



New Pentagon Budget Seeks Small, Pre-9/11 Military Force

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Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel today outlined a five-year Pentagon budget that would shrink Army forces to fewer than before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, while retiring older weapons, including the U-2 spy plane and the A-10 attack aircraft.

“Our recommendations favor a smaller and more capable force — putting a premium on rapidly deployable, self-sustaining platforms that can defeat more technologically advanced adversaries,” Hagel said in prepared remarks as he proposed a budget for fiscal year 2015 of \$496 billion, in line with congressionally approved limits.

Hagel’s plan, to be sent to Congress next month as part of President Barack Obama’s proposed budget for the fiscal year that begins in October, will be reshaped by lawmakers who routinely reject Pentagon initiatives to cut back. The proposal for a smaller Army met immediate resistance today.

“It’s going to be Congress’ job to step in and move those numbers up,” Republican Rep. Michael Turner of Ohio, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, said on Bloomberg TV’s “In the Loop” program. “The world is not getting to be a safer place. This is not the time for us to begin to retreat, and certainly not the time to cut our military.”

Texas Rep. Michael McCaul, Republican chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, said the cuts would hurt military readiness. The nation is only in this position because the Obama administration and Congress will not seriously take on cuts to entitlements, he said.

“It’s all being sacrificed ... on the altar of entitlements. This president cannot take on mandatory spending, so all we’ve done in the Congress — and this president — is basically cut discretionary spending,” McCaul said.

Retired Gen. Jack Keane told Fox News the proposed budget cuts by the Pentagon would “cut into the bone and the capabilities of the Army.”

Keane said this move reflected a poor understanding of the last century of U.S. military history.

“The assumption that’s being made in the Pentagon, and it’s almost laughable if it wasn’t so serious, is they don’t believe the United States will involve itself in a ground war of any consequence again,” Keane said. “The fact of the matter is, those assumptions have been made

after World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Cold War, and every single time they have been proven wrong. Here we are making that same assumption again.”

And Sen. Kelly Ayotte, a New Hampshire Republican whose husband was an A-10 pilot, has already vowed to fight plans to retire that aircraft.

But the libertarian Cato Institute said on its blog that the cuts sound “like the kind of force that Americans want and expect. Given rapidly rising personnel costs, and the great political difficulty of reining them in, the only way to achieve actual savings may be a smaller active-duty force.”

Cato added that reaction from military contractors and Beltway insiders was “predictably apoplectic, but one doubts that the American public are terribly worried about a military that might be slightly less likely to get involved in unnecessary and counterproductive nation-building missions in distant lands.”

Hagel’s plan would reduce the Army by 6 percent to about 490,000 personnel by 2015 from about 522,000 today, accelerating by two years the Army’s plan to reach that total by 2017. Hagel’s proposal also calls for reductions to about 450,000 by 2019 — 30,000 fewer than the active-duty force in September 2001 before the terrorist attacks on the U.S.

For the five years ending in 2019, the Defense Department’s budget forecast includes \$115 billion more in spending than currently authorized in congressionally mandated levels under the budget cuts called sequestration.

The plan calls for requesting \$535 billion in 2016, or \$35 billion more than the sequestration level; \$544 billion for 2017, or \$31 billion over the cap; \$551 billion in 2018, or \$27 billion over the cap; and \$559 billion in 2019, or \$22 billion over the cap.

Hagel’s preview echoes similar practice by his predecessors Robert Gates and Leon Panetta, who highlighted parts of their budgets before formal release. The deepest cuts since 2001 were announced by Gates in April 2009 with the termination or truncation of numerous programs, including the manned vehicle portion of Boeing’s then-\$159 billion Future Combat System for the Army.

The Defense Department’s weapons buying request for 2015 will be about \$91 billion, or \$15.2 billion less than the \$106.2 billion estimated last year, and \$64 billion for research and development, or \$8.8 billion less than forecast, according to internal budget figures provided by a defense official.

Hagel Monday said he accepted the Army’s proposal to terminate its Ground Combat Vehicle program and instead direct program funds toward “a next-generation platform.” General Dynamics Corp. and BAE Systems are developing competing versions of the combat vehicle.

The Air Force will get to continue developing a new bomber and a refueling tanker aircraft as well as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, Hagel said. The service will seek \$1 billion to design a new jet-engine technology that will produce “sizable cost savings,” he said.

