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Political squabbles threaten to harm defense budgets

Panel believes politically charged process for determining federal spending might have dire impact on the military

- By [Amber Corrin](#)
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A haphazard, politically charged process for determining federal spending – which is becoming increasingly complicated with the emergence of the new “super committee” charged with identifying deep budget cuts – will make an already difficult defense budgeting process even harder, according to some policy experts.

To successfully parse out Defense Department funds, Capitol Hill negotiators will need to bring honesty and a willingness to make sacrifices to the table, leaving behind political agendas, a group of Washington insiders said Sept. 13, speaking on a panel Capitol organized by Washington, D.C.-based non-profit Public Notice.

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Particularly of concern is the threat of a sequestration process that will automatically enact billions in sweeping budget cuts. “super committee” does not agree on federal spending reductions, the panel indicated, although most said there is still hope.

“It’s going to be extremely difficult to achieve agreement,” said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy at the Cato Institute. “But more than a handful of people are willing to make hard choices that wouldn’t have been on the table 15 years ago.”

Another positive sign is that decision-makers seem to be following the mantra of “everything is on the table,” according to John Nolan, director of nuclear security at the American Security Project.

“This should be taken as an opportunity to review critical priorities in the American posture,” she said. “We need to think about entitlements, tax reform and the part of federal spending that relates to national security as being part of public policy that is sacrosanct in some way that elevates it out of the give-and-take of governments and democracy and interest groups.”

It will be critical for discussions to be rooted in factual analysis, and to reject the political agendas that have been marring d making in Washington, the panelists said.

“This has been a garbage-in, garbage-out process. It’s a sloppy way to do defense budgeting and defense strategy. ... The budget should be based on realistic, sober assessment of threats and the capabilities needed to address those threats. Any of broad, arbitrary number is lazy and ultimately unenforceable,” said Josh Rogin, national security and foreign policy reporter Foreign Policy magazine and The Cable.

Any realistic resolution will also require balance that focuses on national security, noted Michael Breen, vice president of the National Security Project.

“The question [of how to budget for defense] is less about defense spending and more about national security spending ... : a balanced set of tools that include the hard power tools of weapons systems and military personnel, and also a discussion balance between those programs and [diplomacy],” Breen said.

Larry Korb, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, stressed that it is feasible to cut the defense spending, even dramatically, and still maintain a military edge. He pointed out that President Eisenhower cut defense spending by 30 percent the Korean War, and President Nixon also cut the DOD budget by 30 percent after the Vietnam War. But he conceded that current mismanagement of spending is unprecedented.

“I’ve been around a long time. ... I’ve never seen [defense budgeting] so badly managed. We’re spending \$50 billion on weapons programs that are canceled,” Korb said.

Despite the plausibility of change to the status quo in defense spending, Loren Thompson, chief operating officer of Lexington Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank, believes what comes next will continue to be a function of what has already transpired thus far. Any change that may happen in budget policy likely will face repeal once political control is gained by an opposing longtime pattern in Washington that nullifies any planning aimed at a 10-year outlook, he pointed out.

“I think what will end up happening is that we will revert back to the easiest option, which at the moment is borrowing more money very cheap to do, and cutting things is painful politically, so I think that’s where we’re headed,” Thompson said.

About the Author

Amber Corrin is a staff writer covering defense and national security.



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