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Why \$46 Billion in Pentagon Cuts Shouldn't Make Us Less Safe

Conor Friedersdorf February 22 2013

With \$46 billion in cuts to the 2013 Pentagon budget scheduled to take effect at the end of the month, "the U.S. military's service leaders have begun painting a stark picture of the toll a congressionally mandated budget cut could take on the readiness of the world's largest armed forces." That's a quote from the Washington Post, but it could've as easily come from any number of different news outlets. Dire predictions are everywhere. Pentagon officials warned, via Reuters, that the cuts would "erode the nation's ability to go to war," while PBS spoke to Deputy Defense Secretary Ash Carter, who said that "by the end of the year, two-thirds of our active duty Army units and our reserve units will not be ready to fight other wars. Many of our Air Force units will not be ready to fight other wars. A third of our Navy, our ships in the Pacific, will not be at sea."

They're so good at making cuts to their budget seem scary. Is "the sequester" really going to put American national security in jeopardy? News consumers almost never encounter quotes from Pentagon officials juxtaposed with the context that would help them make independent judgments.

Seeing the scale of the Pentagon budget and how it's changed over time is a good place to begin. Here's a handy chart from the Cato Institute:

As you can see, if the cuts occur, the Pentagon will still end up spending more this year than it did for most of the last 40 years, including the final decades of the Cold War. That doesn't seem so scary.

Here's a chart produced by Bloomberg that shows how U.S. defense spending compares to our biggest-spending rivals:

The chart speaks for itself. If the planned cuts to the Pentagon are implemented, the U.S. will still spend in excess of \$500 billion more than its closest rival, China; put another way, America could match the Chinese military and then fund more than seven iterations of the Russian army.

The Washington Post's story on possible Pentagon cuts contained this noteworthy paragraph: "Facing a \$8.6 billion shortfall, the Navy has delayed the deployment of the USS Harry Truman, leaving just one aircraft carrier instead of two in the Persian Gulf, where tensions continue with Iran. The budget crunch also will mean delays for repairs of a carrier and the construction of another."

Phrased that way, it sounds frightening, doesn't it? "Just one aircraft carrier" in the Persian Gulf! But what if, as added context, the Post had included this great graphic on carriers from GlobalSecurity.org:

In other words, the number of aircraft carriers America will have in the Persian Gulf, on the other side of planet Earth from our location, is the same number of total aircraft carriers possessed by most nations who have one at all. Given that disparity, why would the Post omit any comparisons, append the modifier "just," and include tension with Iran as the only context?

Cuts to the Pentagon will ripple through a tough economy, and because so many people in the upper echelons of the military-industrial complex are corrupt, the volunteers who fight on our behalf are likely to experience more pain from cuts than would be necessary absent the decadence. But if \$46 billion in cuts is enough to jeopardize national security, despite America's geographic advantages and the vast amount we spend on the military compared to all rivals combined, our national security establishment is inept and needs to be gutted from top to bottom.