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Congressional group wants defense budget cut to lessen deficit

From **Jennifer Rizzo**, CNN Pentagon Producer

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- The U.S. defense budget dwarfs every other country
- China spends only a fifth of what the U.S. does on its military
- More than 50 members of Congress want a presidential commission to find budget cuts

Washington (CNN) -- More than 50 members of Congress sent a letter Wednesday to the president's commission on deficit reduction, urging cuts to the nation's defense budget to help narrow the budget imbalance.

Lead by Reps. Barney Frank, D-Massachusetts; Ron Paul, R-Texas; and Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, the group is asking that the president's National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform subject military spending to the same "rigorous scrutiny" that the group says non-military spending will receive.

In a conference call with reporters Wednesday, Frank said it is clear something has to be done to reduce the deficit.

"I've been for some time a critic of America's excessive military engagement with the rest of the world. I think we are suffering from a cultural lag from the time when it was necessary for America to be the world's protector," Frank said.

The U.S. defense budget dwarfs every other country. China, which has the second largest defense budget, spends only a fifth of what the U.S. does on its military.

The Department of Defense currently consumes about 56 percent of all discretionary federal spending and the lawmakers say it accounts for nearly 65 percent of the increase in annual discretionary spending levels since 2001. When mandatory spending is factored in, defense spending accounts for about 20 percent of the total budget.

"It is necessary to 'go where the money is,'" the members of Congress write in their letter. They said they are confident that cuts in defense spending can be made without threatening national security or cutting essential funds to fight terrorism.

"We are not urging reductions that in any way would cut resources and supplies necessary to protect American troops in the field," the letter states.

The group suggests an examination of the U.S. military's commitment overseas, saying the government continues to provide European and Asian nations with military protection based on policy decisions made in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the during the Cold War.

"Given the relative wealth of these countries, we should examine the extent of this burden that we continue to shoulder on our own dime," the letter states.

Other suggestions include examining Pentagon management and its procedures for weapons research, development and procurement, and calling upon the commission to look into the choices made to continue to develop "Cold War era weapons systems" such as missile defense, with the Congressmen saying in their letter they believe "significant savings can be found."

In a statement Wednesday, the Defense Department said its officials remain confident "that the specifics requested in the President's budget submission are the right numbers needed to allow the Department to meet its short and long term institutional priorities while making the best use of taxpayer dollars to help keep America safe.

"DoD leadership is committed to working with the Congress and the Administration to ensure that our troops have the resources they need now and in the future," the statement added.

In August, Defense Secretary Robert Gates voiced concerns about the defense budget being cut.

"My greatest worry is that we will do to the defense budget what we have done four times before, and that is slash it in an effort to find some kind of a dividend to put the money someplace else. I think that would be disastrous in the world environment we see today and what we're likely to see in the years to come," Gates said.

Gates' remarks came as he announced a cost-cutting proposal aimed to hold the growth of the \$530 billion Defense Department budget to 1 percent next year. His efforts include eliminating the Joint Forces Command.

But Benjamin Friedman, research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, says efficiency is not enough.

"You save a lot on defense not by doing the same thing more efficiently, which can save a little money, but by doing less," Friedman says. "You get a force that is more elite, less strained and far less expensive."

This new push from lawmakers comes after Frank, Paul, and Wyden created their own task force earlier this year to look at specific ways to reduce military spending. Their task force released a report in June, which laid out ways to slash \$1 trillion from the defense budget over the next 10 years.

Mackenzie Eaglan, a research fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, says the letter is overreaching.

"If these members have a problem with foreign policy commitments around the world including U.S. treaty and other security commitments, those changes have to be led by the president," Eaglan said. If the president were to significantly reduce foreign policy commitments aside from those in Afghanistan, then a discussion should be had about what could be cut from the defense budget, Eaglan said.


Frank says he is encouraged by both chairs of Obama's deficit commission, who Frank says were pleased the lawmakers were looking into the defense budget.

Fred Baldassaro, communications director with the commission, said Wednesday that that the letter from Congress members had not yet been received but "we will review their suggestions and ideas when we see it."

The commission is tasked with proposing recommendations to balance the budget by 2015 and to address the growth in entitlement spending and the gap between the government's projected revenues and expenditures. The commission is to vote on a final report no later than December 1.

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