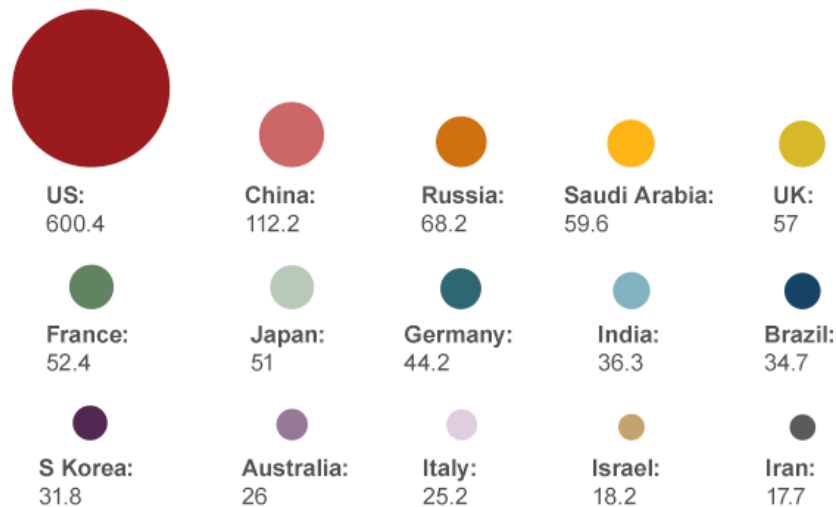




Right-Sizing The Military

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Top 15 defence budgets 2013 (US\$bn)



Source: IISS

Chuck Hagel's 2015 budget would reduce the number of Army soldiers to the lowest level since before the World War II mobilization:

The budget also targets personnel costs, with cuts to soldiers' housing allowances and commissary subsidies, as well as potential increases in health-care fees for the family of active service members. Hagel also proposed a one-percent pay raise in 2015, though pay for flag officers and generals would be frozen at current levels.

Those cuts take a small swipe at what's known as "brass creep"—the swelling ranks of generals and admirals who earn high salaries and retire with cushy pensions. Congress approved multiple raises during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, but a look at base pay rates (what soldiers earn before add-ons like housing allowances and combat pay) shows that the wartime wages didn't trickle down the chain of command.

Derek Mead explains why the Pentagon is cutting personnel:

The main reasoning behind the personnel cuts, according to the Defense Department, is that the US does not need to maintain a force capable of large-scale land occupation when the war in Afghanistan is drawing to a close. Instead, the military is increasing its focus on special operations and cyberwar—and increasing its use of robots.

The growth of war bots has been noted for years now, thanks to revelations about the drone war and key reports like Peter Singer's 2010 "War Machines" story for *Scientific American*. Since then, we've seen the military head further into its cyberpunk phase, with autonomous killer robots now going through testing, which the UN has cautioned against. But in the near term, the reality for the military means higher tech soldiers in fewer numbers; whether they are firing smart rifles or flying drones, a high-tech, automated army can be less costly if utilized effectively.

But Christopher Preble argues that the cuts don't go far enough:

The Pentagon apparently still intends to retain 11 aircraft carriers, possibly cutting into modernization of the Navy's surface combatant ships. As had been reported earlier, the venerable A-10 attack aircraft is going away, but the Pentagon remains committed to the troubled F-35. The early details don't address the possible modernization of the nuclear triad, which is sure to compete with other Air Force and Navy priorities. If the Pentagon isn't serious about confronting those tradeoffs, the resulting infighting could get ugly.

David Edelstein suggests that Hagel may be "tying hands" – preventing the US from engaging in more foreign entanglements. But Millman doubts a smaller army will rein in the interventionists:

The proposed changes in forces structure do not imply a shift non-interventionism. They will make it even more difficult to contemplate long-term, large-scale occupations, but such would have been difficult to contemplate even at a 500,000-person Army. That still leaves very much open the use of force in more "discrete" ways – drones, Special Forces, etc. – that have been the hallmark of the Obama Administration since the beginning of the drawdown in Afghanistan. We should also remember that fighter jock Donald Rumsfeld also advocated a lean and mean Army, and planned the Iraq War precisely as a demonstration of how much we could achieve without deploying an occupation-scale force. We all know how that turned out, but while some learned the lesson, "don't do that again," others learned the lesson, "we need to learn how to do that better before we do that again."

Allahpundit imagines what kind of hay the Republican presidential candidates will make of this:

Rubio, a hawk in the McCain mold, will rip Obama for retreating — but candidates like Walker and Christie will try to walk a line between hawks and doves. So will Paul, actually: His big liability potentially is being seen as Ron Jr. on foreign policy so he may feel obliged to balance his praise for the “smaller, leaner military” approach with criticism of Obama for not beefing up certain areas. And what about Cruz? In a sense he has the opposite problem of Paul, wanting to attack Obama for weakening America but needing to find some merit in cuts to the budget.

Kori Schake is pleased that the Pentagon is learning to live within its means:

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel deserves considerable credit for owning up to the fiscal reality that defense spending will no longer have galloping rates of increase. Specifically, he deserves credit for bringing the department’s budget into compliance with the law. An obvious point, one would think, is that the budget request ought to be in line with the Defense Department spending cap legislated in the 2011 Budget Control Act. Not something we loyal opposition should applaud, since it ought to be standard practice. Yet this is the first budget that acknowledges Congress has given federal spending guidelines that must be followed. The budgets submitted by Barack Obama’s administration were in excess of the top line.

Larison pushes back on the headline, seized on by the right, that the budget reduces the Army to pre-WWII levels:

Critics of any reduction in the size of the military or the military budget are always going to seize on such misleading comparisons to make reductions appear to be much more significant, so it’s important not to blow them out of proportion or make them out to be something more than they are. Before and during the 2012 campaign, Republican hawks repeatedly claimed that the Navy was being shrunk to WWI-era levels, which was true provided that you paid no attention to the quality of the ships, the vast technological differences between the two periods, and the relative strength of other naval forces. Likewise, references to having the “smallest Army since 1940” conveniently ignore that the U.S. will still have more men under arms than any country in the world except for the two most populous countries, and will still be far and away the leading military power in the world.

Peter Weber does the math:

Here’s another way of looking at Hagel’s budget: In 1940, U.S. defense spending was \$1.7 billion, or 1.3 percent of GDP; in 2011, it was \$705.6 billion, or 4.7 percent of GDP. Hagel’s budget proposes lowering defense spending to \$496 billion — the cap in last December’s bipartisan budget deal, or about 2.7 percent of GDP. America would still be spending more than twice as much on defense as it did in 1940, as a percentage of GDP.

Conor weighs in:

Circa 1940, the U.S. had a grand total of zero nuclear weapons. Today the U.S. has 5,113 nuclear warheads. An already dated Wired article noted in 2011 that the U.S. had 7,494 drones, including 161 Predators, which are used for targeted killing. The U.S. also has ten aircraft carriers. How many carriers does our closest military rival have?

One.

(Chart from the BBC.)