

BUDGET

Lawmakers Urge Deficit Panel To Back Defense Cuts

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by Sara Sorcher

House Financial Services Chairman **Barney Frank**, D-Mass., and more than 50 other lawmakers sent a letter to the Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform today describing the "urgent need" to cut excess defense spending.

Frank and other members of the Sustainable Defense Task Force, which issued a report in June outlining possible steps to cut \$1 trillion out of the defense budget in 10 years, said today that excessive spending is a result of America's overextension in defense.

"We're not just talking about reform, or doing more efficiently what we already do" Frank said in a conference call with reporters. "We're talking about how we don't need to do as much" when it comes to defense, he said.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates has proposed cutting more than \$100 billion within DOD's budget over the next five years and using the savings for force modernization and other high priorities. But with the massive \$1 trillion national deficit, these budget hawks are arguing this step will barely make a dent.

Leaving defense off the chopping block would mean cutting into funds for Medicare or Social Security, Frank said. "I admire what Gates is doing, but we could do less when it comes to expensive military apparatus," he said.

Before the commission makes its recommendations in December, Frank said, "We need to make it clear what the tradeoffs are."

The United States has a "bloated idea of what our safety requires," said Ben Friedman, a fellow at the Cato Institute and member of the task force. "By shedding missions, the Pentagon could cut force structure, cut personnel . . . [and the] vehicles procured for them. We don't want to just reduce [our] footprint in Europe and Asia, but get ourselves out of those countries and reduce our commitments to defend them -- and have them serve as [their] own line of defense."

Proportionally, defense makes up 20 percent of the federal budget and almost 60 percent of discretionary spending, Frank said, adding that it's responsible for the 66 percent increase in discretionary spending since 2001.

"We operated for the past 10 to 15 years on the delusion of available resources and our capacity to carry debt," Frank said. "And this has led to bad choices."

As the Navy responds to China's increasing military profile in the South and East China seas, talk of cutting programs will undoubtedly cause concerns in Congress. Gates, during the ASEAN conference

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in Hanoi, stressed America's "national interest" in keeping the waters open for navigation.

The Strategic Defense Task Force recommends reducing the size of the Navy to eight carrier battle groups, Friedman said. "I think that's sufficient to accomplish what we need to, vis-a-vis China, who has zero carrier battle groups. It's a long way to go before we need to grow our navy in response to theirs--[our cuts won't] give away very much of our lead in regard to China."

The United States has built up a margin of superiority over the past 20 years, according to Carl Conetta, co-director of the Project on Defense Alternatives. "Nothing can change the fact that our navy flies two times as many aircrafts as all the navies in the world combined. We float as much power as the next 13 [most powerful] navies--combined."

If reduced cuts allow other countries--specifically China or India--to challenge America's military primacy in the future, Friedman said that plans can change. "We need to preserve wealth in order to build up our military later if we have to," he said.

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