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Obama's defense cuts are a drop in the bucket

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Washington --

President [Obama's](#) defense budget, released Monday, is more than meets the eye - as high as \$1 trillion if all national security spending is included, analysts said.

A president who ran as an antiwar candidate in 2008, at least relative to his opponent, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., Obama is only now, for 2013, proposing his first cuts to the base Pentagon budget, which excludes most war spending.

The cuts total \$6 billion, about a 1 percent nick in the \$525 billion Pentagon budget. Most savings come from the planned drawdown of troops in Afghanistan, where costs are projected to fall from \$115 billion this year to \$88 billion next year. California, which receives 10 percent, or nearly \$57 billion, of the annual defense money, is unlikely to see significant cuts.

The budget does not address the \$500 billion, 10-year automatic cut that is supposed to occur as a result of the failure of last year's "supercommittee" deficit reduction talks.

The budget does include force reductions of 103,000 personnel - mainly in the Army, from 570,000 to 490,000 active service troops, and the Marine Corps, from 202,000 to 182,000 - that Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced last month. Still, these reduce troops to their 2005 level, significantly higher than the number of troops at the start of the Iraq war in 2002.

Weapons systems survive

At the same time, the budget avoids eliminating the most controversial weapons systems, only delaying by a year the purchase of the F-35 fighter plane, the most expensive military procurement ever, projected to cost \$323 billion over its lifetime for 2,443 aircraft.

The administration asked Congress to consider a new round of base closings, postponing decisions on whether to close any domestic bases. The budget maintains all three legs of the nuclear triad of strategic bombers, Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles and submarine-launched missiles.

Many Pentagon critics are disappointed in Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, the Californian who, first as budget chief and then chief of staff to President Clinton, presided over a major drawdown in military spending after the Cold War.

"Panetta did not prepare for what has been in the books for a couple years now, which is the party's over, money's coming down, we're still about \$50 billion over what we spent on average during the Cold War," said Winslow Wheeler, director of the Straus Military Reform Project of the Center for Defense Information in Washington. "It would be reasonable to get back down to that level, and he's not planning for that."

Wheeler said total national security spending includes an enormous security apparatus in the Department of Homeland Security, nuclear weapons spending in the Department of Energy, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and security spending buried in such areas as the State Department.

Wheeler, who has worked for both Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill, said if such spending is included, the national security budget might surpass \$1 trillion.

'Base budget' still growing

While the Pentagon claims nearly half a trillion dollars in cuts over the next decade, those are so-called "baseline budgeting," which counts anything less than previous growth projections as a cut. The Pentagon projects a 1.6 percent reduction in its base budget over the next four years and concedes that over the next decade, "the base budget will grow modestly."

"That ignores that the budget has grown dramatically over the last 15 years," said Christopher Preble, head of defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington. Since 1999, by Cato's calculations, the nonwar defense budget has roughly doubled.

"Do we need to spend as much as we did during the Cold War or fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?" Preble said. "I think the answer is clearly no."

Preble gave the administration credit for a strategic shift that would avoid overseas nation-building as a way to counter terrorism. The budget also calls for about a 10 percent reduction in the 80,000 U.S. troops stationed in Europe, part of the Pentagon's "strategic pivot" toward the Pacific.

But actual base closures in Europe are "a long way away," he said. "We still don't know which ones will be reduced or how fast."

Carl Conetta, co-director of the Project on Defense Alternatives, which favors a smaller military, said the Pentagon plan would spend \$5.65 trillion over the next decade, down slightly from last year's projection of \$6.41 trillion.

According to Conetta's calculations, adjusted for inflation, the \$525 billion base Obama military budget, not including war costs, is slightly below peak military spending under former President George W. Bush, which was \$556 billion, and just below the Cold War high in 1985, during the Reagan military build-up, of \$592 billion.

It is well above the Cold War average of \$443 billion and the Cold War low of \$171 billion, when adjusted for inflation, and far higher than the post-Cold War low of \$383 billion during the Clinton administration.

Facing facts

While Republican presidential candidates, with the exception of Rep. Ron Paul, R-Tex., are campaigning this year on a bigger defense budget, Wheeler said chronic federal deficits in the \$1 trillion range annually mean that won't be feasible.

"The money's not going to be there, and even if a Republican is elected, he will have to deal with that," Wheeler said. "That means less money for the Defense Department, notwithstanding every bit of rhetoric for more that we're going to hear for the next eight months."

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This article appeared on page **A - 6** of the San Francisco Chronicle