



Defense spending may depend on internal GOP debate

By: Andrew Tilghman – October 1st, 2012

The future trajectory of military spending may hinge on a battle within the Republican Party as longtime "defense hawks" who support big Pentagon budgets are at odds with tea party-inspired conservatives who denounce taxes and federal spending across the board, GOP officials and political experts say.

The tension among Republicans has been mounting for several years as the tea party movement has gained influence, and now

the battle is coming to a head as the threat of massive automatic cuts to the defense budget loom under the mechanism known as sequestration.

"Defense spending has become an internal debate inside the Republican Party. Are we going to pay more taxes to maintain high defense spending, or does defense spending have to come down so we don't have to raise taxes?" said Mieke Eoyang, director of the national security program at Third Way, a centrist think tank in Washington.

The schism was on display in August at the Republican National Convention when Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., a star in the tea party movement, told the crowd that Republicans "must acknowledge that not every dollar spent on the military is necessary or well-spent."

GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney has largely sidestepped the battle brewing inside his party by vowing a significant increase in defense spending - more troops, more Navy ships, more missile defense - without offering details on the trade-offs he might make to maintain a balanced budget.

Low taxes a priority

The GOP's tea party faction does not overtly advocate cutting the Pentagon budget. But unlike many traditional Republicans who view national defense as a top priority, tea party-inspired groups are willing put defense dollars on the negotiating table.

"Of course we have to look at the military in terms of how they are using their resources and where those resources are going," said Bob Adams, the Washington liaison for theteaparty.net, a political advocacy group that raises money for tea party events and candidates.

While Adams said many tea party supporters may oppose the specific defense cuts that would happen under sequestration, they would fight any compromise that includes raising taxes.

"We believe that in a time when we are facing the worst recession, the worst economy since the Great Depression, we don't want to be raising taxes on anyone - period. That is not even a choice," Adams said in a recent interview.

Democrats have avoided the debate over defense spending to some degree by mostly agreeing with the Pentagon and the limited spending cuts initiated by former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, a Republican, and publicly supported by the top brass.

"You see the reduction in defense spending coming out of the Pentagon itself, and that changes the dynamic a lot," Eoyang said.

The political landscape has shifted since the 2010 midterm elections gave Republicans control of the House and swept into power many freshmen with tea party support and campaign promises to shrink the deficit. Since then, overall military spending has contracted as troops left Iraq and the Pentagon's base budget flattened out.

"The high point in defense spending was in 2010 - when you had Obama in the White House and Democrats in control of Congress," said Todd Harrison, a defense budget expert with the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in Washington. "It's not what people think when it comes to defense spending and who is doing the cutting."

'Stand up and be counted'

Democrats on Capitol Hill have essentially signaled a willingness to scrap the far-reaching budget cuts that would take effect under sequestration in exchange for a tax hike on upper-level incomes and an implicit agreement to continue running large deficits.

But among Republicans, the tea party's fierce opposition to taxes and government spending is forcing their party to make hard choices.

"It's kind of a 'stand-up-and-be-counted' moment for a lot of Republicans," said Christopher Preble, a defense expert with the Cato Institute in Washington, referring to the January deadline when sequestration's automatic cuts would take effect.

"Before, there wasn't much concern over the deficit, but now they are starting to have to make a choice between, 'Do I want to

preserve my Social Security?' and 'Do I want to spend more on the military?'"

The internal feud is creating some anxiety among individual Republicans trying to straddle the two camps.

"There is some disagreement within the Republican Party," acknowledged freshman Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Ill., an Iraq veteran and a major in the Air National Guard.

That could be summarized as "people who believe in a very robust national defense" and "people who say we need to cut everywhere," he said.

Kinzinger drew attention last year when he successfully fought an Air Force request to spend \$100 million on new flight suits. Budget cutters hailed his courage in standing up to the Pentagon.

But Kinzinger also recalls some heartburn in April when the House's Republican majority approved a 2013 federal budget that included reductions to the Pentagon's planned spending.

"Voting for the last budget that had some defense cuts was not an easy thing for me to do," he said.

The defense cuts under sequestration are written into law, the result of an unusual bipartisan deal struck in August 2011. For months, many defense experts assumed Congress would act to change the law, but in the current political landscape, defense experts are bracing for the worst.

Sequestration "might actually happen," said Richard Aboulafia, a defense analyst with the Teal Group in Virginia. "I think the tea party is intrigued by it as a way to starve government. And Democrats are happy to show off the Republicans being defense wimps. It's fascinating."