

THINK PROGRESS

Are We Actually Cutting Defense Spending?

By [Matthew Yglesias](#) on Sep 21, 2011 at 11:31 am



There's been a lot of talk of defense cuts over the past year of budget negotiations, but Benjamin Friedman and Caitlin Talmage write that we should be skeptical that any of this will materialize.

I would say skepticism is warranted. Not so much as a consequence of wonky budget process considerations, but as a result of strategy considerations. If you think about, say, Denmark there's probably some level of concern there that al-Shabab will take over Somalia and create a congenial atmosphere for Islamist radicalism. Then there's some secondary concern that some of this radicalism might lead to efforts to infiltrate Denmark and launch terrorist attacks in Copenhagen. The proposed remedies for this, however, are going to be general considerations about physical security in Denmark. The country needs effective policing and border security agencies, and it needs to be resilient in the face of the possibility that a bomb may go off somewhere someday without wrecking the country.

America's policy response [is quite different](#):

One of the installations is being established in Ethiopia, a U.S. ally in the fight against al-Shabab, the Somali militant group that controls much of that country. Another base is in the Seychelles, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean, where a small

fleet of “hunter-killer” drones resumed operations this month after an experimental mission demonstrated that the unmanned aircraft could effectively patrol Somalia from there.

The U.S. military also has flown drones over Somalia and Yemen from bases in Djibouti, a tiny African nation at the junction of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. In addition, **the CIA is building a secret airstrip in the Arabian Peninsula so it can deploy armed drones over Yemen.**

The reporters say the “rapid expansion” of these military efforts “is a reflection of the growing alarm with which U.S. officials view the activities of al-Qaeda affiliates in Yemen and Somalia.” No doubt it is that. But it’s also a reflection of a very grandiose conception of the appropriate role of the American military in the world. After all, a radical who’s in Yemen or Somalia is, by definition, not in the United States. It would be cheaper and easier to focus on making sure people can’t get from Yemen to Yuma or from Somalia to Sacramento than for us to go halfway around to try to kill them. But America’s strategic concept is basically that if there’s a problem anywhere in the world that could potentially be ameliorated by dropping American bombs, then we ought to drop the bombs. That strategy *requires* an extremely high level of defense expenditures. Bombs, planes, bases, “secret” airstrips, etc. are all expensive. To reduce military spending, we would need to adopt a more restrained view of the role of the American military. That hasn’t happened.