

# The Boston Globe

## Ashton Carter, military leaders must pivot on spending priorities

Benjamin Friedman

February 17, 2015

Ashton Carter, who took office as Secretary of Defense this week, and the heads of the military services all insist that it is impossible to execute the nation's security strategy without busting through the \$499 billion cap that law imposes on next year's Pentagon budget. The military leaders warn that if Congress will not raise the cap and provide the \$534 billion in non-war funds that they requested earlier this month for fiscal year 2016 — and get rid of future years' caps — the United States will require a cheaper security strategy.

If only that were true.

What passes for American security strategy these days is a mixture of militarized global profligacy and national self-worship. The latest example is the "National Security Strategy," which the White House released Feb. 6. It lists eight "top-strategic risks," including non-security ills such as disease, economic slowdown, and climate change. But having eight top priorities really means having none. The document's mentions "hard choices" and warns against "overreach" but then declares that "there are no global problems that cannot be solved without the United States." It imagines that US military power can be everywhere to promote stability, democracy, and even equality.

Strategy is the prioritization of goals by assignment of resources. Hawks, like Senator John McCain, occasionally insist otherwise and call for military strategy's liberation from budgetary constraints. But that is like suggesting that aircraft designs ignore physics. Strategy lacks meaning without budgetary context.

The White House then has not actually produced a security strategy. It has just affixed that title to florid defense of US leadership and a list of nice things, which collectively define global good as a requirement of US security. Take that standard seriously and you get a permanent sense of insecurity.

It'd be easy to blame the authors, but recent Pentagon and national strategy documents share the problem. All fail to guide budgetary choice. Nor is writing alone at fault. American security policy, as reflected in budgets, cannot totally avoid prioritization, but somehow policy makers still try. There is no earthly region, with the possible exception of Antarctica, that the Pentagon has not labeled vital while justifying some garrison, alliance, or program there. Pentagon budgets have long avoided much shifting of money across military services, or even within them, though that is what implementing strategy requires.

Austerity, in theory, is a thorough auditor and creative reformer. For people and federal departments, wealth limits competition among desires, making their relative value academic. Belt-tightening, short of bankruptcy, demands choices, analysis to inform them, and sometimes innovative ways to do more for less.

Windfall defense budget growth in the 2000s — more than 50 percent, even adjusting for inflation — helped Pentagon leaders take a holiday from strategy. Counterinsurgency was the priority in Afghanistan and Iraq but not Washington, which preferred to fund wars with debt rather than limit investments in future wars linked to stateside jobs. The rising tide of largesse lifted all boats, fighter jets, four-star commands, and the like.

You would think austerity made this decade different. Annual Pentagon spending has fallen 25 percent over the past five years, accounting for inflation. Reduced war funds account for the bulk of the drop. Non-war Pentagon spending dropped 7 percent in 2013, the one year that the Budget Control Act of 2011 required sequestration, equally-applied, across-the-board cuts. Congress then slightly raised the spending caps that law had imposed for fiscal years 2014 and 2015 and passed budgets that did not exceed them. That avoided further sequestration and kept military spending level.

This relative poverty required some sacrifice. Mostly because of declining war funds, active-duty Army end-strength dropped from 570,000 to 475,000 troops and is supposed to hit 450,000 in 2018. The Navy and Air Force got fewer new ships and aircraft than they wanted. Base construction slowed. Reduced operational funding caused a Pentagon civilian hiring freeze, curtailed some training exercises, and produced slight reductions in management costs — despite much talk of efficiency.

Still, strategic change has not come. The end of occupational warfare in the Middle East allowed plans for an Asian pivot, a euphemism for shifting forces to deter China. But funds for troops in Europe and the Middle East (minus the war zones) and their combatant commands have not pivoted. The Navy and Air Force — the forces most relevant to fighting China — did not grab non-war funding at the expense of the ground forces. The pivot, relabeled as rebalance, ultimately amounted to little more than words. Rather than change course, the Pentagon is doing a bit less of everything, except grousing.

Whatever the chiefs say, that is unlikely to change, for two reasons. One is that current austerity is not that austere. 2015 Pentagon spending authority, adjusted for inflation, roughly matches 2004's, the midpoint of the recent upswing. During the Cold War, spending was higher only in 1952 and 1985, the heights of the Korean War and Reagan buildup.

War budgets — officially, Overseas Contingency Operations funds — also limit pressure on the Pentagon. The 2016 request of \$51 billion, ostensibly to fight the Islamic State and keep troops in Afghanistan, would be 21 percent less than 2015, but war budgets are declining slower than war costs.

Because budget caps do not apply to OCO, the Pentagon and Congress have increasingly hidden non-war expenses there. That off-book accounting now makes up roughly half of OCO funds. That's \$25 billion of proposed cushioning against austerity next year, more than the cut that the

Pentagon would suffer by complying with the cap. The administration insists on keeping this slush fund as long as caps constrain military spending.

Beltway elites are a bigger obstacle to strategic reappraisal. Military leaders long ago learned not to push for funds at the expense of other services. This cartel, which they call jointness, stymies civilian efforts to change strategy.

Few are inclined to try. Foreign-policy makers in both parties, especially those vying to be president or get named to a top post by one, proclaim, almost in chorus, that stability everywhere depends on American military presence or actions. Recent experience has made everyone charier of occupying restive states, but Washington's preferred alternatives are bombing, lethal aid, military training, or oaths of support backed by threats — not staying out and at peace. US leaders are today intellectually immune to real strategies, which require actual choices about what dangers to meet with what defenses.

Absent lower caps or better leaders, hard choices will remain, for Pentagon, just a slogan advertising slight discipline. With a trim here and an accounting trick there, the Department of Defense will muddle along its present course, while elected leaders justify it with paeans about American military power's indispensability to every pleasant noun that "global" can modify. We that object might take solace in the fact that our hubris is a luxury that our fortune affords. Only blessed nations can worry so much about their safety while confusing it with everything they want.

*Benjamin H. Friedman is a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the Cato Institute.*