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## News Analysis: Will U.S. military see budget cuts?

by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Dec. 1 (Xinhua) -- With an eye on reducing the soaring deficit, U.S. President Barack Obama's deficit commission is targeting the military for cutbacks.

Indeed, the U.S. armed forces comprise 23 percent of the overall national budget and account for the largest chunk of the world's military spending. With that in mind, some experts and lawmakers are arguing that cuts must be included in an overall push to lower the U.S. deficit.

Obama's commission has already tagged a number of big-ticket items for 100 billion U.S. dollars of military cutbacks in a draft of its budget recommendations. A final draft was expected on Wednesday.

But amid the drumbeat over slashing the deficit, questions arise concerning how much support Congress will lend to those recommendations, as well as whether the military will see budget cuts that deprive it of much-needed equipment, vehicles and aircraft.

Speaking at a recent Cato Institute panel in Washington, Rep. Barney Frank, chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, said support for reducing military costs has gained traction.

"I am struck by the change of a couple of months ago of Obama saying he is going to freeze domestic spending but not applying it to the military, to where we are today," he said, referring to the president's recent shift in favor of curbing military spending.

"There are clearly going to be more restraints on military spending that I thought," he said.

But in spite of such shifts, some analysts said cuts are unlikely, not least of all because of recent skirmishes between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and South Korea, which is a U.S. ally. Deep and significant cuts would also require a grand bipartisan deal, which some experts said is unlikely in the next Congress.

James Carafano, a defense expert at the Heritage Foundation, contends that budget reductions are far from likely and that the commission's recommendations will have little impact, although some other analysts said they could prove influential.

It would make little sense for the GOP to put defense on the chopping block, as that would take pressure off progressives to deal with long-term spending programs with which conservatives are at odds, he said.

"It's not like there's going to be a giant drumbeat on defense cuts from conservatives and moderates. There's not," he said.

The Defense Department also just finished its quadrennial defense review and laid out its

requirements for the next five years, he noted.

"I don't think Obama can sign up for big-ticket defense cuts, particularly since he just said that he's going to continue the mission in Iraq and Afghanistan," he said.

The White House announced earlier this month that U.S. troops would hand over security duties to Afghan forces in 2014.

Other analysts said it remains premature to predict whether Congress will support reductions in the military's 700 billion U.S. dollar budget.

Todd Harrison, fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, said it is too soon to tell what Congress will do.

Still, it is difficult to make much progress in curbing the deficit if defense is taken off the table, and from that perspective cutbacks will increasingly be forced as something that Congress has to consider, he said.

#### MAKING CUTS WHERE THEY MAKE SENSE

Loren B. Thompson, chief operating officer of the Lexington Institute, said that while some spending reduction is certainly needed, lawmakers should choose wisely.

Indeed, there could be consequences for cutting some of the weapons programs that the deficit panel has proposed: Money already spent would be wasted; the military would be deprived of capabilities that a program would have delivered; and required weapons would need to be replaced, he said at the Cato panel.

One program on the deficit commission's hit list is the expeditionary fighting vehicle, on the grounds of its cost - 10 million U.S. dollars per copy - and some reliability problems.

Still, it provides more speed, protection and firepower than the Marine Corps' current amphibious vehicle -- a Cold War relic that has become a sitting duck for precision guided munitions -- and cancelling the program could result in many U.S. casualties, he said.

While Defense Secretary Robert Gates has contended that the United States is unlikely to conduct expeditionary warfare in the future, Thompson argued that the U.S. has a poor track record for predicting tomorrow's missions, as the United States has managed to miss every threat in the last five decades.

The V-22 Osprey tilt rotor is another target for cuts, as proponents of cutbacks cite its high costs. But it is unique, as it combines the agility of a helicopter with the range and speed of a fixed wing aircraft, and there are some places that troops cannot access in a helicopter and others that a fixed-wing craft cannot reach, he said.

The Marines have also developed their entire future operations concepts around the availability of the airframe, he said. It is also a 60 billion U.S. dollar program and 50 billion U.S. dollars have already been spent, he said.

Cutting that program now would undercut decades of technological investment and hobble expeditionary warfare plans. The military would also have to buy more conventional helicopters and likely endanger the lives of large number of marines, he argued.

The joint tactical radio system is another target of the budget panels. If the system is killed, the military will have to spend billions of dollars on outmoded radios and still will not be able to communicate between branches.

Virginia class submarines are also being eyed for cutbacks.

It is the only submarine program in the United States, and ending it would mean getting out of submarine building for first time in around 100 years. And that would mean abandoning underwater warfare, since cold war subs are soon to retire, he argued.

"If we are going to do this right, we need to understand what is it we are doing, and not just slash things because it sounds like a good idea," he said.

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