

Strategic Concerns Complicate Efforts to Cut US Defense Spending

May 25, 2011

Al Pessin | Pentagon

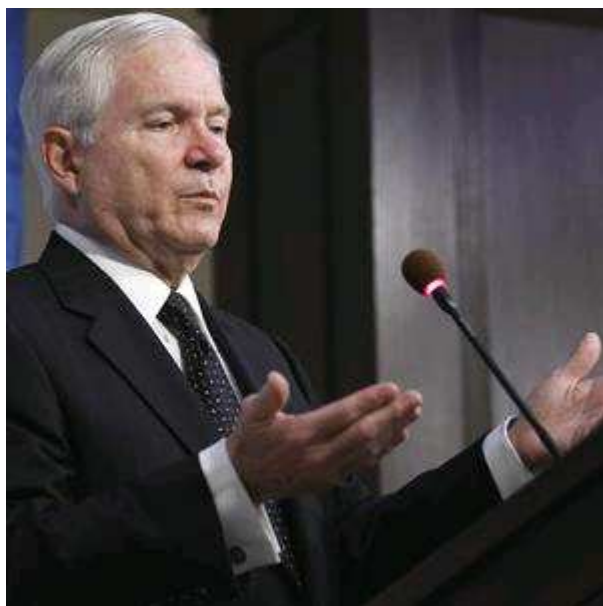


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Defense Secretary Robert Gates gestures while speaking at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research in Washington, Tuesday, May 24, 2011

During his final weeks in office, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates is making the case for strategic thinking about defense, as some members of Congress and some Obama administration officials want

deep defense spending cuts to help reduce the federal budget deficit. The issues are complex and they include decisions on what is needed and what is not, whether some greater risks can be accepted and whether too much defense spending could hurt U.S. national security in the long-term by weakening the economy. The

debate continues about the U.S. security role in the world in an era of fiscal constraints.

Secretary Gates had a simple message for budget cutters during a speech this week at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research in Washington.

“If we are going to reduce the resources and the size of the U.S. military, people need to make conscious choices about what the implications are for the security of the country,” he said.

Gates has engineered billions of dollars in defense cuts through his initiative to eliminate unneeded programs, streamline operations and find other efficiencies. But he said the kind of cuts that President Barack Obama wants - \$400 billion over 12 years - can not be achieved without reducing U.S. military capabilities. And that, he said, must be done very carefully.

“Unless our country’s political leadership envisions a dramatically diminished global security role for the United States, it is vitally important to protect the military modernization accounts,” he said.

Gates said some things should not be cut - including new fighter jets and other aircraft for

the Air Force, new ships for the Navy and plans to rebuild ground forces after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But Gates acknowledged that there are other programs that could be cut, if political leaders are willing to accept increased risks from potential threats, including terrorist groups, rogue states and rising powers China and Russia. But the secretary said there is also some good news for the people who will make the tough choices after he leaves office at the end of June.

“The threats and potential adversaries America faces today are dangerous and daunting,” he said. “But as a matter of national survival, they do not approach the scale of the Soviet [Union's] military threat that provided the political and strategic rationale for military expenditures that consumed a significant portion of our economy [during the Cold War].”

During an expert panel that followed the defense secretary’s speech, analysts debated defense priorities and budget cutting strategies.

Tom Donnelly of the American Enterprise Institute was skeptical of reducing U.S. military capabilities.

“The real world test of American power goes on

every day, regardless of what our domestic budgetary conversation will be," he said.

Donnelly said that starting the review of defense spending after stating the goal of \$400 billion in cuts is like providing the answer before the questions are asked.

But Christopher Preble of the Washington-based Cato Institute said the president's target figure will force strategy makers to face the tough choices they have been able to avoid during the past decade of defense spending increases.

"Strategy is supposed to drive force structure, not the other way around," he said. "And yet, most of us here know that's not the way it's worked. It's never the way it's worked. Eventually, we are going to have to choose between those things that are absolutely essential to U.S. national security and those things that are nice to have in a fictional world of no resource constraints."

Preble said that although President Obama's spending cuts sound like a lot of money, they can be met without diminishing the U.S. military's ability to defend major national interests.

Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution is among many in Washington who say long-term U.S. security is linked to the long-term health of the U.S. economy. O'Hanlon advocated making enough cuts in defense and other government spending to ensure prosperity and security in the future.

"If there is one rule that I think applies to major deficit reduction, there has to be a feeling of shared sacrifice," he said. "And the secretary said that in his speech. And he's willing to try to do his part from where he sits, but the rest of the government is not."

O'Hanlon said Democrats will block cuts to health care reform and programs for the poor and the elderly, and that Republicans will block significant defense cuts and efforts to raise taxes. He says that means there probably will not be major U.S. defense spending cuts or significant moves to reduce the federal budget deficit, at least until after the presidential and congressional elections in November of next year.

O'Hanlon said he would like to have heard Secretary Gates talk more about what to cut, rather than just what not to cut, and about how

global strategic priorities are interwoven with fiscal concerns. For O'Hanlon, China is a prime example.

"I think the way you could have talked about China is to say we don't want to view China as a threat," he said. "Having said that, we have to worry about military competition with China, as we have for decades. But we also have to worry about economic competition with China, not just in terms of our prosperity, but also in terms of our long-term security. Balancing all these concerns gets to the heart of what we are discussing."

This is only the beginning of the debate over U.S. government spending for fiscal year 2012, which begins October 1. Secretary Gates, using the prestige built up over a widely-praised four-and-a-half-year tenure, has identified the programs he says are critical. But it will be left to his designated successor, Leon Panetta, along with President Obama and Congress to decide how much to spend on defense, what, if any, additional risks to accept, and what impact that will have on long-term U.S. security and economic prosperity.

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