops. The military already plans to reduce its forces by about 47,000 troops beginning in fiscal 2015, which would set military end strength at roughly 2003 levels.

“Some people want to be in charge and large,” Hoffman says. But “a Pax Americana for a country that is insolvent is not a Pax Americana.”

Megan Scully contributed to this story.