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Calls to cut defense spending grow louder

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Federal authorities are ratcheting up demands to cut spending, including Defense Department budgeting that had not been touched by previous mandates to cut spending.

On Nov. 10, co-chairs of the White House-established National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform released an expansive draft [proposal](#) for trimming the federal budget, including significant cuts into the DOD budget that would total \$100 billion by 2015.

The proposal was echoed Nov. 18 in a [letter](#) signed by a second, bipartisan panel of 45 defense and budget experts sponsored by the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy and the Project on Defense Alternatives. The panel urged the fiscal commission to move forward with defense cuts

The fiscal commission's \$100 billion-trimming budget recommendations come in addition to the ongoing DOD budget cuts proposed earlier this year by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, which are designed to yield \$100 billion in savings to be funneled into war spending.

But commission co-chairs Erskine Bowles, a former Clinton administration official, and former Republican Sen. Alan Simpson said those savings should instead be directed toward reducing outstanding debt.

"Currently, the savings are to be reallocated to force structure and modernization. If these savings were applied to deficit reduction instead, we could save \$28 billion in 2015," they wrote in the proposal's [illustration of savings](#).

Gates, speaking Nov. 16 at a Wall Street Journal event in Washington, [criticized](#) fiscal commission's recommendations as amounting to "math, not strategy," and rejected the idea that DOD is the main problem with the federal deficit.

The bipartisan panel backed the recommendations of Bowles and Simpson, noting that the burgeoning federal deficit is a threat to national security and that DOD shouldn't be exempt from measures to reduce the national debt.

"The military, like other parts of the government, needs to cut spending. It's not viable economically or politically to exempt defense from spending initiatives," said Gordon Adams, an American University professor and former associate director at Office for Management of Budget who was one of the 45 proponents that signed off on the letter to Bowles and Simpson. Adams, along with four other of the signatories, spoke with reporters in a conference call Nov. 18.

Some of the cuts proposed by the fiscal commission and largely endorsed by the panel include pulling tens of thousands of troops out of Europe and Asia, scaling back the military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, strengthening DOD financial management and acquisition reform, and rethinking the overall DOD strategy and U.S. geopolitical role.



“Since the end of the Cold War, we have required our military to prepare for and conduct more types of missions in more places around the world. The Pentagon’s task list now includes not only preventive war, regime change and nation building, but also vague efforts to ‘shape the strategic environment’ and stem the emergence of threats,” the panel’s letter to the fiscal commission said. “It is time to prune some of these missions and restore an emphasis on defense and deterrence.”

The fiscal commission’s recommendations also include canceling the Marine expeditionary fighting vehicle, the Marine Corps F-35, the Navy’s Future Maritime Prepositioning Force, and the Army’s joint light tactical vehicle, ground combat vehicle and joint tactical radio.

Also potentially on the chopping block are Navy ships and programs. In June, the Sustainable Defense Task Force recommended the Navy fleet be reduced from 288 to 230, including seven nuclear subs.

The bipartisan panel also pointed to Gates’ previous note that “the U.S. Navy is today as capable as the next 13 navies combined, most of which are operated by our allies. We can safely save by trimming our current margin of superiority,” the letter to the fiscal commission read.

However, speaking at the Hudson Institute in Washington on Nov. 16, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Gary Roughead disputed the idea of cutting naval forces as he projected their rise in the face of increasing challenges for land forces.

Roughead predicted the Navy in the future will face a growing African role in global sea operations, increased traffic at a deeper and expanded Panama Canal, and a territory of ocean enlarged by global warming.

He also said the Navy is working with Capitol Hill to push through legislative support for the purchase of 20 new littoral combat ships – a plan facing crunch time amid a lame duck congressional session and a looming Dec. 15 expiration date on contract bids for the ships, Roughead told [DOD Buzz](#).

At least one expert on the bipartisan panel disagreed with the idea of cutting submarines. Retired Army Col. Douglas Macgregor called the subs a “war-winning advantage we cannot and must not surrender.” But Macgregor did concede that a decrease in traditional ships will likely be necessary in the moves to slash spending.

“The common wisdom is there are only two kinds of ships: submarines and targets,” Macgregor said. “Let’s face it, surface ships are an anachronism.”

On the whole, the bipartisan panel rejected the idea that enough is being done in Washington to reduce the federal deficit, particularly in the realm of defense spending.

“The first priority in national security has to be economic prosperity,” Macgregor said. “We cannot sustain this trillion-dollar spending.”

“At the end of the day, it’s about policymakers restraining their impulse to use the military in the reckless way they have for the last twenty years,” added bipartisan panel member Christopher Preble of the Cato Institute.