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What Price Defense?

William D. Hartung | June 28, 2010

There's no question that President Obama's new National Security Strategy, released late last month, is an improvement over the "shoot first, ask questions later" approach favored by the Bush/Cheney administration. But it is not different enough.

On the positive side of the ledger, the Obama administration's strategy document pledges to increase funds for diplomacy and foreign assistance, and to favor strong alliances over go-it-alone approaches. It defines the spread of nuclear weapons as "the gravest danger" facing the United States, and reiterates the administration's pledge to seek a world free of nuclear weapons. And it acknowledges that some of the most urgent threats we face have nothing to do with terrorism.

What is missing from the Obama strategy is any sense of limits. While the mix of tools may be different, the overriding goal is the same: to be able to project military power anywhere in the world on short notice, and to be prepared to fight two or more wars simultaneously. Unless these commitments are scaled back, it will be virtually impossible to demilitarize US foreign policy and address nonmilitary threats like climate change and global poverty.

But even on this score there may be a ray of hope. The National Security Strategy asserts that US influence abroad is grounded in the strength of its domestic economy, and pledges to "grow our economy and reduce our deficit." Achieving either of these goals will require a rethinking of US global commitments.

In the short term, with unemployment hovering around 10 percent, it makes no sense to cut federal spending. But over the longer term, it will be necessary to take steps to reduce deficits from their current high levels. And that's where the Pentagon comes in.

Any serious effort to reduce federal deficits must start with substantial reductions in Pentagon spending. At around \$700 billion per year, military spending rivals Social Security as the largest item in the federal budget. It is at its highest levels since World War II and has increased steadily since 2001 - the longest period of sustained growth in military spending in the history of the United States.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has made some attempts to tame the Pentagon beast, but so far his efforts have fallen far short of what is needed. Last year he succeeded in eliminating major weapons programs such as the F-22 combat aircraft and the Airborne Laser (ABL), a Star Wars-style missile defense system.

Gates has been talking tough ever since, telling a crowd gathered in Abilene, Kansas (Dwight D. Eisenhower's hometown) that "the gusher has been turned off" on Pentagon spending. He has made some stark comparisons, noting, for example, that the United States spends almost as much on its military as the

entire rest of the world combined; and that the US Navy is larger than the next thirteen navies combined, eleven of which are possessed by US allies.

The logic of Gates's statements suggests that deep cuts in Pentagon spending are possible. But so far he has mostly moved money from one kind of weapons program to another.

Getting real reductions in military spending will require more than just cutting unneeded weapons programs and eliminating waste, fraud and abuse at the Pentagon. It will mean cutting back on the missions the military is expected to carry out. Obama's National Security Strategy seems to acknowledge this point when it speaks of "the danger of overextending our power." The administration now needs to take this rhetoric seriously by adopting a strategy of restraint that could free up hundreds of billions of dollars for other purposes.

This is where public pressure should come into play. If the deficit is to be reduced, it makes much more sense to cut Pentagon spending than it does to reduce investments in education, clean energy and mass transit. These other activities not only create more jobs but they address urgent national needs. The president and Congress need to hear this message loud and clear. So should the President's National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, which was appointed earlier this year to address long-term budgetary trends.

Toward this end, Representative Barney Frank has encouraged the creation of a Sustainable Defense Task Force composed of more than a dozen nongovernmental experts, including Carl Conetta and Charles Knight of the Project on Defense Alternatives; Lawrence Korb of the Center for American Progress; Benjamin Friedman and Christopher Preble of the Cato Institute; and Laura Peterson of Taxpayers for Common Sense; as well as yours truly (a full list of task force members is available at <http://www.comw.org/pda/fulltext/1006SDTFreport.pdf>) online).

The task force has developed a menu of options that, taken together, could reduce military spending by a total of \$960 billion over the next decade. These are substantial cuts, not just the slower growth levels advocated by Gates. And they can be achieved just by cutting the Pentagon's base budget, without even addressing the funds allocated for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among other recommendations, the task force calls for deep cuts in US nuclear forces, a 100,000 reduction of US troops deployed in Europe and Asia and a 20 percent cut in the number of ships in the Navy.

No longer should it be assumed that US forces should be able to go anywhere and fight any battle. For starters, we should eliminate some of the more than 650 overseas US military bases, and we should pull back some of our hundreds of thousands of troops stationed overseas--not only in Europe and Asia but in the Middle East as well. There should be no more Iraq-style wars of occupation, and no plans to undertake them. And the Obama administration should be held to its pledge to start removing US troops from Afghanistan in mid-2011, and preferably sooner. This should serve as a prelude to renouncing large-scale counterinsurgency wars--like the nearly decade-long Afghan conflict--as unnecessary and ineffective tools of US security.

Military spending cuts are a real possibility for the first time since the mid-1990s. Progressives should take advantage of this opportunity to push for lower Pentagon budgets and more sensible defense policies.

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