



Navy paints dire picture of weakened US fleet

By Dianna Cahn February 17 2013

Choppy water for ship repair workers over budget crisis

Navy officials: cuts could degrade fleet, forces, safety

Fighting breaks out in Liberia. Gunfire and explosions erupt on city streets, and marauders soon turn their fury on Westerners.

An SOS goes out that civilians are in peril.

But the Navy has scaled back its deployments off the African coast. It has no amphibious assault ship, carrying helicopters, landing craft and Marines, nearby.

The global security blanket afforded by the world's best-trained and best-funded military is gone, done in by budget cuts.

The Americans aren't coming.

This is not some imagined distant future. It's a description of next year's Navy by its top officer, Adm. Jonathan Greenert, portraying what will happen if Congress allows looming budget cuts to crash down on the fleet next month.

The reductions dictated by these cuts are drastic. Aircraft carriers will sit pierside and in dry dock because they can't get serviced. Planes, hospital ships, rescue teams and drug interceptors will be grounded, with training hours drastically cut. Civilian furloughs and canceled industrial contracts will sucker-punch the local economy, and work to modernize or expand the fleet will be shelved until lawmakers can overcome their differences on how to balance the budget after more than a decade of war.

As the congressional stalemate smolders, defense leaders warn of dire consequences: a Navy stripped of readiness and unable to meet global challenges, and one that will erode - more quickly than people realize - into a far less capable or visible guardian of U.S. interests around the world.

"If there's a humanitarian disaster some place, the Navy may not be there because we are... in higher priority areas," said Adm. Bill Gortney, head of the service's Fleet Forces Command in Norfolk.

The Navy will no longer be able to send ships to South and Central America and the Caribbean, where it intercepted hundreds of tons of illegal drugs coming into the United States last year, Greenert, the Chief of Naval Operations, told the House Armed Services Committee last week. It won't be able to fully support counterterrorism operations in Yemen and Somalia. And despite the Navy's "pivot to the Pacific," deployments to Asia will drop by two-thirds.

"So we're not there when it matters, and we're not ready when it matters," Greenert said.

Defense officials recognize that the drawdown from Afghanistan will mean a time of declining support for defense spending. That has happened after every U.S. war, and many experts say it has always been painful and messy, leading to a hollowing of forces after Vietnam and again after the Cold War.

But a broad spread of global threats is causing alarm - the Arab Spring, al-Qaida in Africa, Iran and North Korea developing nuclear weapons, China's growing military might - and defense officials caution against budget cuts dictating a de facto defense strategy rather than having a comprehensive national defense policy that governs how cuts are best made.

"There is no question we must get our nation's fiscal house in order, but we should do so in a thoughtful, coherent manner," Greenert wrote last week in a statement for the Senate Armed Services Committee. "Unless we change course, we will, without proper deliberation, dramatically reduce our overseas presence, our ability to respond to crises, our efforts to counter terrorism and illicit trafficking and our material readiness across the Navy."

Until this month, such warnings were theoretical. But they took concrete form Feb. 6 when the Navy canceled the deployment of the Norfolk-based Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf, two days before it was set to leave.

Navy leaders asked the Pentagon to downgrade its policy of having two carriers in the Gulf to keeping one there, in order to stretch out the fleet's readiness.

It was more than a significant cut; it was a strategic shift dictated by cost-cutting that demonstrates the impact not just on U.S. military capabilities, but on its defense policies around the world.

Outgoing Defense Secretary Leon Panetta raised another example when he said that automatic cuts would curtail as much as one-third of western Pacific naval operations, upsetting a strategy adopted by the administration last year to address the rise in Chinese military power.

"This whole idea about trying to rebalance will be impacted," he said.

Sequestration, Panetta said, is like the sheriff in the 1970s movie "Blazing Saddles" putting a gun to his own head to try to establish law and order.

"It puts at risk our fundamental mission of protecting the American people," he said. "This is no way to govern the United States of America."

The question, said retired Adm. John Harvey, shouldn't be what to cut from the defense budget, but rather what the national defense strategy should look like under a smaller budget. That's a discussion that is taking place internally but needs to be conducted publicly for the country to consider, he said.

"My concern is we haven't had this conversation yet," said Harvey, who retired last fall after heading Fleet Forces Command. "We got caught up in 10 years in Iraq and Afghanistan and we did whatever it took. That coincided with a brewing national fiscal storm and a deeply partisan political situation. We missed the whole discussion of, 'What is this about? What does the country want in its foreign policy and what are we willing to pay to achieve it?' "

Even during last year's presidential campaign, when President Barack Obama and Republican nominee Mitt Romney traded barbs over the size of the Navy during their final debate, they never delved into the issues, Harvey said.

