

Pentagon budget multiplies as security threat list grows

By NANCY A. YOUSSEF
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Despite calls on Capitol Hill for major defense budget cuts, the Pentagon this week will unveil the largest budget in its history - driven by an expanding list of what defines national security.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates said his proposed \$553 billion budget "represents, in my view, the minimum level of defense spending that is necessary, given the complex and unpredictable array of security challenges the United States faces around the globe."

Those challenges now include pandemic diseases, piracy, human trafficking, rising oceans, national debt, education, cyber warfare, the wars on terrorism and traditional state-to-state threats.

But defense analysts, budget experts and some members of Congress take a more jaundiced view, saying the insistence that the U.S. fund a military poised to address every type of possible threat not only thwarts efforts to control the deficit, but also makes it difficult to set priorities on what threats the nation really faces.

During the Cold War, the military had to be prepared to fight two simultaneous wars. Now, it must be good at everything.

"The strategy doesn't drive the budget. It's the other way around," said Christopher Preble, the director for foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. "What you have is an existing force structure and then Washington trying to figure out how to use it."

Pentagon planning documents show the extent of the problem - experts said the list of threats the military cites has never been so expansive.

In his annual guidance this year to U.S. troops on what he thinks should be the Pentagon's priorities, Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, named Afghanistan, China, Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan as areas the U.S. must focus on. He called for stressing cyber warfare and the health of the force as well.

The Pentagon's quadrennial defense review, which the military produces, in part, to outline its priorities and shape its budget, last year called for U.S. forces to be prepared for a range of warfare "from homeland defense and defense support to civil authorities, to deterrence and preparedness missions - occurring in multiple and unpredictable combinations."

It called climate change "an accelerant of instability," marking the first time such a document linked environmental issues with national security.

On pandemic disease, the report found that "detecting, diagnosing, and determining the origin of a pathogen will enable U.S. authorities to better respond to future disease outbreaks and identify whether they, are natural or man-made. Accordingly, we are expanding the biological threat

reduction program to countries outside the former Soviet Union in order to create a global network for surveillance and response."

And on piracy and human trafficking, the review found the U.S. must invest more in "regional maritime security organizations in order to protect vital sea lines of communication."

Doing all that will require 3 percent more money next year, Gates has said, not including spending on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Such a boost would mark the 14th year in a row that Pentagon spending has increased, despite the disappearing presence in Iraq. In dollar terms, Pentagon spending has more than doubled in 10 years. Even adjusted for inflation, the Defense Department budget has risen 65 percent over the past decade.

Gates has proposed some modest trims that total about \$78 billion over five years and shrinking by 47,000 the size of the Army and the Marines Corps in 2015.

But the bottom line figure would still go up during that time, with projected spending totaling \$643 billion in 2015 and \$735 billion on 2020. Even with the reduction in staffing forecast for 2015, the Army and Marines Corps would be larger than they were when the Iraq and Afghanistan wars began.

That approach has angered some and frustrated others.

"It's hard to say (Washington) made tough choices," said Lawrence Korb, a budget expert at the Center for American Progress.

Former U.S. Sen. Alan Simpson, a Wyoming Republican who co-chaired the bipartisan Deficit Reduction Commission that proposed cutting the defense budget by \$282 billion over five years, called Gates' trims "crappy little cuts."

"You have to do something significant," Simpson said, calling the rising national deficit "absolute madness."

In Congress, there's growing pressure to cut Pentagon spending, which accounts for as much as 66 percent of the federal government's discretionary budget. But key members, such as House Armed Services Chairman Rep. Buck McKeon, R-Calif., have said the defense budget should increase. The result, observers said, will be a lot of bickering and some minor tweaks to the budget, but no major overhaul.

"I don't see Congress at least this year embracing Bowles-Simpson" recommendations, Korb said of the bipartisan deficit commission's report.

Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., has called for keeping defense spending at 2010 levels for the next decade just to determine how the money is being spent. Last week, Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., called for the Defense Department to defend its programs as part of a plan to trim the federal budget by \$500 billion.

Rep. Pete Stark, D-Calif., has proposed freezing the defense budget at 2008 levels, a savings of \$182 billion over five years.

"We spend more than any other country. The next closest is China. We spend seven times what they do. How about just cutting back to maybe only spending five or six times as much as China does?" Stark asked on the floor of the House last month when he introduced the bill.

The Obama administration has shown no interest, however, in narrowing the definition of national security.

In the past year, the military has named a general to deal with cyber war, and Pentagon officials have said they consider rising oceans and the shrinking Arctic a possible national security threat, too. Cyber command currently has a \$120 million annual budget, but that's expected to be increased by an additional \$105 million in next year's budget.

Mullen, without irony, added a new national security threat in an August interview with CNN. "The most significant threat to our national security is our debt," he said - because it could threaten future military spending.

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