

Cruz defense plan at odds with reality, analysts say

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Ted Cruz blasted the bipartisan budget deal reached in October that staved off a looming fiscal crisis because it "completely annihilates the 2011 budget caps, the one successful attempt at spending restraint in the Obama era."

Four months later, the Republican presidential hopeful is pushing a defense spending plan that would blow through those same caps by hundreds of billions of dollars.

Cruz's defense vision laid out on Tuesday would increase spending on the military by roughly \$140 billion per year compared to the Obama administration's current blueprint, according to one think tank estimate.

Like the other Republican candidates, Cruz's plan expresses an aspirational vision of the military - with soaring defense spending and deep cuts to domestic agencies - but it runs smack into the budget reality in Washington: Spending caps cheered by Republicans are set to return in full force soon after the new administration takes office.

The very caps that the Texas senator was praising last year will place clamps on the overall size of the military's budget, and without a so-called grand-bargain that tackles taxes, entitlements and government spending, the budget logjam is unlikely to break when a new occupant enters the White House.

"Even with a Republican Congress, the basic dynamics that have restrained defense spending are still going to be in place," said Benjamin Friedman, a fellow at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. "And Democrats are not going to be so enfeebled that they can't stop anything."

Mackenzie Eaglen, a defense analyst at the conservative American Enterprise Institute who has briefed several GOP 2016 candidates, warns that whomever wins the White House in November is in for a rude awakening when it comes to the defense budget.

She estimates that the next administration will need to come up with an expected shortfall that already exists of \$250 billion in defense spending in the coming years before it can try to implement its own plans for increases.

That's because the Budget Control Act - which limits both defense and non-defense discretionary spending - returns again next fall unless Congress acts to change the spending limits.

Even the Obama administration's budget, which Republicans say is decimating the military, includes \$100 billion more than the spending caps allow over the next five years.

On top of that, the bill for modernizing the nuclear triad is looming on the horizon and will cost hundreds of billions of dollars.

"That's before you buy one new ship, one new aircraft and one new soldier," Eaglen said. "I don't think the candidates themselves know what they're in for. But this is the budget math, and it ain't pretty."

Cruz's defense plan stresses the need for spending cuts on the one hand while calling for more ships and soldiers on the other. He calls for an Army of 525,000 active-duty soldiers, reversing a drawdown that puts the service on a path to 475,000 at the end of this fiscal year, and a Navy of 350 ships, up from today's 272.

He also wants the Air Force fleet to rise to 6,000 aircraft, including 1,500 tactical fighter aircraft.

The increases would total roughly an additional \$140 billion in defense spending above the Obama administration's \$610 billion national defense budget for fiscal 2017, according to Mark Cancian, a senior adviser with the centrist Center for Strategic and International Studies, who ran Cruz's proposal through the think tank's "force-cost calculator."

Other Republican candidates lay out similar goals, though not all have released the same level of specifics.

Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush wants to boost the defense budget by \$1 trillion over 10 years compared to the levels envisioned under the Budget Control Act of 2011. Ohio Gov. John Kasich is calling for \$102 billion in additional defense spending over eight years. And Florida Sen. Marco Rubio wants a 323-ship Navy with an additional aircraft carrier.

Cruz has tried to walk the line between being a defense hawk and a budget hawk as he mounts his bid. The two Republican factions have battled on Capitol Hill over the federal budget, with many fiscal hawks cheering on the budget cuts to the Pentagon as real cuts to federal spending.

Rubio has criticized Cruz's defense record, including the Texas senator's votes against the National Defense Authorization Act, which authorizes funding for the Pentagon, as well as his support for a budget from Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) that would have slowed defense spending.

But Cruz also supported an amendment from Rubio himself last year that would have boosted defense spending by hundreds of billions over the next decade.

Cruz's campaign did not immediately respond to a request for comment. In his speech Tuesday, Cruz stressed that "the nation must be prepared for the possibility of multiple, near- simultaneous conflicts."

In Cruz's defense blueprint, which does not come with a price tag, the Texas Republican lays out how he expects to pay for the increases. He claims that he can offset the cost of added military spending by accelerating economic growth at a 4-to-5 percent clip, cutting federal spending by \$500 billion - including waste and duplication at the Pentagon - and selling federal assets and land.

His plan is similar to what other GOP candidates have expressed. But the promise of economic growth may or may not come, and Democrats have rejected any efforts to cut non-defense spending without an equal reduction to defense spending.

Cruz's plan "certainly doesn't seem particularly informed by political realities," said Friedman, the Cato analyst.