



New, smaller US military has long road to reality

Published: Tuesday, 4 Mar 2014 | 3:15 PM ET

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Military budget cuts the Pentagon proposed last week would end funding to some weapons programs and dramatically reduce troop counts, but the proposed budget is probably far from the eventual reality.

Defense Secretary [Chuck Hagel](#) put forward a budget of about \$500 billion a year—much less than the \$600 billion-plus the Pentagon spent in 2012—and there's a lot of speculation about what the final congressional military budget will look like.

"That's the big question," [Democratic](#) Sen. Mark Udall of Colorado, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, told CNBC. "The president always proposes, and [Congress](#) always disposes."

Contractors and weapons

Hagel's budget reduces or suspends purchases of some big contractors' weapons systems and preserves others.

Proposed cutbacks include reduced purchases of Predator and Reaper drones from privately held General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, and a plan for no further orders of littoral combat ships, which are made by [Lockheed Martin](#) and [General Dynamics](#).

At the same time, Hagel would preserve funding for multibillion-dollar equipment development programs, such as Lockheed's F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and a long-range bomber program that is expected to be the target of competing bids from a joint Lockheed-[Boeing](#) team and a [Northrop Grumman](#) team.

Troop levels

The [Obama](#) administration has proposed to make troop cuts through a drawdown in Army personnel, from more than 520,000 soldiers to about 450,000 by 2019.

According to Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, the budget represents a shift from a large military ground force characterizing an era of overseas wars in [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#) to a smaller, more highly trained force that makes greater use of technology.

"If we're not doing low-tech wars that require boots on the ground, you have a smaller, elite force that allows you to use technology and train some exceptionally skilled people," he said.

While some have voiced disapproval of the budget, especially its reductions in military personnel and possible cuts to benefits, such as subsidized grocery prices, Preble sees limited room for adjustment given restrictions imposed by sequestration.

"They might just accept the unhappy choices and then blame the [White House](#) for what comes next," he said of Congress.

Vocal resistance to cuts already in place

But [Republican](#) Rep. Michael Turner of Ohio, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, is not keen on some of the cuts.

"We need to make certain that this president doesn't recklessly cut our national defense," Turner told CNBC. "I think the drawdown on the army is incredibly dangerous. Although the president says that he doesn't want to use the troops in the way that we have seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, we don't always get to choose our conflicts."

Pete Hegseth, CEO of Concerned Veterans for America, agreed. Though the group advocates for veterans as well as for spending cuts, he indicated that he opposes the defense cuts in their current form.

"This is budget cuts masquerading as a strategy," Hegseth said. "This is to shrink the military and [its] ability to project power in the world. This administration believes that we will never again fight a protracted war on foreign soil. I think it's shortsighted to handcuff yourself."

'Political equation'

While defense cuts are inevitable, passing the budget in its current form would mean eliminating tens of thousands of voting service people—especially problematic prospect for Congress in an election year.

"Because we are in a political season, the prospects of it passing 'as is' are very low," Hegseth said. "It's a political equation."

Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution's Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, said members of Congress will be particularly sensitive to protecting expenditures for benefits. But other high-profile items, such as one or more of the 11 U.S. aircraft carriers, could also end up on the chopping block, he added.

Both Udall and Turner indicated that they expect bipartisan cooperation on the cuts, in whatever form they take.

"I absolutely believe that this is bipartisan," Turner said. "I'm hearing concerns from both sides of the aisle. We need to sharpen our pencils."

—By *CNBC's Adam Molon*. Follow him on Twitter: [@CNBCMolon](https://twitter.com/CNBCMolon).