

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Hollow Claims of a Hollow Force

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Opponents of military spending cuts are getting creative. Mitt Romney [3] and AEI [4] pretend that the Obama administration massively cut defense spending when in fact they kept it growing. The chairman of the House Armed Services Committee baselessly predicts [5] that cuts might force us to bring back the draft, even though a smaller volunteer force should be easier to recruit. The Aerospace Industries Association implies [6] we spend less on defense than we did at any point since the World War II; in fact, we are at a post-war high in real terms. The secretary of defense, without any factual support, asserts [7] that \$500 billion in defense cuts would add one percent to the unemployment rate. You have to wonder if he thinks that the (largely fictional [8]) additional \$450 billion in defense cuts that he supports [9] would do similar damage.

The more substantive claim wielded by Pentagon boosters is that cuts would produce a hollow force, a military so overburdened with missions that it is too small to perform and thus unable to protect Americans. These claims exaggerate both the damage cuts would do to our military's ability to perform current missions and the damage not performing those missions does to our security.

A particularly hyperbolic hollow force argument is the "Assessment of Impacts of Budget Cuts [10]," recently produced by the House Armed Services Committee's majority staff. The report considers defense cuts of 10 and 18 percent and says either will cripple our security. Cuts to the Marines Corps' force structure, they say, would destroy the Corps' ability to perform noncombatant evacuations in dangerous environments—a claim that has no factual basis and insults the Marines' ability to conduct raids. They assert, without explanation, that minor cuts to our massive nuclear arsenal would cause our allies to doubt our willingness to defend them. Of course, they never ask whether this doubt, should it materialize, might beneficially cause our allies to pay more for their own defense. They claim that cuts to missile defense would increase nuclear proliferation, even though fewer defenses might make deterrence easier to attain, lessening proliferation. Worst, they argue that cuts would require slashing personnel benefits and forced

retirements—“breaking faith” with the force—even though various reports, including the one discussed below, show that cuts of this order could occur without personnel cuts and end strength could be reduced by letting people retire without replacement.

The report says nothing about why cuts will lead to the scenarios it mentions rather than alternatives or how much each option saves. It is little more than a series of scary stories. Yet several reporters credulously ^[11] relayed ^[12] its projected outcomes as if they result from real analysis.

Similar in objective but more sophisticated is a report released last week by the Center for a New American Security: “Hard Choices: Defense in an Age of Austerity ^[13].” The report outlines four proposed military budgets, ranging from \$350 to \$850 billion in cuts over ten years. It attempts to avoid discussing alternatives to current defense strategy, which it deems “global engagement.” Its takeaway point ^[14] is that exceeding \$500-550 billion in cuts is overly dangerous and would undermine our ability to execute a strategy of “global engagement.”

Three points about the report bear mentioning. First, its preferred level of military spending is roughly commensurate with what the White House wants and thus seems designed to defend current Pentagon plans. It is less alarmist than the House report but follows the same script in asserting that bigger cuts will undercut our ability to do all the stuff we now do, and that would be bad.

Second, the authors' notions of what cuts pose unacceptable risk are simply asserted without justification. The report shows how big cuts would limit our ability to patrol foreign seas, deploy armies and so forth but not how that would impact our security. That omission shows the impossibility of divorcing defense budgeting from defense strategy. To draw conclusions about the efficacy of military spending, you have say something about how you cause security, which means talking about strategy. The authors further demonstrate this problem when they sensibly ^[15] argue that with protracted occupational warfare now less likely, the ground forces should get less of the budget and the navy and air force more. As Chris Preble suggests ^[16], that budgetary recommendation follows from a strategic choice.

What's more, there is little reason to believe the report's claim that we could not execute its “global engagement” strategy at far less cost. The report defines that strategy as having six components (really three or four since several are redundant):

1. Guard the U.S. homeland against territorial invasion or attack by another country.
2. Deter potential adversaries from attacking the U.S. and allies.

3. Protect trade routes and access to global energy supplies on which the U.S. and allied economies depend.
4. Help secure the global commons of sea, air, space and cyberspace, on which the U.S. and global economic systems rely.
5. Defend the United States against transnational security threats, such as nuclear proliferation and international terrorism.
6. Support international laws and norms which help bolster peace and security.

These objectives are so vague and the threats to them so few that a far smaller force could defend them with ease. For analysis of how we could lessen the costs of commanding the global commons (CNAS's categories three and four), especially the sea, read [Joshua Shrifrinson and Sameer Lalwani](#) ^[17]. They show how the primacy strategy that CNAS implicitly endorses encourages U.S. enemies to arm and erodes our relative power. We can ^[18] both enhance security and avoid hollowing the force by using it more judiciously.