



Experts: Bush defense plan is a lot like Obama's

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Jeb Bush's speech laying out his foreign policy on Wednesday provided a lot of tough talk on how to keep the country safe but ultimately didn't differ in many places from the Obama administration's current plan, experts said.

Bush said Wednesday he would deploy U.S. combat troops to Syria, allow special operators to target terrorist networks and rely largely on local ground forces to defeat the Islamic State.

"While air power is essential, it alone cannot bring the results we seek. The United States — in conjunction with our NATO allies and more Arab partners — will need to increase our presence on the ground," Bush said in the speech at The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina. "But the bulk of these ground troops will need to come from local forces that we have built workable relationships with."

Analysts say this strategy, largely devoid of specifics, doesn't look much different from the plan put forth from the Obama administration that he's criticizing.

"It's not really clear to me what he wants to do differently," said Benjamin Friedman, a defense research fellow with the Cato Institute. "It all seems to be let's bluster harder, let's shake our fist harder, let's spend more money, but really not change in strategy from what the current administration says."

The president announced last month that he would send about 50 U.S. special operators to Syria. U.S. troops are already conducting raids against the Islamic State in Iraq, including one where U.S. forces worked with Kurdish fighters to free 70 hostages kidnapped by the Islamic State.

Bush also said he would remove Syrian President Bashar Assad from power to bring long-term political stability to the country, which is also a priority of this administration.

His inability to provide specifics or make strategic decisions in a speech that largely said the military should be doing more of everything shows a lack of strategy, Friedman said.

"He basically just seems to be saying 'let's just throw more money at everything in the defense budget.' That I think reflects a lack of strategy," he said.

Michael O'Hanlon, a defense analyst with the Brookings Institution, also said the "devil is in the details," raising questions about whether Bush would use a larger U.S. ground presence for training raids, marching on Raqqa or a peacekeeping operation.

"Absent such details, I may like the willingness to do more, but the words don't yet convince me that he has studied the problem well or outlined a truly promising path forward," O'Hanlon said.

In addition to his strategy against the Islamic State, Bush laid out his plan to end across-the-board budget cuts, add soldiers and Marines, modernize the military's aircraft and accelerate a submarine program.

"In the span of a decade, will have withheld \$1 trillion from national defense," Bush said. "They are completely arbitrary imposed by a process that everyone in Washington claims to dislike but no one in Washington has the courage to stop."

But Friedman said Bush has given no details on how he would fund these priorities, the cost of which is impossible to estimate because of his lack of specifics.

"He made no attempt to explain what it would cost or to really lay it out in careful enough detail that one could figure it out besides the fact that he said he wanted to reverse cuts that came recently under Obama," Friedman said.

If Bush meant that he wanted to undo sequestration and go back to 2012 spending levels, as Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., said in a recent stump speech while on the presidential campaign trail, it could cost up to \$1 trillion.

Bush said he would ask Congress to authorize adding 40,000 active-duty soldiers to the Army, which would essentially just undo cuts that are planned for the Army's force strength by fiscal 2018.

The Army had 490,000 active-duty soldiers in fiscal 2015, but is planning to shrink by 40,000 soldiers by fiscal 2018. The plan Bush laid out on Wednesday to eliminate those cuts would maintain the Army's current levels.

Bush would also grow the Marine Corps to 186,000 active-duty troops, or what the Marines determined was an "ideal force size," according to the 2016 Index of U.S. Military Strength from the Heritage Foundation. A force of that size allows for a 1-to-3 deployment-to-dwell ratio, meaning troops will deploy for seven months for every 21 at home.

If the force size is any smaller, the ratio will be closer to 1-to-2, meaning seven months deployed for every 14 at home, a tempo many say is wearing down troops and their equipment.

The Marine Corps force level for fiscal 2015 was about 184,000.

In addition to increasing personnel, Bush said he would also focus on the platforms the military uses, including a new generation of aircraft "so that our planes aren't older than our pilots," growing the naval fleet, accelerating the submarine program, improving missile defense,

surveillance and cybersecurity and giving more money to intelligence agencies that support the war fighter.