



Chuck Hagel Is Looking for a Few New Ideas

By: Stephen M. Walt – August 2, 2013

According to Thom Shanker of the *New York Times*, U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel is "looking for a few good ideas." Translated: The Defense Department is under a lot of budget pressure (from the sequester and from broader fiscal realities), so he's looking for smart ways to cut the budget without jeopardizing U.S. security.

If Hagel is really looking for some "outside-the-box" thinking on this important issue, then I've got three suggestions for him. First, he won't make real progress without examining the fundamentals of U.S. grand strategy: What America's real interests are, what are the different ways it can advance or protect them, and what are the costs, benefits, and trade-offs among different commitments? Trying to maintain all U.S. present commitments on a shoestring makes it much more likely that the country will in fact defend nothing very well.

Second, in addition to directing the Defense Department bureaucracy and the uniformed services to work hard on it, he ought to convene a "Team B" of outside experts to brainstorm the problem too. And if he needs new ideas, he ought to populate that Team B with knowledgeable people whose views aren't warped by long service inside the Washington bubble or by years spent inside the Pentagon itself. Instead, this group should be composed mostly of people who don't work for defense contractors and who don't depend on Defense Department consulting contracts for their livelihoods. I'd also exclude people at think tanks that receive a lot of defense-industry dollars and anyone who has ever spoken at the Aspen Security Forum. (I'm not dissing any of these organizations, by the way; I'm just saying that it's not where I'd look to find alternatives to the conventional wisdom).

In short, I'd be looking for smart academics and independent thinkers, like MIT's Barry Posen or Cindy Williams, Dartmouth College's Daryl Press, or the Cato Institute's Christopher Preble. Throw in Andrew Bacevich of Boston University and Carl Conetta of the Project on Defense Alternatives. A creative, thoughtful journalist like James Fallows and an iconoclast like Michael Lind would be good additions too. Hagel should also encourage this group to consult with insiders or seasoned Washington veterans -- such as Brent Scowcroft, Steve Clemons, Colin Powell, Gordon Adams (an FP columnist), etc. -- to make sure that their recommendations aren't just pie in the sky.

The point is not that such people would necessarily come up with the best ideas; the

purpose of this sort of exercise is to ensure that a wide range of possibilities gets considered and that well-worn shibboleths get challenged.

Third, Hagel should remind everyone involved in this process who they are working for. The name of the organization in question is the "U.S. Department of Defense." It is not the "Department of Imperial Power Projection," "Department of World Order Maintenance," the "Department of Democracy Promotion," or the "Department of Regime Change and Global Pest Control." My dictionary defines "defense" as "the action of resisting attack," and the focus of its efforts ought to be on that fundamental goal. Weaning the United States away from the belief that its security is enhanced by constantly searching for monsters to destroy in faraway lands (a task the country has been doing rather badly in recent years) would be a major achievement. But it's not one the United States is likely to accomplish if the task is left solely to the usual experts and the existing institutions.