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Deficit-Buster Proposals Won't Work Without Changes in U.S. Defense Strategy

A string of proposals in recent weeks has recommended every which way to reduce the nation's staggering debt. Most of the suggested remedies rely less on tax hikes than on massive spending cuts, including up to \$150 billion to be carved from the Pentagon's annual \$700 billion budget.

Although it could be months or years before actual cuts are made to the defense budget, it is no longer a question of if — despite forecasts by Defense Secretary Robert Gates of 1 percent growth a year — but how much of the Pentagon's funds will be on the table, experts contend.

Critics from all sides of the political spectrum already have blasted the proposed cuts. Some for not going [far enough](#). Others for indiscriminately [decapitating important programs](#) at the expense of national security.

The [National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform](#) is expected to unveil a comprehensive debt-reduction plan next week. Based on the draft report published by the panel's co-chairs — former Republican Sen. Alan Simpson and Erskine Bowles, one-time chief of staff to President Clinton — the defense budget, which makes up 23 percent of federal expenditures, will be targeted more aggressively than Gates would have wanted.

But regardless of what fiscal reforms the commission ends up offering, no debt-reduction proposals, including those that have been put forth so far, are going to be taken seriously unless they are accompanied by sweeping changes in U.S. military strategy and long-term objectives, experts caution. Too much of the cost-cutting efforts that are being suggested, including Gates' own "efficiencies" campaign to save \$100 billion over five years, rely on optimism and the idea that by trimming excess overhead and scaling back on contractors, the Defense Department can contribute a big chunk of money to the Treasury.

Analysts are skeptical. All the efficiencies in the world will only add up to spare change, they contend. They call for more fundamental reforms — a revised national security strategy that would allow the Pentagon to cut back and still ensure the security of the United States. That means having to make tough choices such as possibly reducing military commitments to police the globe and fundamentally restructuring the vast defense bureaucracies that were created to fight a third world war.

Any shift in strategy, however, will have to come from the Obama administration and Congress, [analysts](#) point out, as it is not the fiscal commission's job to develop defense strategy.

"The Defense Department's biggest weakness is its budget strategy: the absence of strategic choice," says Gordon Adams, American University professor who authored the defense recommendations in the [Domenici-Rivlin proposal](#) that was presented by former Senate Budget Committee Chairman Pete Domenici (R-N.M.) and White House Budget Director under Clinton, Alice Rivlin.

Cutting the defense budget should not be about doing the same with less, Adams says. The reaction to the Simpson-Bowles report, which takes aim at many big-ticket weapon programs and calls for work force reductions, was predictable. Every targeted program or agency, as was seen recently with U.S. Joint Forces Command, is making a case that it is essential to national security, and its supporters already are mobilizing lobbyists and advocacy groups.

The smarter approach would be for the Obama administration and Congress to agree to a scaled-back military strategy, says Adams. "At the end of the day, it's about policy makers restraining their impulse to use the military in the reckless way it's been used in the past 20 years," he says.

Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, says there is a fatal flaw in the Bowles-Simpson plan that is often seen in budget-cutting proposals in Washington. "It is counting a bit too much on efficiencies and programmatic reforms," says Preble.

The military strategy laid out in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review was, from the get-go, blasted as being overly ambitious and more of a wish list than a serious assessment of future commitments and threats. The current fiscal crisis brings into sharper relief the failures of the QDR to set priorities that match the available resources, Preble says. "It is a cop out for policy makers to dodge decisions they should have made a long time ago."

The United States can slash defense spending and still maintain a strong national security," says Preble. "But without a change in strategy, cuts in spending are worse than doing nothing."

Retired Army Col. Douglas Macgregor, a critic of the Pentagon's current strategy, says the top priority now has to be the "invigoration of our economic prosperity as the foundation of military power."

He contends that the wars the United States is fighting today are not making the nation safer. "There is no existential threat to the United States today," he says. "We have chosen to engage Islamic terrorists in the most expensive and often self-defeating manner," he says. "This needs to stop."

At a Washington, D.C., conference last week, Pentagon acquisition chief Ashton Carter said the Defense Department already has canceled many weapon procurements and it is now reaching a point "where what we have in our program are things we want." If the Pentagon is unable to come up the \$100 billion in savings that Gates called for, the assumption is that more programs will be cut, even if they are deemed essential by the military services.

Such a predicament could be avoided if the military were asked to do less than what it's doing now, says former Air Force Secretary Michael Wynn. "You need to stop doing stuff," Wynn tells Carter during a question-and-answer session. "You can talk about efficiency and squeezing cost. But it's easier if you stop doing stuff. Then you put pressure on the system."

Benjamin Friedman, research fellow at the Cato Institute, estimated that in the Bowles-Simpson proposal, almost 50 percent of the cuts are based on efficiency gains. "Only one sentence that says anything at all about changing strategy or reducing commitments," says Friedman. "That's irresponsible," he says. Efficiencies are the most popular approach, but is unlikely to save enough money to make a dent in the debt. "One man's waste is someone else's essential national security requirement," he says. "Even low-hanging inefficiency fruit like JFCOM requires a fight."

If the United States took bold steps to curtail military commitments, it may force allies to question their defense

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strategies and consider pouring more resources into their security, says Friedman. Today, he says, "Our allies assume we'll bail them out. We're providing disincentives for other countries to police their regions."

The United States, he insists, will be "pretty safe even with a small defense budget. What we do overseas matters to our security only on the margins."

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