"It became an exchange of talking points that missed, in my view, the point of the discussion," he said. "What's the point of the Navy? What do you want to be a part of?"

A document that could help direct the conversation is a prescient 2010 report that the Navy commissioned from the Center for Naval Analyses, looking at the mission and capabilities of a smaller, cheaper Navy in the post-war drawdown from Afghanistan, Harvey said. The paper explored five scenarios for shrinking the Navy while maintaining an overall strategy for naval global influence.

It concluded that four of the options - all requiring some compromise from the Navy's mission of being forward-deployed and combat-ready around the world - had merit, while the fifth would simply hollow out and substantially weaken the Navy by trying to keep up with overseas deployments and meet current mission requirements with a smaller stream of resources.

"The worst-case option is you just simply shrink, without an overall direction," Harvey said. "It's the worst case and also the most likely outcome, sadly, given the state of the political gridlock we are in today."

The budget cuts aren't without support. Some say that federal defense spending has grown so bloated in the past decade that the cuts are simply trimming off fat, bringing America's military sector to a reasonable size. Bipartisan commissions have endorsed cuts that Pentagon officials claim will significantly weaken U.S. standing in the world, leaving some room for skeptics.

In a Reason-Rupe poll released Jan. 30, more Americans pointed to defense spending than anywhere else in the federal budget when asked where Washington spends too much.

The poll, which questioned 1,000 people, also found that 61 percent supported cutting military spending back to the level before the Iraq and Afghanistan wars began.

Jan van Tol, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, said the Defense Department spent billions on controversial programs such as the Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carrier, which might cost \$14 billion, and the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, which is still being tested after exorbitant research and development costs.

"People ask themselves: 'Look at these gobs of money being wasted on things we don't need,' " Van Tol said. "What we are concerned with is operations and combat readiness. And it is this other stuff that makes people think: 'Jeez, we give a lot of money to defense, and jeez, a lot of it gets wasted.' "

Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, said he and other libertarians have been calling for years for the United States to shed its role as savior of the world.

"As powerful as we are, the U.S. can't be on the hook everywhere," Preble said. "It's incumbent upon American policymakers to say, 'This is the deal. We are proud of the contributions we made to global security but we can't do that for another 60 years.' Ultimately it will be better for other countries to step up and participate in some of their work."

That thinking is now being embraced by military leaders who are starting to accept that they just won't have enough to go around.

"Many nations in the world invest in the security of the world," Gortney said in an interview at his Fleet Forces Command office at Norfolk Naval Station.

"And there are other nations that, quite frankly, are getting a free ride.... And we are going to be doing a lot less. That's the fiscal reality of it."

However, some warn that the threats posed by a militarizing China and a nuclear Iran or North Korea make the world more dangerous than ever. A more aggressive China, said Paul J. Smith, professor of national security affairs at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I., is now a primary concern for U.S. foreign policy.

"This is not the time to be signaling U.S. retrenchment and weakness abroad, which is what I fear the sequestration budget cuts do," Smith said via email. "It will telegraph a message of weakness in the region, and to our allies."

In public, at least, defense officials are not outlining how they would make responsible cuts, given the leeway to do so. But some experts have laid out options:

One suggests that cutting force and fleet sizes while forgoing large-scale purchases such as the F-35 and new submarines would allow the Navy to shrink its budget without shrinking its mission.

Other proposals step into long-untouchable territory, suggesting cuts to salary and benefits or deep reforms in the Pentagon administration that would include trimming the military's health care package.

A determined Gortney sat in his office last week, struggling to match up the fiscal numbers with the global mission with which he's been tasked. When he couldn't make those numbers work, he went back to his bosses, he said.

The guidance he received was to focus on "defending the nation for the war fight" and stay forward-deployed as much as funding will allow.

The delay in the Truman's deployment and the reduction to a single carrier in the Persian Gulf mean he can ensure a ready carrier to deploy to the region until sometime in 2014, Gortney said. But with the budget squeeze cutting so deeply into his maintenance and training schedule, he said, his fleet will be limited.

"We are just not going to do it in so many places," Gortney said.

Adding to his challenges, Gortney said he's also tasked with maintaining the long-term health of the force to keep it ready through 2020.

"Eighty percent of the Navy, we own today," he said. "In a large measure, the readiness of the Navy in 2020 is our focus today."

Asked how he can do that when he doesn't know what will happen next year, Gortney declared:

"I don't know what I am doing tomorrow."