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Senators question Pentagon cuts amid doubts on NATO

By NANCY A. YOUSSEF
McClatchy Newspapers

Senate lawmakers on Wednesday questioned the wisdom of steep U.S. military budget cuts at a time when top Defense Department officials warn the NATO alliance is weakening due to spending cuts by several European allies.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Appropriations Committee that the Pentagon must sustain some of the budget cuts mandated by the Obama administration to weather the fiscal crisis. But they cautioned that if Congress makes too many cuts too fast, it would affect the scope of U.S. military capability and significantly hamper the effectiveness of NATO, whose Libya operation Gates has sharply criticized.

"I would rather have a smaller, superbly capable military than a large, hollow one," Gates said. "But a smaller one will be able to go fewer places and do fewer things."

The questioning of the two departing officials - Gates' four-year tenure ends on June 30, while Mullen will step down this summer - came after Gates delivered a stinging speech last week to a NATO meeting in Brussels. Gates said that the U.S. would increasingly question the value of the Cold War alliance if NATO members continue to cut their defense budgets at a greater rate than the U.S.

Gates said that NATO couldn't sustain its 11-week air operation against Col. Moammar Gadhafi's forces without the U.S. providing ammunition and intelligence.

Nearly every major NATO ally has proposed deep defense cuts. Britain has proposed an 8 percent cut over the next four years. France's defense spending is staying flat for the next three years. In the past year, Germany eliminated conscription from its force.

The Obama administration has proposed \$400 billion in cuts over 12 years but spread them across expenditures for national security, not just defense. Even if the Defense Department sustained all the cuts, it would amount to a 6 percent reduction in that 12-year period, assuming defense spending stays steady at \$539 billion a year.

Defense spending, which has doubled since 2000, is projected to grow further to more than \$700 billion during that period, according to administration estimates.

The U.S. defense budget is scheduled to grow another 4 percent during the next fiscal year. At the same time, war spending, which is added to the base defense budget, is expected to fall. Gates projected that during the next fiscal year the U.S. would cut its war spending by \$40 billion; it's currently at \$159 billion.

Senate Appropriations Committee members asked Gates and Mullen how much they'd consider reducing the U.S. troop presence overseas in places like Germany and Japan, given NATO allies' shrinking budgets. And they asked how much the U.S. could depend on NATO allies to not only lead the mission in Libya but also continue to contribute in Afghanistan, where the Obama administration is expected to announce within weeks the withdrawal of an unspecified

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number of the more than 100,000 U.S. forces deployed there.

"What is NATO? What are we going to require of NATO members? What actions should NATO undertake?" asked Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md. "When we ask for a coalition of the willing, we're going to need a coalition of the capable. Are we ever going to ask that again?"

The U.S. has usually led NATO missions, but in Libya the Obama administration has reduced the U.S. role and let NATO forces, chiefly Britain and France, take the lead. In Afghanistan, the U.S. provides two-thirds of the international forces stationed there.

Together, the 28 NATO member countries have 2 million troops; the U.S. has 2.2 million. The U.S. funds 75 percent of the NATO budget.

Gates said the Obama administration's budget proposal amounted to "real cuts." He said the military may have to consider raising the retirement age and increasing the co-payment for the military health care plan.

Despite his criticisms, Gates told the lawmakers that NATO remains necessary for U.S. security.

"A NATO that has reduced capabilities is still better than no NATO at all," Gates said. "One of the things that has happened to our allies is that they really have stepped up ... in Afghanistan, but the result of that has been that the costs of their participation in Afghanistan has brought further pressure on the modernization budgets of those European countries."

Christopher Preble, a budget expert at the CATO Institute, a libertarian research group, said that NATO members made cuts because they don't perceive their national security threats to be as great as the U.S. does - and believe that if they get in trouble the U.S. military will come to their aid.

"That has happened in Kosovo and Bosnia, and now Libya," Preble said.

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