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At Think Tanks, Meeting of Minds on Defense Cuts

By: Dion Nissenbaum – May 29, 2013

Defense experts from across the political spectrum are joining forces to call on Congress to tackle some of the most politically charged Pentagon spending choices and avoid cuts that could undermine America's national security.

More than two dozen military analysts from 10 major think tanks are planning to release a joint letter on Monday urging politicians to close military bases, overhaul the military's generous health-care program and cut the size of the Pentagon civilian workforce.

Signatories include analysts from the Libertarian Cato Institute, the conservative American Enterprise Institute, and the left-leaning Center for American Progress.

"All agree on three basic reforms," said Todd Harrison, a defense specialist at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments who has been spearheading the unified campaign.

Of the three proposals, cutting the Defense Department's civilian workforce – which has risen to nearly 800,000 – may be the most politically palatable.

But lawmakers already are challenging a Pentagon proposal to set up a new base closure commission. And politicians have largely rejected past Defense Department efforts to raise fees to pay for the military's health-care benefits.

But the groups argue that Washington has to confront these specific issues if it hopes to protect other essential military spending priorities, such as advances in cyber warfare, development of new drone technology, and preservation of the nation's nuclear arsenal.

Later this week, senior Defense Department officials are expected to provide Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel with the results of a special strategic review meant to offer the Pentagon a series of budget cutting alternatives.

On Wednesday, four of Washington's leading think tanks presented their own suggestions on how the Pentagon should deal with plans to cut projected defense spending by \$500 billion over the next 10 years.

While the groups provided different approaches, they all agreed on several key issues. All four groups called for reducing the Pentagon civilian workforce by at least 82,000. All urged the military to close bases.

The groups also all called on the military to make significant cuts in the size of the Army and to trim the number of aircraft carriers in the Navy.

Mr. Harrison's group, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, called for the Pentagon to reduce its overall workforce by 18 percent and to increase its dependence on drones and cyber weapons.

The Center for a New American Security, a think tank with longstanding ties to the Obama administration, also called for a smaller military that relies more heavily on drones and cyber weapons.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies, a bipartisan think tank led by a former Clinton administration defense official, said the U.S. military should stop providing worldwide security and serve more as a "stick" in U.S. diplomacy.

AEI offered the most gloomy assessment by warning that American security would suffer from deep defense cuts that forced the military to reduce its presence around the world.