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Military no longer seen as immune from spending cuts

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Two big waves that crashed ashore in Washington, D.C., this month are precursors of a powerful storm brewing over federal budgets and deficit spending.

Experts say that if even a politically taboo topic like Social Security is threatened by the looming political cyclone, there is little chance that major defense programs like Lockheed Martin's F-35 joint strike fighter program will escape unscathed.

"If you're a Lockheed Martin guy in Fort Worth, there's plenty of reason to be worried," said Thomas Donnelly, an analyst with the conservative American Enterprise Institute.

With the lopsided results of the Nov. 2 election and last week's release of a bipartisan commission's comprehensive proposal to bring federal budget deficits under control, which includes massive cuts in defense spending, analysts say the questions of where and how to cut budgets are ones that the president and Congress can no longer avoid.

"I've been saying for a long time that right after the elections there was going to be a change in the prevailing winds on budget issues," said Winslow Wheeler, an analyst at the left-leaning Center for Defense Information, a longtime Pentagon critic and a former aide to Senate Republicans.

A second bipartisan deficit-cutting plan is due out this week from a task force headed by former Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., and former Clinton budget director Alice Rivlin. That plan is also expected to call for at least a hard freeze on defense spending.

"This is all contributing to a larger narrative that everything is on the table," said Mackenzie Eaglen of the conservative Heritage Foundation.

Conservatives hold out hope that the traditional Republican support for defense programs will shield them from the rising tide of fiscal prudence.

But the deficit-reduction proposals put forth by the bipartisan deficit commission appointed by President Barack Obama, co-chaired by former Republican Sen. Alan Simpson and Democrat Erskine Bowles, call for cuts and reforms in Social Security and defense spending, as well as nearly every other federal government activity.

Because the proposals are wide-ranging, they are being taken seriously, despite immediate political denunciations -- more from the political left than the right.

They "indicate the appetite for budget cuts in this age of austerity," Peter Arment, aerospace industry financial analyst for Gleacher & Co., said in a note to investor clients.

Further undermining support for maintaining defense spending at current levels, let alone boosting it, is the ascendancy of the libertarian wing of the Republican party. Libertarians generally advocate limited U.S. presence outside the nation.

"The libertarian types are really feeling their oats," Donnelly said. "They view the Department of Defense like it's the Department of Education, just on steroids."

One of the Senate's most ardent conservatives with a libertarian bent, Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., wrote that Republicans "should resist pressure to take all defense spending cuts off the table." Newly elected Sen. Rand Paul,

R-Ky., an icon of the GOP's Tea Party faction, also said defense spending is not sacrosanct.

Deciding which defense programs get cut will be painful and difficult, said Christopher Preble of the libertarian Cato Institute. In his view, those choices are overdue, given that the United States is spending twice as much or more per capita on defense than any of its allies and trading partners. "That's just hard to sustain budgetarily or politically," Preble said.

The first sign of the potential carnage among defense programs will likely come this spring, Wheeler said, when the new Congress is forced to raise the national debt limit as powerful committees begin work on the 2012 budget.

Members of Congress representing the defense-industry-laden Fort Worth area seem to be taking a low-profile approach so far.

Rep. Kay Granger, R-Fort Worth, said in an e-mailed statement: "I continue to be optimistic about the programs that are based in my district because they are ... essential to the national security of the United States."

Staff for Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison pointed to her statements calling for a freeze on all discretionary federal spending except defense.

Sen. John Cornyn's office declined to comment. Staffers for Rep. Joe Barton, R-Arlington, did not respond to e-mailed questions.

The deficit commission's proposals touch on the most obvious places to save big money in the defense budget, if not the only ones. The oft-delayed and over-budget F-35 "is low-hanging fruit, especially the [Marines'] B-model" which is particularly complex and has the most problems, said Wheeler, a critic of the program.

But those programs have supporters inside and outside of the Pentagon.

Donnelly said that if the government adopts proposals to cut the F-35B, halt production of Bell Helicopter's V-22 Osprey and kill outright a new sea-and-land fighting vehicle, "the Marine Corps would have no firepower or mobility."

The real turmoil will come in the coming months, if members of Congress start seriously considering real spending cuts.

"It's going to take some time, and it's not going to be pretty," Wheeler said.

He predicted that if the political momentum for budget cuts holds, senators and representatives will go along while fiercely protesting and trying to protect their own pet projects.

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