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The US should cut military spending in half

Defense Secretary Gates's military budget cuts are too conservative.

By Benjamin H. Friedman

WASHINGTON

Hawks depicted the cuts that Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently proposed for the Pentagon's weapons programs as a savage assault on the military industrial complex. They insisted that Secretary Gates would leave us prostrate before future rivals.

Counterinsurgency enthusiasts, meanwhile cheered Mr. Gates's willingness to swap high-tech platforms for capabilities suited to the unconventional conflicts we are fighting.

The truth is that the Gates proposal is both too cautious and inadequate. After all, Gates isn't cutting non-war-related military spending; he's raising it slightly, to a whopping \$534 billion.

If he has his druthers, the next military budget will look much like this one: It will still serve excessive objectives. We will still defend allies that can defend themselves, fight in other people's civil wars in a vain effort to "fix" their states, and burn tax dollars to serve the hubristic notion that US military hegemony is what keeps the world safe.

To really keep us safe, we should slash defense spending. Americans should prepare for fewer wars, not different ones. Far from providing our defense, our military posture endangers us. It drags us into others' conflicts, provokes animosity, and wastes resources. We need a defense budget worthy of the name. We need military restraint. And that would allow us to cut defense spending roughly in half.

Two points demonstrate how unambitious the Gates proposal is.

First, he would just replace most canceled programs. Gates suggested ending production of the Air Force's premier fighter, the F-22. But he wants to accelerate the Joint Strike Fighter program and to buy more F-18s. He would delay the Navy's procurement of cruisers and its next carrier, but only slightly. He would end the Navy's DDG-1000 destroyer program, but buy more of the Navy's older Arleigh Burke class destroyer, and keep buying the Navy's littoral combat ship.

He proposes breaking up the Army's modernization program, the Future Combat Systems, and canceling some of the vehicles – but they will be replaced with others. All told, spending on a national missile defense program would be cut by only about 15 percent.

Second, the military's size will barely budge under this plan. Yes, the Army would grow to only 45 brigade combat teams rather than 48, as was planned. But the people who were to fill out the 48 would be stuffed into 45 – the units will have higher readiness. The Navy is likely to shrink to 10 carrier battle groups instead of 11, but the decline will take decades. The Air Force will shrink only slightly. Gates wants to halt personnel reductions in the Air Force and Navy and continue to expand the Army and Marines by 90,000 servicemen.

To understand why that is conservative, consider how much we spend on defense relative to both our purported rivals and our past. Our defense budget is almost half the world's, even leaving out nuclear weapons, the wars, veterans, and homeland security. It is also more than we spent at any point during the cold war. When that struggle ended, we simply gave back the Reagan buildup and kept spending at average cold war levels. Then we began another buildup in 1998 that nearly doubled nonwar defense spending.

There are no enemies to justify such spending. Invasion and civil war are unthinkable here. North Korea, Syria, and Iran trouble their citizens and neighbors, but with small economies, shoddy militaries, and a desire to survive, they pose little threat to us. Their combined military spending is one-sixtieth of ours.

Russia and China are incapable of territorial expansion that should pose any worry, unless we put our troops on their borders. China's defense spending is less than one-fifth of ours. We spend more researching and developing new weapons than Russia spends on its military. And with an economy larger than ours, the European Union can protect itself. Our biggest security problem, terrorism, is chiefly an intelligence problem arising from a Muslim civil war. Our military has little to do with it.

We should embrace this geopolitical fortune, not look for trouble. If we decided to avoid Iraq-style occupations and fight only to defend ourselves or important allies, we could cut our ground forces in half.

If we admitted that we are not going to fight a war with China anytime soon, we could retire chunks of the Air Force and Navy that are justified by that mission. Even with a far smaller defense budget, ours will remain the world's most powerful military by a large margin. The recently enacted GI Bill, which gives veterans a subsidized or free college education, offers a vehicle for transitioning military personnel into the civilian economy.

Of course, powerful interests benefit from heavy defense spending, and cutting the military budget would be a tough sell. Both political parties believe that American primacy is the route to safety. But they're wrong.

A more restrained approach to defense is what would make us safer.

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