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## U.S. Budget Committees To Lead Deficit Attack

By JOHN T. BENNETT  
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For decades, the U.S. defense sector has closely watched congressional authorization and appropriations panels. But as Washington looks to pare its debt, Rep. Barney Frank says the must-see action will occur within the House and Senate Budget committees.



**TOP DEMOCRATIC LAWMAKER** Barney Frank, D-Mass., says the defense budget will not be immune to budget cuts. (File photo / Getty Images)

Years of fiscal policies have left the government with a large federal deficit and choices that are "zero-sum," Frank, D-Mass., said Nov. 19 at a forum sponsored by the CATO Institute. The chairmen of the budget committees "will be the ones making these decisions," he added.

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Frank said the lawmakers from both sides of the political aisle that will lead the budget panels will not allow hawks to remove defense budgets from deficit-reduction deliberations.

While members of the House and Senate Armed Services committees will want more defense spending, Frank and Loren Thompson of the Lexington Institute agreed during the lunch-hour session that the wishes of these pro-military lawmakers largely will go unmet.

Frank and CATO scholars have said it is possible to cut more than \$1 trillion from the DoD budget over a decade. Thompson said the nation's fiscal situation is so dire that that figure might be surpassed.

Despite the nation's fiscal woes, the "modest threat" that is militant Islam gives officials in Washington some leeway "to make some decisions" about how to pare the Pentagon budget. But cuts are inevitable, considering the size of the U.S. defense budget - more than \$700 billion expected in 2011, Thompson said.

Frank said the debate about deficit reduction "is taking a turn." Earlier this year, even President Obama was proposing shielding defense spending from such efforts. Since then, a handful of high-level panels - including the co-chairmen of one created by Obama - have put forth deficit-paring plans that call for deep U.S. defense cuts, including the termination of big-ticket weapon programs.

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But Thompson questioned whether these panels "truly understand" the fiscal and operational ramifications of ending some of the programs they want to end.

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One "favorite" of the panels is the Marines' Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle. He noted the service already has spent billions on its development, and said sending Marines ashore in the existing amphibious assault vehicles would equate to sending them to war "in death traps."

Another proposal the debt panels have floated is deferring some Virginia-class attack submarines. But Thompson questioned whether the panels understood that most national security experts say the U.S. fleet is very much at risk in the Pacific region. What's more, he noted, deferring Virginia-class subs would likely mean the total erosion of submarine-building skill sets in New England and southeast Virginia - and rebuilding those skills "would be tremendously expensive."

But he said some weapon cuts are likely because it's politically easier to terminate "some obscure weapon system that it is to cut benefits."

Frank said his notion of cutting U.S. defense budgets and molding a smaller force is predicated on a policy that "the Pentagon should not be the world's military."

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