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**Christopher Preble and Charles Knight**

# Regaining Our Balance: the Pentagon's New Military Strategy Takes a Small Step

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President Obama wisely invoked the words of President Eisenhower from nearly 51 years ago when he presented the Pentagon's new strategic guidance last week. In his famous farewell address, Eisenhower advised his countrymen to "maintain balance in and among national programs."

"After a decade of war," President Obama [said](#), "as we rebuild the sources of our strength at home and abroad, it's time to restore that balance."

Balance depends on what you are standing on. With respect to our physical security, the United States is blessed with continental peace and a dearth of powerful enemies. Our military is the best-trained, best-led, and best-equipped in the world. It is our unstable finances and our sluggish economy that make us vulnerable to stumbling.

Unfortunately, the new strategy does not fully appreciate our strengths, nor does it fully address our weaknesses. In the end, it does not achieve Eisenhower's vaunted balance.

Hawks are attacking the strategic review, which will inform the Pentagon's budget for the coming years. House Armed Services Committee Chairman Buck McKeon [slammed](#) it as a strategy that "ensures American decline." *The Weekly Standard's* William Kristol [said](#) that the cuts being contemplated "would decimate our military."

Don't believe it. True, the sharply rising budgets of the decade following 9/11 are over. The services won't be able to afford everything they want. Tighter budgets will force the military to prioritize and economize, just as the rest of us have done. But that hardly constitutes "decimation," and smart strategic adjustment is more likely to prevent "decline" than to herald it.

The Pentagon's base budget, adjusted for inflation, is likely to stay above its 2008 level. The United States will remain -- by a large margin -- the dominant military power on earth. In light of the nation's troubled fiscal condition, the danger is not that the president will cut too much, but rather that the exorbitantly high military spending and global military activism during the last two decades will continue.

President Obama and his lieutenants have yet to spell out the details (those will be released with the budget in a few weeks), but we do know that they are planning to cut \$260 billion over five years from the president's 2012 fiscal year plan released in February of 2011. According to calculations by Carl Conetta of

the Project on Defense Alternatives, this is an 8.6 percent inflation-adjusted reduction from the first five years of Obama's previous plan, but only a 4 percent reduction from the previous five years, which included the height of the Bush-Obama military build-up.

With respect to the strategy, and to the military's global commitments, some genuine changes may be in the offing. The end of the decade may see reductions in U.S. troops in Europe and the number of nuclear warheads -- unnecessary legacies of the Cold War. Obama seems unlikely to deploy U.S. troops to remake failing states, operations that have proved costly and counterproductive. That shift in focus allows for significant reductions in the Army and Marine Corps.

The United States would be secure with an even smaller force. Few contemplate the United States fighting a land war in Asia -- wise advice that has been echoed by the likes of Douglas MacArthur, Dwight Eisenhower, and Robert Gates. Some troops can be brought home from that region. And when we bring them home, we can also shrink the size of the stay-at-home "institutional army," as well as supporting civilian employees and private contractors.

At its core, the "new" strategy is based on many of the same flawed assumptions of the old. It continues to task the U.S. military with the defense of the global commons, assuming this is the sole duty of the United States. There is the obligatory talk about "building partner capacity," but such efforts have largely proved unsuccessful. Other countries usually do not see their security needs the same way Washington does, and some are inclined to "free ride" on our security guarantees.

The twin constraints of fiscal insolvency and dwindling public support for a grandiose foreign policy present an opportunity for rethinking U.S. security commitments, as well as what we spend to fulfill them. A more realistic foreign policy, and a smaller, more restrained military presence around the globe, will allow us to engage in fewer costly missions. We can then turn our attention to the true source of our national insecurity: our untenable fiscal situation and the anemic economy.

By refocusing on the foundations, we can regain our balance.