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Budget battles reshape debate about military strategy

- By [Amber Corrin](#)
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Cuts to military spending are inevitable, but the prospect is raising a question of survivability: Can the military defend the nation and its interests with less money, or are we doomed to lose World War III?

The answer depends on who you ask and how the Defense Department executes its military strategy.

Although there are a wealth of dire predictions — including from Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, who has used “doomsday” in public speeches more than once — others say spending reductions have traditionally followed wars. In this case, that would mean spending less on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as they draw down.

If members of the congressional supercommittee charged with cutting more than \$1 trillion from the federal budget fail to come to an agreement and sweeping across-the-board cuts kick in, the situation will, by all accounts, be devastating for a military already worn thin by a decade at war.

Even as top Defense Department officials warn Congress against cutting too much from their budget, there is furious debate among experts on what the ramifications might be. In the process, the conversation is shifting away from which major weapons systems to cancel and toward re-evaluating the military’s mission.

“We need a new strategy first,” said Larry Korb, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. “I think we need to switch from trying to be a global hegemon to offshore balancing, which is traditionally what we had.... Eisenhower cut spending after Korea, Nixon cut spending after Vietnam. As we get out of Iraq and draw down in Afghanistan, we have another opportunity.”

At the top of the list of changes is the way our military is structured and used.

“I think we can rethink what we ask our military to do to achieve substantial savings without increasing the risk to the United States or unfairly burdening our troops,” said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. “We should be more reticent to use military force, especially when our vital interests are not at stake. A leaner, more focused military can no longer be in the business of defending other countries that [can] defend themselves.”

A faulty premise?

But some insiders reject the notion that we are spending too much on defense.

“Cutting defense to make the economy healthier is actually committing suicide,” said James Carafano, director of the Heritage Foundation’s Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies. “Great powers don’t rot from without; they don’t spend themselves into defeat. Great powers rot from within. It’s not the costs of defending themselves and their interests that defeats them. It’s when they stop generating the wealth and the will to protect themselves that they collapse.”

Michael O’Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, warned that the changing nature of threats doesn’t diminish the dangers against which the United States must defend itself. Although he acknowledged that budget cuts are inevitable, he said they must be done with great care.

“That the United States spends a lot more on its defense than other nations is not necessarily a bad thing,” O’Hanlon wrote in a Washington Post editorial. “American military excellence — in people, training and equipment — is one of the reasons that Middle East oil continues to flow despite Iran’s malevolent intentions and that China continues to prefer a peaceful rise to a violent one. While saving money and becoming more efficient are important, I’d like to keep American military pre-eminence largely as it is.”

Still, at least one defense expert insists that a balance can be struck between competing needs.

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"The single most important mission we have, as has been since the dawn of the Nuclear Age, is deterrence," said Loren Thompson, chief operating officer of the Lexington Institute. We should do "nothing that diminishes the credibility of our nuclear deterrent triad of submarines, missiles and bombers. After that, I would say this is mainly about counterterrorism in the near term. As long as we can effectively execute the global terror campaign, you're pretty much free to do what you want with the rest of the budget."

About the Author

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

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