If automatic budget cuts resume in 2016, the Air Force would have to retire its entire fleet of KC-10 tankers, buy fewer F-35 jets and sustain 10 fewer Predator and Reaper drone patrols, Hagel said.

To pay for the programs and the new engine, the Air Force will shrink the size of its tactical air squadrons and completely eliminate its A-10 attack airplane fleet, to save \$3.5 billion over five years, Hagel said. The move would let the Air Force concentrate its resources on the F-35 made by Lockheed Martin.

The A-10, known as the Warthog, was built by Fairchild Republic and has been upgraded by Chicago-based Boeing; Falls Church, Va.-based Northrop Grumman; and Bethesda, Md.-based Lockheed.

The Air Force also will retire its fleet of 50-year-old U-2 spy planes in favor of Global Hawk surveillance drones made by Northrop Grumman, Hagel said.

The decision to depend on drones reverses a previous attempt by the Pentagon to keep the U-2s instead and comes as the Defense Department “has been able to reduce the Global Hawk’s operating costs,” Hagel said.

The Pentagon won’t conduct any negotiations to buy more than 32 Littoral Combat Ships (LCS), compared with the 52 originally proposed, Hagel said. Versions of the ship are made by Lockheed and Henderson, Australia-based Austal Ltd.

“I am concerned that the Navy is relying too heavily on the LCS to achieve its long-term goals for ship numbers,” Hagel said.

The ship is intended to operate in a “relatively permissive environment,” and the Pentagon must “closely examine” whether the vessel “has the protection and firepower to survive against a more advanced military adversary and emerging new technologies, especially in the Asia-Pacific,” Hagel said.

Hagel said he has asked the Navy to design a “capable and lethal small surface combatant, consistent with the capabilities of a frigate.” The Navy must consider new designs as well as modifications to the current LCS design, Hagel said.

Current spending plans foresee the Navy keeping 11 aircraft carrier groups, Hagel said. “However, we will have to make a final decision on the future of the George Washington aircraft carrier in the 2016 budget,” he said.

If Congress doesn’t reverse the automatic budget cuts by 2016, the George Washington would be retired before a scheduled overhaul, leaving the Navy with 10 carriers, Hagel said.

While reducing the size of the Army “entails some added risk if we execute extended or simultaneous ground operations, our analysis showed that this force would be capable of decisively defeating aggression in one major combat theater” in addition to defending the U.S. homeland and supporting air and naval forces, Hagel said.

If Congress doesn’t reverse automatic budget cuts by 2016, the active-duty Army “would have to draw down to an end-strength of 420,000 soldiers,” Hagel said.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ray Odierno said as recently as this month that he’d be comfortable with a force of 450,000. A level of 420,000 would be too low, he said.

Hagel said U.S. Special Operations forces will grow to 69,700 personnel from 66,000 today because they’re “uniquely suited to the most likely missions of the future.”

The Pentagon will propose a 1 percent pay raise for all military personnel except general and flag officers, whose compensation for 2015 will be frozen at current levels, Hagel said.

The Defense Department also will seek to cut back growth in tax-free housing allowances, reduce by \$1 billion the annual subsidy to military commissaries and make adjustments to the military health insurance program, Hagel said. Military retirees and some active-duty personnel will be asked to pay “a little more in their deductibles and co-pay,” he said.

The political resistance to any cuts in pay for the active-duty military or benefits for veterans was demonstrated this month: Congress partially reversed its own decision in December’s budget agreement to restrain cost-of-living adjustments for working-age military retirees.

Hagel faces a tighter budget environment than either Panetta or Gates because his plan was required under the Bipartisan Budget Act to cut as much as \$43 billion from the year-ago level envisioned for fiscal 2015.

Hagel said the Pentagon will ask Congress to approve another round of base closings in the United States in 2017, although lawmakers have denied similar requests in the last two years. “But if Congress continues to block these requests even as they slash the overall budget, we will have to consider every tool at our disposal to reduce infrastructure,” Hagel said.

The Pentagon already has cut base infrastructure in Europe by 30 percent since 2000 and plans to pursue more closures on the continent this year. The Defense Department doesn’t need congressional approval to shut bases outside the United States.