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A Historic Opportunity to Cut Military Spending

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The agreement in Washington to raise the debt ceiling in exchange for spending cuts has made a lot of people very unhappy. But the agreement had one important positive aspect: it created a historic opportunity for significant cuts in projected military spending.

Under the agreement, a joint House-Senate committee is supposed to propose, by Thanksgiving, \$1.5 trillion of debt reduction (expenditures less revenues) over ten years. ***Significant cuts in projected military spending are on the table.*** Indeed, if the joint committee doesn't agree on a plan or Congress doesn't enact it, \$1.2 trillion in cuts in projected spending over 10 years will be triggered, of which [half must come from the military](#).

If the military cuts in the trigger mechanism take place, when added to the projected military cuts announced by the White House as part of this week's deal, total cuts in projected military spending would amount to \$884 billion. This is very close to the \$886 billion in military cuts agreed by the plan of the Senate's "Gang of Six," a plan [endorsed by President Obama](#). It's in the ballpark of - but less than - the \$960 billion in proposed military cuts of the Frank-Paul [Sustainable Defense Task Force](#), the trillion dollars in proposed military cuts of the [report](#) of President's deficit commission, the \$1.1 trillion reduction in projected military spending proposed by the [Domenici-Rivlin task force](#), and the \$1.2 trillion in military cuts recommended by the [Cato Institute](#). Conservative Republican Senator Tom Coburn says cutting the projected military budget by a trillion dollars over ten years is ["not hard" and is "common sense."](#)

In other words: cutting projected military spending by a trillion dollars over the next ten years has become politically plausible.

Now, some voices have said: the cuts in projected military spending in the automatic trigger are irrelevant, because the automatic trigger is not going to happen, because a key point of the automatic trigger is to be so odious to Republicans on military spending, that it will build pressure on the joint committee to come up with a compromise, and for

Congress to approve the compromise, because the alternative will be the odious cuts in military spending.

But these voices neglect the fact that except for the super-hawks in Congress [e.g. McCain, Graham, Kyl, Lieberman, McKeon] - who, despite their media prominence, *do not appear to currently control the Republican caucus* - the military cuts in the automatic trigger are *not that odious*. As noted above, if the automatic cuts happen, the cut in projected military spending will be about the same as the bipartisan Senate Gang of Six plan - endorsed by President Obama - and less than the projected military cuts of the Sustainable Defense Task Force, the report of President's deficit commission, the Domenici-Rivlin task force, the Cato Institute, and conservative Senator Tom Coburn. For many Members of Congress - likely a majority, judging from the struggle over the recent deal - the automatic trigger is not as odious as what some people want to put in the joint committee report: tax increases, most odious to many Republicans; cuts in Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid benefits, most odious to many Democrats. These most odious things are not in the automatic trigger.

Indeed, as Representative Barney Frank has recently noted, there's a new dynamic on the playing field: Tea Party Republicans who are skeptical of the Empire and are quite ok with cutting the military budget. As Frank [told the *Boston Globe*, explaining the military cuts in the first round of the deal](#):

"The Tea Party people are anti-military spending to a greater extent than establishment Republicans and have a healthy dose of isolationism thanks to American intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan," says Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts, who has long pushed to cut the defense budget. "On this issue, they were a positive force."

Therefore, the automatic trigger is not Armageddon as far as military cuts are concerned. And because the automatic trigger is not Armageddon on military cuts, cuts in projected military spending have the potential to play a big role in the joint committee report, because anyone who prefers the military cuts of the trigger to the joint committee report will have somewhere else to go.

The other key dynamic is this: because the joint committee has to come up with a fixed amount of debt reduction, there is going to be tremendous pressure from Democrats and Democratic constituency groups on Democratic leaders to cut military spending, because the main alternative to cuts in military spending will be cuts to domestic spending.

Indeed, in a [letter](#) sent to Congressional Democratic leaders Thursday, the AFL-CIO, the National Organization for Women, the NAACP, Friends of the Earth, and many other Democratic constituency groups called for cuts in military spending to be as least as great as any cuts in domestic spending:

Any discretionary savings must rely at least as much on cuts in national security programs as on spending cuts in non-security discretionary programs. While there is an effort to cut spending across the broad array of annual discretionary spending programs,

national security spending, which comprises 61% of the discretionary budget, continues to grow. Without cuts to national security programs, even very deep cuts to all other discretionary funding taken together will fall far short of dealing with the deficit. We want a safe and secure nation. But national security programs should not be immune from oversight and fiscal responsibility. We can responsibly reduce spending in this area without compromising our nation's security.

Thus, according to these influential Democratic constituency groups, in the scenario in which the joint committee does not agree to any revenue increases, the cuts to "national security programs" would be at least as much as in the automatic trigger: 50%.

A trillion dollars over ten years may seem intuitively like a huge cut. But in fact, it isn't. Remember that the baseline for all these numbers is currently projected spending over the next ten years. The Domenici-Rivlin task force suggested freezing military spending for five years and not letting grow it faster than GDP for the next five; that would save \$1.1 trillion over ten years. And, as noted above, there are now a number of plans in circulation, from experts across the political spectrum, showing where to cut to get \$1 trillion in savings in military spending. A trillion in cuts in military spending over ten years would just return military spending to the average for the Cold War. And, [according to the White House](#), \$350 billion in cuts to military spending are already agreed, so we just have \$650 billion to go to get to a trillion, which is just a little over half of what the joint committee is charged with finding.

Cutting the military budget by a trillion dollars over ten years would likely imply a fundamentally different foreign policy than we have recently experienced: one without counterinsurgency wars. The *Washington Post* [reports](#):

To find \$1 trillion in savings, the White House would have to make major changes to its current global military strategy, under which the Pentagon should be able to fight two wars like Iraq and Afghanistan simultaneously. Scaling back that requirement would allow for big cuts to the Army and Marine Corps... Congress would be betting that the Afghan war will wind down as planned and that the country will not be drawn into any big, costly counterinsurgency wars in the next 10 to 15 years.

From the point of view of the interests of the majority of Americans, that's not a cost of cutting the military budget; it's a benefit.

Of course, a trillion in cuts in military spending is not a ceiling for what we should aspire to. There's no reason that we should accept Cold War levels of military spending as the best we can do. But from where we are now, a trillion in cuts in military spending would be a tremendous leap forward.

A historic opportunity is, of course, not at all the same thing as a certainty. If you want to see these military cuts take place, speak up. You can urge your representatives in Congress and the President to put the military budget first in line for cuts [here](#).

