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Posted on Thu, Jan. 05, 2012

Obama outlines leaner military but gives few specifics

Nancy A. Youssef | McClatchy Newspapers

last updated: January 06, 2012 07:10:42 AM

WASHINGTON — Even as the United States has withdrawn from Iraq, winds down its ground war in Afghanistan and prepares with a leaner military budget, it faces an array of future threats and must still be prepared to fight several conflicts simultaneously, the Pentagon said Thursday in unveiling its latest defense strategy.

The eight-page document aims to address mounting calls for budget cuts and explain why the Pentagon needs to maintain most resources thrown its way over the last decade of war. It concludes that the military must be prepared to conduct one major conflict and several smaller conflicts at the same time.

The department didn't say whom the military could be fighting but it pledged to create a smaller force. To underscore the shift spent waging two major ground wars, President Barack Obama made a rare appearance at the Pentagon to introduce the strategy seeking to put his stamp on the cutbacks as he launches his re-election bid.

"The tide of war is receding," Obama said. "As we look beyond the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — and the end of long-term wars with large military footprints — we'll be able to ensure our security with smaller conventional ground forces."

The Obama administration has said it plans to cut \$487 billion from the defense budget over the next decade, but the president's Secretary Leon Panetta and other officials didn't offer details of where reductions would be made other than to say they'd shrink ground forces. The details, they said, would be outlined during next month's budget session.

The implication of further cuts in the size of ground forces suggests that the department no longer plans to fight prolonged national conflicts such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Rather, the department will invest in drones, unmanned aircraft, cybersecurity and create an agile force.

"We'll continue to get rid of outdated Cold War-era systems so that we can invest in the capabilities that we need for the future, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, counter-terrorism, countering weapons of mass destruction and the ability to operate in environments where adversaries try to deny us access," Obama said.

The United States would focus particularly on the Pacific and the Middle East, Panetta said. In Europe, he added, the U.S. strategy "will evolve."

"Confronting the threats of the 21st century demands greater flexibility to ... shift forces," Panetta said. "How we defeat the enemy will vary across conflicts."

However, experts noted that they'd heard many of these same arguments from former Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld in the opening months of the George W. Bush administration in 2001. Then came the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"It is easy to emphasize Asia, technology and quality over quantity. In fact, this is what Secretary Rumsfeld did until 9/11 began almost total reversal in every aspect of our strategy and plans less than a year after the Bush administration came to office," said Cordesman, a defense expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a nonpartisan research center.

That the Pentagon is discussing cutting Cold War programs suggested that the new budget also could delay the pace of building missile submarines, which are designed for conventional warfare, and production of the controversial F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

The F-35, the most expensive weapons program in U.S. military history, has been riddled with flight and technical problems, raising questions about whether its cost is justified. But the program also has generated jobs in many states, earning it reliable backers.

The House Democratic Caucus chairman, Rep. John Larson of Connecticut, said Thursday that he was "especially heartened" that the Pentagon wants the F-35 program to succeed.

"It is programs like that, with collaborative effort from all of the services and the best our industry can produce, that when combined with the great strength of our men and women in uniform will keep America strong for years to come," Larson said.

Critics noted that the department's vow to be prepared for any kind of conflict at any time would make it difficult to determine

Michele Flournoy, the undersecretary of defense for policy, said the department was taking risks by reducing the budget as much but she didn't specify what those risks were.

The \$487 billion cut over the next decade amounts to roughly 8 percent of the projected budget when adjusted for inflation. But she noted that the administration will be able to control the budget only for the next five years at most — if Obama wins re-election during that period, the budget will drop by only 5 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars over the previous five years.

Assessing spending after that point "is kind of guesswork," said Lawrence Korb, a defense expert at the left-leaning Center for American Progress.

Historically, the United States has cut more than 15 percent in defense spending during postwar periods, said Christopher Prentiss, president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian research center.

The relatively limited cuts appeared to be an attempt by the Pentagon not to repeat the mistakes of the post-Vietnam War period, critics said that the United States hollowed out its force only to be ill-prepared for the conflicts of the past decade.

Rep. Randy Forbes, R-Va., the chairman of the House Armed Services Readiness Subcommittee, said the strategy didn't spell out how to make such cuts.

"This laundry list of vague 'priorities' is not a strategy for superiority; it is instead a menu for mediocrity," Forbes said in a statement.

Even before the announcement, the Pentagon planned to cut the number of Marines by 20,000 by 2016 from the current figure of 180,000. The Army was expected to cut 27,000 from its force of 547,000 during the same period after years of expanding to support the war in Afghanistan.

Answering those who worried about treatment for service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, Panetta vowed that their "benefits" would be protected but he suggested that retirees and those who join the military from now on could see reductions.

Obama sought to balance national security and fiscal responsibility, calling the reductions significant but arguing the Pentagon must maintain U.S. military superiority. He noted that the U.S. defense budget would continue to be larger than those of the next 10 years combined.

"I think it's important for all Americans to remember, over the past 10 years, since 9/11, our defense budget grew at an extraordinary rate," the president said. "Over the next 10 years, the growth in the defense budget will slow, but the fact of the matter is this: It will still grow because we have global responsibilities that demand our leadership."

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