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Sizing up defense cuts

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Congressional lawmakers should have listened, and it's disappointing they didn't.

Nine defense policy think tanks across the philosophical spectrum recently came together and reached general consensus on strategically sound reductions and increases for the military as it enters a time of far-ranging budget cuts.

It was encouraging to see that, in an era when there often is such ill will and so little room for agreement among members of Congress, the hawks at the American Enterprise Institute could join with the liberals at the Center for a New American Security and the libertarians at the Cato Institute and reach general agreement on military priorities.

Unfortunately, Congress has so far given a thumb's down to many of the ideas.

Sure, there's little surprise that lawmakers would balk at proposals such as another round of base closures, a major reduction in the civilian work forces on military facilities and overhauling the military's health care program. But there are sound policy grounds for all those ideas.

Indeed, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said in a recent speech that without reforms, the military's costs from health care and other "internal costs" will increasingly crowd out funding for military readiness.

The think tanks offered other proposals worthy of consideration and debate. The Defense Department, the groups agreed, needs to make increased investment in advanced technology assets including drones, cyber capabilities and space-based telecommunications. It needs to buttress the bomber (with an updated version of the Long-Range Strike bomber) and submarine components of the nuclear triad.

The think tanks also showed consensus on specific force reductions for the Army and on fewer Navy aircraft carriers.

Lawmakers are wrong to dismiss these ideas out of hand. Spending cuts are coming, and they need to be guided by sound strategy, not politics.