

Deficit Commission Targets the Pentagon



By [William Hartung](#) - November 11, 2010, 4:15PM

There is much to question in the report of President Obama's deficit commission, but I want to focus on one area in which it is headed in the right direction: cutting the military budget. The details on this have been either overlooked or misstated in much of the press coverage of the commission's report (this is not its final report, mind you, but a document released under the aegis of its co-chairs, Erskine Bowles and Alan Simpson). If the co-chairman's [recommendations](#) were taken up, the Pentagon budget would be \$100 billion lower in 2015 than it otherwise would have been, and cumulative cuts from 2012 through 2020 could add up to more than \$800 billion. Given that it is at its highest levels since World War II -- and almost as much as the rest of the world spends combined -- the military budget can afford to shed some dollars, and \$800 billion over a decade is a good starting point. Whether this level of cuts can make its way through Congress and past the arms lobby is another question.

But of course, there are cuts and there are cuts. Of the \$100 billion saved in 2015 under the proposal, over one-quarter of it comes from applying "efficiencies" promised by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to deficit reduction instead of plowing it back into other parts of the Pentagon budget, as Gates would like to do. Efficiencies of this sort -- cutting overhead, improving acquisition processes, getting rid of duplicative offices and agencies -- are notoriously hard to realize in practice. And aside from getting rid of a few generals and admirals and seeking to eliminate the Joint Forces Command (a significant undertaking), Gates has not indicated where the savings will come from. So, as my colleague Carl Conetta of the Project on Defense Alternatives has put it, these proposed savings are "soft" -- sound good, but may never be fully implemented.

By contrast, the commission co-chairs make some "hard" cuts -- ones that are very specific and would surely save money. These include cuts in weapons programs like the V-22 Osprey, the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, the Joint Light Attack Vehicle, the Marine Corps version of the increasingly costly Joint Strike Fighter, and others. In all, these account for \$20 billion of the \$100 billion in savings in Pentagon spending projected for 2015.

But what the co-chairman's report doesn't do is cut the size of the military by reducing total troop levels. Or, as Gordon Adams of the Stimson Center [puts](#) it, the commission fails to present "a different view on how the US engages the world and the missions we give to the armed forces."

Aside from the details, the most important impact of the report is that it puts cuts in military spending on the table in a serious way. By contrast, both President Obama and Congressional Republicans had thus far been calling for exempting Pentagon spending from short-term deficit reduction measures. And while the budgetary maneuvers being engaged in by Robert Gates are frequently referred to as "cuts" or "reductions," they are

in fact just efforts to move spending from one part of the military budget to another, in the context of continuing increases in overall spending.

Will these ideas get traction in the new Congress? Maybe. As Christopher Preble of the Cato Institute has [noted](#), there is a split in the Republican ranks over putting military spending on the table in deficit reduction scenarios, with major players like Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) and newcomers like Rand Paul (R-KY) and Pat Toomey (R-PA) in favor of taking a scalpel to the Pentagon. Military spending debates will be a case of strange bedfellows, with liberal Democrats joining hands with Republican deficit hawks in efforts to trim military spending. Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) and Rep. Ron Paul got the ball rolling on this when they and more than 50 of their colleagues [wrote](#) to the deficit commission urging them to include cuts in military spending in any deficit reduction plan. And Rep. Frank encouraged the formation of the Sustainable Defense Task Force (of which I am a member), a group of over a dozen experts responsible for a [report](#) that documents over \$960 billion in potential savings in Pentagon spending over a ten-year period.

Budget cutters will be up against hawkish ideologues who want to "throw money" at the Pentagon, as one analyst for the American Enterprise Institute put it; and against the arms lobby, which can count on most senators and representatives with major arms factories in their states or districts to resist spending cuts. The outcome is not pre-determined. For example, when President Obama successfully terminated the F-22 program last year, he got over a dozen Republican votes in the Senate, including Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), but also including none other than Sen. Jim DeMint (R-SC), a Tea Party favorite who dislikes the president so much that he spoke about "breaking" Obama by opposing his health care bill.

So, the battles over the Pentagon budget may be more interesting than many of us might have expected just a few years ago. The combination of deficit fever and the drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan (the sooner the better) will create a climate in which downward pressure on Pentagon spending will grow. In short, we have the greatest opportunity since the end of the Cold War to significantly cut military spending.