

Congress Should Stand Firm on Spending Caps

By Christopher Preble

11/26/2013

Rumors abound that budget negotiators are nearing a possible deal to reverse spending cuts required under the 2011 Budget Control Act (BCA).

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell is hoping his colleagues will [stand firm and reject any deal](#), telling reporters Tuesday: "I think it's a bad idea to revisit a law that's actually working and reducing spending."

Unfortunately, he is competing with military spending advocates such as [Reps. Buck McKeon and Mac Thornberry](#). They claim that the dangers confronting the United States today are graver than ever, that the costs to address these threats are rising and cannot be contained, and removing the defense spending caps is necessary to ensure the United States remains safe and secure.

They are wrong on all counts.

First, some context on spending: The Pentagon's base budget, excluding the costs of the ongoing war in Afghanistan, remains 26 percent higher than in 2000, in inflation-adjusted dollars. Under the spending caps established by the BCA, Pentagon spending would average around \$528 billion per year from 2013 to 2021, over 18 percent higher than during a typical year in the Cold War.

This is curious considering the threats facing the United States were far greater then. The threats today are declining, not rising. In fact, all forms of violence, from cataclysmic great power wars to civil wars and ethnic conflicts, have declined to historic lows.

To be sure, some insurance against potential threats is wise, in the unlikely event that current favorable trends are reversed, but we still can maintain our safety while spending less. That's because technological advances allow today's military to address possible threats with fewer people and fewer platforms.

For instance, U.S. naval vessels have far more striking power than the early 20th century dreadnaughts, just as precision-guided munitions have rendered today's aircraft at least 10 times more capable of striking targets as their dumb-bomb-dropping precursors. To be sure, these new platforms are much more expensive, but the military services and their suppliers are more cost-conscious today than a decade ago, as when the Air Force recently killed a plan to outfit the next-generation bomber with a [\\$300,000 kitchenette](#). Such excesses might be resurrected if BCA opponents succeed in changing the law.

The reforms extend well beyond defense procurement. In 2011, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen [admitted](#) that the military hadn't been forced "to make the hard choices" because they had all the money they requested, plus a little more. Today, the spending caps are forcing the services to prioritize.

For example, austerity has focused attention on the military's antiquated compensation system. Today's soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines are better compensated than those who served during World War II or the Cold War. And they should be. A modern military must compete to attract and retain the best and the brightest, and that costs money.

The current trajectory of personnel costs is [unsustainable](#), however. Pay and benefits are already eating into other Pentagon spending accounts, including procurement, operations and maintenance, and training. The net effect may impair military readiness. Now, even outspoken military spending advocates, such as [Reps. Duncan Hunter and Adam Kinzinger](#), both veterans of the post-9/11 military, have endorsed changes, including expecting working-age retirees to pick up more of their health care costs.

There is, in fact, broad, bipartisan support for proposals once thought to be the third-rail of Pentagon politics. In addition to compensation reform for active-duty military personnel, [a letter](#) signed by scholars from the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for American Progress, and the Brookings Institution, among others, also calls for shrinking the Pentagon's sprawling civilian workforce and reducing overhead, including eliminating excess base capacity.

The most important piece of the military spending puzzle remains the United States' hyperactive foreign policy. Even if we were to implement the sensible reforms made politically realistic by spending caps, we would still spend more than we need to keep Americans safe. That is because today's military is mainly geared toward defending others. By discouraging our allies from doing more to defend themselves and their interests, U.S. policymakers have ensured that U.S. troops bear disproportionate burdens, and [U.S. taxpayers pay disproportionate costs](#). If we are going to spend less on the military in the next ten years than we have over the last ten, we must ask our smaller, cheaper military to do less. And we must expect others to do more.

The Budget Control Act, for all its flaws, has managed to deliver something once thought impossible: actual spending cuts. Our military remains second to none, despite those cuts, and might be stronger in the future because of them. A deal to cancel or reverse those cuts threatens to derail sensible reform proposals that could deliver far larger savings to taxpayers in the future. Sen. McConnell is right: Congress should stand firm.

