

Pentagon to present biggest proposed budget ever

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Topics: [Robert Gates](#)

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Despite calls on Capitol Hill for major defense budget cuts, the Pentagon will unveil the largest spending plan in its history today -- driven by an expanding list of national security threats.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates has said the proposed \$553 billion budget "represents, in my view, the minimum level of defense spending that is necessary, given the complex and unpredictable array of security challenges" that the United States faces.

The budget proposal is not expected to hold any big, unpleasant surprises for North Texas.

Gates delivered the bad news for local contractors a month ago, when he announced a wholesale restructuring of the F-35 joint strike fighter program. His revision cuts planned orders by \$12.5 billion over the next five years.

Those are tax dollars that won't be spent with Lockheed Martin's Fort Worth facility and its many subcontractors, large amounts of which would have been paid to local employees and suppliers.

As recently as last fall, the Pentagon expected to order at least 45 F-35s in 2012, at a cost approaching \$9 billion. But because the program is five years behind schedule, the 2012 order will be just 32 planes.

Other major defense programs important to Tarrant County, particularly the Marines' V-22 Osprey and H-1 helicopter programs of Bell Helicopter, are not expected to face any danger of budget cuts.

Orders to Bell and Boeing for the V-22 are expected to remain constant at 35 aircraft and \$2.8 billion. Marine helicopter orders are likely to be almost \$1 billion.

The challenges that Gates and U.S. military leaders say they now must anticipate include not just threats from other nations and battling terrorism, but pandemic diseases, piracy, human trafficking and rising oceans.

But defense budget experts and some members of Congress take a more jaundiced view. They say insisting that the U.S. fund a military poised to address every possible threat not only thwarts efforts to control the deficit, but makes it difficult to set defense priorities.

"The strategy doesn't drive the budget. It's the other way around," said Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. "What you have is an existing force structure, and then Washington trying to figure out how to use it."

In his annual guidance this year to U.S. troops on what he thinks should be the Pentagon's priorities, Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, named Afghanistan, China, Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan as areas the U.S. must focus on.

Mullen also called for focusing on cyberwarfare and the health of the military force as well.

The Pentagon's quadrennial defense review last year called for U.S. forces to be prepared for a range of warfare "from homeland defense and defense support to civil authorities, to deterrence and preparedness missions."

It called climate change "an accelerant of instability," the first time the military has linked the environment to U.S. security.

On piracy and human trafficking, the review found that the U.S. must invest more in "regional maritime security ... in order to protect vital sea lines of communication."

All that will require 3 percent more money next year, Gates has said, not including spending on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Such a boost would mark the 14th year in a row that Pentagon spending has increased.

Even adjusted for inflation, the Pentagon budget has risen 65 percent over the past decade.

Gates has proposed modest trims that total about \$78 billion over five years. The Pentagon budget would still go up during that time.

"It's hard to say [Washington] made tough choices," said Lawrence Korb, a budget expert at the Center for American Progress.

Former Sen. Alan Simpson, a Wyoming Republican who was co-chairman of the bipartisan Deficit Reduction Commission that proposed cutting defense by \$282 billion over five years, called Gates' trims "crappy little cuts."

"You have to do something significant," Simpson said, calling the rising national deficit "absolute madness."