

Panel commissioned by Barney Frank recommends nearly \$1T in defense cuts

By Roxana Tiron - 06/11/10 12:15 PM ET

A panel commissioned by Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) is recommending nearly \$1 trillion in cuts to the Pentagon's budget during the next 10 years.

The Sustainable Defense Task Force, a commission of scholars from a broad ideological spectrum appointed by Frank, the House Financial Services Committee chairman, laid out actions the government could take that could save as much as \$960 billion between 2011 and 2020.

Measures presented by the task force include making significant reductions to the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program, which has strong support from Defense Secretary Robert Gates; delaying the procurement of a new midair refueling tanker the Air Force has identified as one of its top acquisition priorities; and reducing the Navy's fleet to 230 ships instead of the 313 eyed by the service.

Shipbuilding has strong support in the congressional defense committees, which write the Pentagon bills. Efforts to reduce the number of ships would run into resistance from the Pentagon and the shipbuilding lobby.

Frank on Friday warned that if he can't convince Congress to act in the "general direction" of the task force recommendation, "then every other issue will suffer." Not cutting the Pentagon's budget could lead to higher taxes and spending cuts detrimental to the environment, housing and highway construction.

The acceptance of the recommendations would depend on a "philosophical change" and a "redefinition of the strategy," Frank said at press conference on Capitol Hill.

He said the creation of the deficit reduction commission offers the best opportunity for the reduction recommendations. Frank wants to convince his colleagues to write to the deficit reduction commission and warn that they would not approve any of the plans suggested by the commission unless reduction of military spending is included.

The task force has looked at various options to trim the Pentagon's budget in order to reduce the deficit. Those include a reduction in Army and Marine Corps end-strength by cutting back on personnel stationed in Europe and Asia; and rolling back Army and Marine Corps personnel as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan end.

The panel also looked into reforming military compensation, which could save about \$55

billion; saving \$60 billion by reforming the military healthcare system; and reducing recruiting expenditures once the wars wind down to preserve about \$5 billion.

All of these recommendations would be expected to engender congressional opposition.

The task force also suggested canceling the V-22 Osprey program and the Marine Corps's troubled Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle.

The U.S. nuclear arsenal would also be on the chopping block, under the panel's suggestions.

The task force recommends reducing the U.S. nuclear warhead total to 1,050.

Launchers would include 160 Minuteman missiles and seven Ohio-class submarines with 24 missiles (each with five warheads).

The panel also recommends retiring the Air Force bombers — “the bomber leg of the nuclear triad,” which includes land-based missiles and nuclear submarines — and ending work on the Trident II missile.

Frank acknowledged Friday that making cuts to the military's healthcare system, known as Tricare, would be a “non-starter” with his congressional colleagues. But he said that suggestions on how to handle the nuclear arsenal and missile defense could get a “great deal” of support on the Hill.

Frank requested the creation of the task force in cooperation with Reps. Walter Jones (R-N.C.) and Ron Paul (R-Texas) and Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.).

The Project on Defense Alternatives coordinated the work of the task force, which included the following members: Carl Conetta, Project on Defense Alternatives; Benjamin Friedman, Cato Institute; William Hartung, New America Foundation; Christopher Hellman, National Priorities Project; Heather Hurlburt, National Security Network; Charles Knight, Project on Defense Alternatives; Lawrence J. Korb, Center for American Progress; Paul Kawika Martin, Peace Action; Laicie Olson, Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation; Miriam Pemberton, Institute for Policy Studies; Laura Peterson, Taxpayers for Common Sense; Prasannan Parthasarathi, Boston College; Christopher Preble, Cato Institute, and Winslow Wheeler, Center for Defense Information.

This story was posted at 10:24 a.m. and updated at 12:14 p.m.