

Chicago Tribune

Defense cuts?

Underwhelming fiscal discipline at the Pentagon

[July 10, 2011](#)|Steve Chapman

Politicians often rail against government spending, except when it goes to the military. Conservatives believe there is no such thing as too much defense spending, and liberals don't argue, for fear of being labeled appeasers. So when there is talk of the two parties agreeing to cut the Pentagon budget, it sounds like a monumental change.

But probably not. It's a good thing that defense, which accounts for roughly a fifth of all federal outlays, is no longer considered immune to the need for frugality. But both supporters and opponents have a stake in portraying any trims as far more significant than they really are.

Ads by Google

- [Volunteer Your Time](#)Take The Pepsi Challenge & Change Your World. Cast Your Vote Today! [RefreshEverything.com](#)
- [Are You a New Volunteer?](#)Make the Most of Your Time With a Free 30-Page Volunteer Handbook [www.calt.ca](#)

The Obama administration reportedly has decided to boost its planned defense cuts to as much as \$700 billion from \$400 billion over the next 12 years. That sounds like a lot — considering that the earlier, smaller figure had sparked furious objections.

Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld warned it would be "a grievous mistake" that would someday "be measured in American lives lost." Mitt Romney, in line with most other presidential candidates, insisted "we should not reduce our commitment to national security."

Some Republicans in Congress may be prepared to subject defense spending to the sort of scrutiny applied elsewhere. But if you think the tea party favorites will demand serious fiscal discipline, you are in for a disappointment.

House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan's heralded budget plan would, according to Cato Institute analyst Christopher Preble, leave the Pentagon "essentially unscathed." Michele Bachmann wrote recently, "Blaming our budgetary woes on the military is reckless and misinformed."

She doesn't seem to have noticed that while discretionary domestic outlays have been flat in inflation-adjusted terms over the past decade, military expenditures have not. The discretionary defense budget, after accounting for inflation, is 80 percent bigger this year than it was in 2001 — and 33 percent bigger than it was just five years ago.

Assuming the president and Congress agree to the cuts being discussed — no sure thing — it would still be larger in 2016 than it was for most of George W. Bush's presidency. It would also be more, in real terms, than it was at the height of President Ronald Reagan's military buildup, when we faced a hostile nuclear superpower in the form of the Soviet Union.

It might make sense to provide such gargantuan sums if we were merely trying to keep up with our enemies. In reality, the United States devotes more money to defense than the next 17 countries combined. We spend six times as much as the Chinese, who come in second overall.

It would be misleading to say we greatly outspend our rivals. When it comes to military outlays and capability, we have no rivals. The United States is the New York Yankees, and everyone else is in Little League.

If spending is the solution, the problem has been solved many times over. If, on the other hand, we are still dangerously vulnerable to our enemies, more dollars are not likely to make us safe.

But we keep chasing the dream of absolute security, which requires an unending succession of wars in faraway countries that pose little or no danger to us. That's what justifies the immense military budget, an indulgence disguised as a necessity.

[Ads by Google](#)

- [Volunteer Your Time](#) Take The Pepsi Challenge & Change Your World. Cast Your Vote Today! [RefreshEverything.com](#)
- [Are You a New Volunteer?](#) Make the Most of Your Time With a Free 30-Page Volunteer Handbook [www.calt.ca](#)

What neither party is willing to consider is downsizing our global obligations and ambitions. Both Republicans and Democrats can be found in support of staying in Afghanistan for three more years, keeping some troops in Iraq beyond this year and continuing the war in Libya. Wars cost money — lots of it.

Nor is either party ready to reassess our permanent presence in Europe, South Korea and Japan — which have ample resources to provide for their own defense. If our leaders want to preserve the option of intervening anywhere on Earth, anytime something happens that we don't like — and most of them do — they have to maintain a military establishment that dwarfs all others.

So don't expect the Pentagon to become noticeably smaller just because we're being buried in debt. An aide to House Armed Services Committee Chairman Buck McKeon, R-Calif., told Politico, "The chairman is deeply concerned about any defense cuts made during wartime."

There lie the crucial facts about the defense budget: 1) Washington politicians resist cutting in wartime; and 2) it's always wartime.

[Steve Chapman](#) is a member of the Tribune's editorial board and blogs at chicagotribune.com/chapman

schapman@tribune.com