

Democracy Arsenal

CNAS Report Underscores Need for a New Strategy

Posted by the Editors

October 06, 2011

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The Center for a New American Security (CNAS) summarizes its new report on defense spending as follows: “U.S. Global Engagement Strategy at Risk If Defense Cuts Exceed \$550 Billion Over Ten Years.” If the headline is meant to be taken at face value, it is our *strategy* that is at risk if we cut further, not our security. And the report, [*Hard Choices: Responsible Defense in An Age of Austerity*](#), acknowledges as much, noting that we can’t scale back the Pentagon’s ambitious plans beyond the magic number of \$550 billion unless “policymakers re-calibrate America’s global engagement strategy and/or generate savings by reforming pay and benefits.”

Putting pay and benefits aside for the moment, strategy is at the heart of the matter. At a time when the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are winding down and deficit reduction is the order of the day, it is precisely the right time to “re-calibrate America’s global engagement strategy.” If we do so, it will be possible to trim planned Pentagon spending by up to \$1 trillion over ten years. This is roughly twice the level that the CNAS report deems acceptable. Examples of how to generate this level of savings are contained in reports and articles published by the [Sustainable Defense Task Force](#), [the Cato Institute](#), and [Gordon Adams and Matthew Leatherman of the Stimson Center](#), writing in the January/February 2011 issue of *Foreign Affairs* (Adams and Leatherman set out an approach for cutting \$788 billion over a shorter time frame, from 2012 to 2018).

The Pentagon has accumulated a dizzying array of missions in the 2000s. It is well past time to cut back. Priority missions should include destroying and disrupting al Qaeda or other terror networks intent on attacking the United States; preventing nuclear proliferation and reducing global stockpiles of nuclear weapons; and cybersecurity. But we should not design U.S. forces with an eye towards fighting future wars of occupation like Iraq or large scale counterinsurgency campaigns like Afghanistan that seek to remake other societies. The Pentagon should not be an economic development agency, and its proliferation of security assistance programs should be both cut back and made more transparent.

The CNAS report does a service in acknowledging that economic constraints are “driving strategy, not the other way around,” and that therefore the real question is what level of risk we are willing to take as we rein in the Pentagon’s ambitious spending plans. And it sketches out four scenarios that cover the current range of discussion for adjustments in Pentagon spending, from “Reposition and Reset,” at \$350 billion to \$400 billion in savings, to “Focused Economy of Force,” at \$800 to \$850 billion in savings, all over a ten year time span. In each of the scenarios, ground troops are de-emphasized in favor of air and naval power, and the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean are given priority, along with the Middle East. The authors of the report seek to set out the trade-offs and security risks entailed in each scenario. And they give specific details on how each of their scenarios would impact procurement, R&D, troop levels, intelligence spending, and more. Two missing ingredients are a discussion of the role of allies in providing for their own defense and the importance of non-military tools of security in addressing and preventing threats.

But what is an appropriate level of risk? Under its “deepest cuts” scenario, CNAS raises concerns about how long it would take the U.S. to mobilize for a major ground operation, or whether it could act soon enough to prevent an adversary from seizing territory. These concerns must be considered in the context of a discussion of how likely such situations are to arise, and which of them would require U.S. action, either alone or with allies. But most importantly, in what it considers its riskiest option, CNAS emphasizes the fact that U.S. leaders would have to be “much more cautious about where and when to use force” and “would have to prioritize global missions far more clearly than in the past.” These are good things, things which should be done regardless of what level Pentagon spending settles in at.