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Want To Cut Defense? Maybe Give The Military a Breather, Then

By [Spencer Ackerman](#)  November 18, 2010 | 2:02 pm | Categories: [Paper Pushers](#), [Beltway Bandits](#), [Politicians](#)



After the leaders of a White House deficit commission released a plan to chop \$100 billion out of the defense budget, Defense Secretary Robert Gates struck back, criticizing the plan as “[math, not strategy](#).” That’s music to the ears of a different group of defense budget-cutters, who have a strategy to scale back U.S. military commitments — and reap the cost savings.

Pull tens of thousands of troops out of Europe and, to a lesser degree, Asia. Scale back the increase in soldiers and Marines prompted by the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. There are lots of poorly-functioning military programs that can be cut, but the real path to a lower defense budget that doesn’t impact military preparedness is in going to war less, according to a letter to the deficit commission signed by 45 longtime defense wonks. Call it the dove’s budget.

“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,” reads the [letter](#) (.PDF), spearheaded by the Project on Defense Alternatives and the libertarian Cato Institute. “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. It is time to prune some of these missions and restore an emphasis on defense and deterrence.”

The ultimate purpose of the letter is to bolster the [defense cuts recommended last week by Erskine Bowles and Alan Simpson](#), the chairmen of the deficit commission. But it tries to cast those cuts in terms defense hawks might applaud: by increasing “mission effectiveness,” in the words of signatory Gordon Adams, an American University professor and former White House budget official. Except they’d do that by not overtaxing the military — that is, they’d ask troops to *do* less, rather than just *spend* less. Hawks won’t be happy about that.

“Cuts without strategy would be worse than doing nothing at all,” said Christopher Preble, a retired Navy officer and Cato defense wonk. “A combination of fiscal pressures are pushing down on the defense budget, but policymakers need to be rethinking military power and what it’s to be used for.”

The letter itself doesn’t actually spell out what to cut, cheering on Bowles and Simpson instead and making a strategy-based case for defense reductions. But a June report from the Sustainable Defense Task Force, a defense review requested by Reps. Ron Paul and Barney Frank and led by many of the letter’s signatories, [recommended nearly \\$1 trillion in cuts over ten years](#). Among the casualties: a Navy sized at 230 ships, down from the current 288; 50,000 U.S. troops removed from bases in Europe and Asia; the end of the F-35, the Pentagon’s favored next-generation fighter jet; and the end of the Marines’ swimming Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, to name a few.

Not everyone who signed the letter is on board with the cuts in the Task Force. During a call with reporters about the letter, one of the signatories, Doug Macgregor, a retired Army colonel, argued against cutting submarines; the Task Force would get rid of seven nuclear subs. Submarines are a “war-winning advantage we cannot and must not surrender,” Macgregor said, given that over 80 percent of the world’s commerce travels by sea and few nations have anti-submarine capability.

That at least gets the defense-budget debate back to first principles: what’s the role of the U.S. military after the Iraq and Afghanistan wars end? (Um, [assuming they’ll actually end](#).) Adams criticized the Pentagon’s recent mega-strategy document, known as the Quadrennial Defense Review, as a “layercake of missions with no set of priorities [and] no effort to say which are acceptable risks and which are unacceptable risks,” making it hard to identify sensible missions to jettison. “In order to spend less, we ought to be doing less,” Adams said. “The goal is not to do the same things with fewer people.”

Whether Washington politicians will actually cut defense is uncertain, even with the giant federal deficit and weak economy. The incoming chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Rep. Buck McKeon, said on Monday that [defense cuts were a “red line”](#) for him. And the Pentagon leadership is focused on [spending its cash more wisely](#), not necessarily spending less of it. Adams noted that the military wasn’t immune to cuts during the deficit-slashing attempts that defined the late 80s and most of the 1990s. But that was before the U.S. got attacked on its own soil and launched two wars with murky endpoints.

And the services are just as inclined to raise the strategy point as an argument for cutting budget fat, not missions. Admiral Gary Roughead, the Navy’s leader, argues for an [expansive U.S. naval strategy requiring 313 ships](#). And the Marines say that as long as the U.S. wants a force to call on rapidly that can fight at sea and on land, [they’ll need some kind of tank that can transfer them from a ship to a beach](#), if not necessarily the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle.

But the signatories say that they’d recommend mission cuts even during a time of budget surpluses — and that to cut the budget without doing cutting missions means the military will find itself under-resourced when crises happen. “At the end of the day,” Preble said, “it’s about policymakers restraining their impulse to use the military in the reckless way they have for the last twenty years.”

Photo: U.S. Army

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