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Conservative Groups Rally Against U.S. Defense Spending Cuts

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Three right-leaning Washington think tanks are warning against any cuts to annual U.S. defense budgets, arguing a smaller global footprint and shrunken weapon modernization coffers would threaten national and economic security.



REP. BARNEY FRANK, D-Mass., leads a group of 55 mostly Democratic lawmakers who are urging slashing the Pentagon's budget and using the savings to cut the federal deficit. (Alex Wong / Getty Images file photo)

"Defense spending is near historic lows. Between 2010 and 2015, total defense spending is set to fall from 4.9 percent to 3.6 percent of GDP, even though the nation has assigned more missions to the military over the past two decades," states a report by the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation

and the Foreign Policy Initiative.

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The report labels as a "myth" the notion - held primarily by Democratic lawmakers and defense analysts - that current Pentagon spending levels cannot be sustained. Another myth, according to the conservative groups: "Additional defense spending is unnecessary as the United States already spends more on defense than half the world combined."

"The defense budget is a relatively small slice of the \$14-plus trillion American pie," the report states. "And it's a shrinking slice: As a percentage of our economy and as a percentage of the federal budget, the burden of defense is declining. President Obama's long-term budget projections ... reduce Pentagon spending in real dollars."

That shrinking slice "largely reflects the dramatic growth of entitlement spending," which now "account for around 65 percent of all federal spending," according to Mackenzie Eaglen of Heritage. If taxes remain at "historical levels," Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid "will consume all tax revenues by 2052, leaving no money for the government's primary constitutional obligation: providing for the common defense."

The report argues defense spending accounts for "less than 20 percent of all new [federal] spending from 2001 to 2009."

During a briefing to unveil the report, Eaglen said defense budget analysts of all political stripes agree the Pentagon's procurement accounts are

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underfunded. Analysts have said that hardware modernization accounts are underfunded by about one-third.

The conservatives' call for sparing the defense budgets from cuts came a day after 54 House Democrats and one Republican - Rep. Ron Paul of Texas - urged the U.S. Debt Commission to urge the White House to slash the Pentagon's yearly budget and transfer the savings to paring the federal deficit. The libertarian CATO Institute supports Pentagon spending cuts, as well.

The addition of Paul and CATO to the group merely shows it is "clear" the Democrats are attempting to splinter "Tea Party conservatives from other conservatives," AEI's Thomas Donnelly said.

The 55 lawmakers, led by Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., told the commission a smaller global footprint will allow personnel cuts and hardware program cancellations.

As Washington awaits the commission's recommendations for federal deficit reduction, Frank told reporters Oct. 13 that Pentagon budget cuts are possible because the U.S. military "no longer needs to be the world's policeman."

The Frank-led group wants to bring home most U.S. troops. That means getting out of Iraq and Afghanistan, but also U.S. forces stationed in Europe and Asia. They envision an American force that would do less. It would therefore cost less, allowing the savings to help pay down some of the nation's \$1.4 trillion deficit.

"Potential savings can be realized if we are willing to make an honest examination of the cost, benefit, and rationale of the extensive U.S. military commitment overseas, which in large part remains a legacy of policy decisions made in the immediate aftermath of World War II and during the Cold War," the lawmakers wrote in a letter to the financial commission.

"There is no vested economic argument" for keeping 50,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, nor for continuing to "station 15,000 Marines on Okinawa," Frank told reporters.

The conservative groups have a different viewpoint, however.

Eaglen called it a "false argument that you can defend the homeland without project power abroad." U.S. forces, for instance, are needed to defend sea lanes that must remain open for global commerce. On the other side is Frank, who the previous day said a large American naval footprint in the Pacific to keep open commercial sea lanes "is World War II thinking."

Donnelly also dismissed Frank's call to end U.S. military basing around the globe, saying Washington will "always care about the balance of power in Europe, the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific," and cannot afford to be "agnostic" about stability in the Middle East, the Indian Ocean region nor Southeast Asia.

While the Democratic-CATO call for defense cuts was largely focused on deficit reduction, where defense fits into reduction efforts did not come up during the conservative organizations' event on Capitol Hill. The clear theme of the AEI-Heritage-FPI session was to begin erecting a defensive shield around the annual Pentagon budget, as conservatives apparently are increasingly fearful they might not be able to stave off top line cuts much longer.

And deficits are mentioned but once in the joint report.

"The idea that defense cuts will restore fiscal health simply does not add up: suppose Pentagon spending for 2011 - \$720 billion - were eliminated entirely," it states. "This would only halve this year's federal deficit."

The Democrats - and their libertarian CATO allies - have a much different view of defense spending and deficit reduction, setting up a likely fight when a new Congress takes office in January.

"Given the size of our deficit and debt problems, as well as the political

challenges and policy controversies involved in implementing any solutions to them," the Democratic lawmakers told the Debt Commission, "it is clear to us that cutting the military budget must be a part of any viable proposal."

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