



Hagel is latest sign Obama could limit Pentagon power

Posted By Kevin Baron - December 14, 2012

If reports that President Obama will pick Chuck Hagel to succeed Defense Secretary Leon Panetta are true, it will be one more sign that he may use his second term to rein in America's global military presence after an expansion that dates back to September 11, 2001. Hagel's views on the limits of American power support a defense retrenchment that seems increasingly likely.

Although no decision has yet been made as to the speed of withdrawal, the president has promised that the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan will end by 2015.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon faces \$60 billion in across-the-board cuts starting January 2, 2013, unless Congress and the president can avert the so-called fiscal cliff. And, even if they do reach a deal, all of Washington expects defense spending to take another hit, beyond the \$487 billion, 10-year cut passed in last summer's Budget Control Act.

And, perhaps most surprisingly, two weeks ago the Pentagon's general counsel, Jeh Johnson, delivered a speech in Britain making the administration's case that the war on terrorism could soon become a matter of law enforcement, not military action. Johnson predicted that a "tipping point" was coming where enough al Qaeda leaders had been killed or captured that pursuing terrorists "should no longer be considered an armed conflict."

Hagel, a Vietnam veteran, believes the United States should use force only when absolutely necessary. And his insistence on never repeating a military intervention like the Iraq war is one of the things for which he has become best known. In an op-ed for the Washington Post in 2006, Hagel opposed President George W. Bush's coming troop surge and called for an immediate shift toward withdrawal, writing, "There will be no victory or defeat for the United States in Iraq."

That stance solidified Hagel's reputation as a non-interventionist, a label that has stuck since he left the Senate in 2008. Hagel also agrees with the Obama administration that the United States should not pursue a perpetual global war on

terrorism.

Within hours of Bloomberg reporting on Thursday that Hagel was being teed up for the job, the CATO Institute, which advocates for limited government, was singing Hagel's praises as an advocate of America's limited power.

"Hagel, a decorated Vietnam war veteran, understands war, and doesn't take it lightly," said Christopher Preble, CATO's vice president for defense and foreign policy studies, in a statement. "Although the president will obviously make the decisions, I expect that Hagel will generally advise against sending U.S. troops on quixotic nation-building missions."

Hagel's military service also gives him credibility the White House needs in defense and foreign policy circles -- and he is a Republican.

David J. Berteau, senior vice president and director of the Center for Strategic and International Studies' International Security Program, said a Hagel selection makes sense in many ways and, along with the withdrawal of Susan Rice's name for secretary of state, "indicates the importance [to the White House] of a bipartisan approach to national security." Obama certainly would need bipartisan cover to limit the military's budget and role in foreign policy.

But conservatives don't necessarily trust Hagel. "I'm surprised to see someone like Chuck Hagel in a position to become [the secretary of defense]: averse to the use of power, prone to second-guessing everyone, himself included," said Danielle Pletka of the American Enterprise Institute. "I'm guessing Obama will get more than he bargained for."

Her AEI colleague Michael Rubin was blunter, arguing that a Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel would make America less safe. "I think his vision of foreign affairs and defense goes beyond naïve and actually is malign," Rubin told the E-Ring. "He simply does not understand the way Iran works, the way Somalia works, the way Pakistan works. I mean, these guys are going to eat him for lunch."

According to Rubin, Hagel's non-interventionist views make him "like Ron Paul separated at birth." He said Hagel would abdicate "the idea of America being a power throughout the world," adding, "The man really does seem to be an isolationist."