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Where Defense Ends, Strategy Begins

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The alarm bells have only begun to ring louder in Washington. As sequestration under last year's Budget Control Act seems more and more likely in January, the usual phalanxes of supporters are rattling the sabers of forlorn national security and even economic disaster if defense has to take their 50 percent of forecasted cuts. Last month, for example, Rep. J. Randy Forbes (R-VA), House Armed Services readiness subcommittee chairman, played up election-year politics by [claiming](#) that more than 128,000 defense-related civilian posts would be lost.

As usual, the debate is about the wrong thing. A dozen years into the 21st century, and you would think we would understand that defense and national security are not the same thing.

The Forbes distortion of the discussion flies even in the face of Republican ideology -- isn't this, after all, one way to cut the size of the federal bureaucracy in Washington? Benjamin Friedman argues at both the [Cato Institute](#) and in [Foreign Affairs](#) (not exactly bastions of liberalism) that, while Pentagon protagonists have a point that such massive cuts will limit military capabilities, "that would actually be a good thing for the United States."

Why? Because: "Austerity is an efficient auditor. It forces Washington to scrutinize expenses and to prioritize... With less money, military leaders will choose more carefully among programs, sacrificing less-favored missions and administrative bloat."

There are those who [argue](#) that such arbitrary amputations "without any talk of threats, strategy or requirements" would imperil U.S. national security -- harkening history repeating itself as before World War II or Korea, when Americans were caught unprepared. To those points, Friedman answers first that "Washington's defense establishment is incapable of making the kind of strategic shift these cuts would suggest, as politicians remains wedded to existing American military commitments." And to the second related concern: "American wars are surprises. From Pearl Harbor to Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, and 9/11 we got the pre-war planning wrong. The solution is not better plans but flexible forces that can adjust for we don't know what... With no obvious demon at the door, we can cut defense spending, stay flexible, and focus on the more pressing threat of debilitating debt."

What Friedman and others are increasingly suggesting is that less may in fact be more -- if we realize that the fundamental flaw of American national security policy is that defense planning has not been based on strategy, but on "threats" and "capabilities." Defense budgets have been essentially shopping lists, justified not by strategy as much as operational concepts. Following the post-9/11 focus on stability operations, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism, the Navy and Air Force have come up with "[air-sea battle](#)" -- an operational concept designed to fight a future battle of Midway with China and "enhance deterrence, and ensure freedom of action around the world over the next generation" as the Obama administration "pivots" geostrategic emphasis from the Middle East to East Asia and the Pacific.

The problem with this ongoing train of operational concepts is not so much that "air-sea battle," for instance, is a "[self-serving military industrial complex fantasy](#)." The problem is that they are [not strategies](#) -- "they are, at most, operational concepts that could support a strategy." You can't create a strategy by simply elevating an operational concept or a tactic. The Global War on Terrorism is a good example of this, provoking an open-ended commitment to a never-ending war. And history has not been kind to great powers that remain in perpetual conflict at the cost of their prosperity.

I agree with Friedman: Cutting the defense budget, including under sequestration, would not necessarily be a bad thing, at least in the longer run. It would break us of our industrial-era habit of simply throwing money at every problem, which up to now we could afford to do. As Brandeis University Professor Jacqueline Hazelton puts it, "If you can do everything, you do do everything. Or try."

Scarcity, after all, is the greatest impetus for strategy, and we are rather lousy at it, because up to now we've never had to be very strategic in our foreign policy and national security approaches. Hence the overwhelming focus on operations and tactics. Substantial cuts in defense would not only be a driver for national security reform, which we desperately need (and yet the [Project on National Security Reform](#) is now, amazingly, defunct). It would also force us to re-think and re-balance our foreign policy. Not every problem would look like a nail, just because the big hammer of hard power is the biggest and most expedient thing we have.

But I also agree that less is not automatically more. That's because the U.S., unfortunately, suffers from a chronic "[strategy deficit](#)," as former PNSR President and CEO James Locher puts it, made even worse by "the dominance of political messaging." The National Security Staff, for example, is "driven by its inbox and cannot find time to think long term or make use of foresight to anticipate developments." Even if it wasn't, there is no real system to translate strategy into operations, align organizations to that strategy, and link it all to the budget process.

True strategy, as Locher [explains](#), is "the art and science of employing all instruments of national power and influence -- not just military tools -- to accomplish national objectives." Strategy is not about threats and capabilities -- which are reactive. Strategy is

fundamentally about making choices about the future, and a strategic mindset is driven, more than anything, by scarcity as well as opportunity.

Which brings us back to Friedman: "Shrinking the U.S. military would not only save a fortune but also encourage policymakers to employ the armed services less promiscuously, keeping American troops -- and the country at large -- out of needless trouble. Especially for the last two decades, the United States' considerable wealth and fortunate geography have made global adventurism seem largely costless."

A strategy based more on restraint than self-indulgence, he lays out, would allow us to save at least about \$1.2 trillion over a decade, three times what the Obama administration is now asking for. Cutting Army, Navy, and Air Force structures by as much as one-third; consolidating commands and cutting the work force; raising co-pays on military health insurance and cutting discounts; and cutting the nuclear force in half. We could also, for example, rely more on the [Reserves](#), which are far more capable and operationally experienced than at the time of Korea as a result of the last decade of wars.

Sequestration notwithstanding, the whole polemic about peace, national security, and defense needs a fresh approach, not just because our old *modus operandi* no longer works -- we simply can't afford it anymore. Less may not be necessarily be more, but we now have decades of evidence that more is not necessarily more, either. The "fiscal cliff" provides an historic opportunity finally to get it right, if we can understand that where defense ends, strategy can begin.