

U.S. National Defense in Perspective

by U.S. Senator John Tower

The striking aspect of this year's defense budget debate is that it has not centered on our national defense needs. For the most part, outside of the Department of Defense and congressional Armed Services Committees, the discussion has been couched in terms of overall budget considerations.

This approach has dangerous implications. National defense is, in fact, the primary responsibility of national government. It also is exclusively a federal function. No state or local government, no private enterprise, can take up the slack left by federal neglect.

Our national defense spending must be driven by the nature of the threat to our national interests in the world. This threat, from the Soviet Union and its surrogates, is growing.

My long experience as a member of the Armed Services Committee has led me to the conclusion that it would be a grave error to make significant reductions in the administration's defense budget.

Global Perspectives

There can be no question that the first point of departure should be an explanation of U.S. foreign policy objectives and our role in today's troubled world.

We have become, in a sense, an island nation heavily dependent on external sources for energy, vital metals and minerals, and on the international marketplace. Open sea lanes are essential to our economic health.

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The magnitude of U.S. interests in Europe, Asia, and the Western Hemisphere is represented by our participation in eight formal treaties involving national security commitments to forty-two countries.

The need to fulfill these commitments is driven by a clear perception of national interest. Our military presence overseas is a result of the prudent military axiom which tells us to defend our interests as close to the source of danger, and as far from our borders as possible. The basic objective of our overseas presence is the defense of North America.

Thus, through geographic circumstance and historical and evolutionary processes, our national interests have been determined, and our foreign policy commitments developed to support them.

These commitments, when combined with an analysis of potential threats, dictate our military requirements.

In recent years, the threats to our interests have increased, demanding the attention of the United States and its traditional allies to repairing unfavorable shifts in the military balance in Europe and in Asia. However, additional threats have arisen in areas not covered by the system of Western alliances, and in Latin America, where our strategic vulnerability must not be underestimated.

Against these military requirements, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have long recommended an "acceptable risk" force structure which would support our national security commitments. We are currently well below that recommendation. That is the basis for the judgment of our military leadership that U.S. forces are stretched too thin and that, in the event of serious crisis or conflict, the risks of an unfavorable outcome are too high.

There must be no illusion that a significant overall reduction in defense will not be noticed by our allies and adversaries, and will not be reflected in a reduction of our capability to wage and sustain combat. Such reductions *will* be noticed and will once again cast meaningful force improvements into the uncertain future with a concomitant increase in strategic risk. Members of Congress cannot separate themselves from the foreign policy consequences of defense budget reductions.

The Defense Budget in Perspective

In addition to reviewing the manner in which defense spending supports foreign policy commitments, we should also take a cold, hard look at the annual investment in defense as an element of our total economic effort.

This administration was elected on a policy platform which fully articulated its intent to moderate growth in spending for social programs and increase spending for defense. Though painful to some, this proposed change in priorities is being implemented in a manner much less dramatic than popularly believed.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, administration data indicate that the national defense function would increase from 6.1 percent of gross national product (GNP) in 1982 to 7.3 percent in 1986 and 1987. Over the 1983-1987 period, the administration's proposed outlays would average 6.9 percent of GNP. CBO notes that this is higher than the average for the preceding five years (1978-1982) during which the average defense share of GNP was 5.4 percent. It is lower, however, than the 10 percent average for several years following the Korean War.

CBO goes on to note:

"Relative to total federal unified budget outlays national defense outlays from 1978 to 1982 were about 25 percent — the lowest share since World War II. The administration's 1983 budget indicates that this share would increase to about 37 percent by 1987 — a level last reached in 1971. In the post-World War II period, national defense as a percent of unified budget outlays exceeded 37 percent each peacetime year from 1954 to 1970."

In my view, some reductions in entitlements may be necessary. However, my principal concern is some prominent coalition might

John Tower is a Republican senator from Texas and the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

agree to cut defense, with some hoping to reduce the deficit but others actually intending to add money to domestic programs, in which case the defense program would go down and the deficit would remain high — two unacceptable outcomes.

For these reasons, I believe we can safely set aside the argument that the federal budget is abnormally skewed in favor of defense. In historical context, President Reagan's budget still falls short of previous levels of defense spending. Given our greatly weakened defense posture, one might ask whether, in fact, the president is doing enough.

Maintaining the Defense Program

Another important measurement is the level of effort required to maintain the total defense program from year to year. Secretary Weinberger has stated, and CBO has confirmed, that 93 percent of annual defense outlays are already committed when the fiscal year begins. These outlays are composed of military and civilian payrolls, a minimum level of operations and training, and commitments from prior year programs. Thus, even by eliminating all new investment initiatives, the minimum operating cost of defense would be \$200.8 billion in FY 1983.

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Budget Options

There are numerous ways to address our options in assessing the allocation of defense dollars. Let me assess the realistic options for major defense cuts in terms of the program objectives and priorities which serve as the main pillars of defense spending: readiness, modernization and force structure.

Readiness

Readiness refers to the near-term ability of units to fulfill their assigned missions. It is based on the number and mix of personnel, and on the availability and condition of equipment. So called "readiness accounts" do not exist. Only balanced improvements contribute to solid readiness.

For example, some budget proposals will reduce or freeze military pay. Yet one of our most recent readiness problems has been related to personnel retention. I can guarantee that any backing off from our commitment to improve military compensation will have a negative effect on retention and personnel readiness.

Another area of concern is widespread equipment shortages in ground forces. A basic lack of equipment continues to be the Army's most fundamental readiness problem.

The message is simply this: don't expect to sustain, let alone improve the current readiness of our forces if you intend to generate "savings" in personnel compensation or procurement. Maintaining readiness is a multi-faceted problem, and higher operational and training tempos, which many equate with improved readiness, will actually degrade the readiness of our forces if those forces are undermanned and underequipped.

Modernization

The second option is to reduce modernization or investment.

Since the early 1970s, the Services have strived to implement a modernization program that would be responsive to the changing threat. By all accounts, these modernization plans were under-financed; and we have paid dearly in terms of money lost to inflation and inefficient rates of production, overlapping resource requirements, and reduced capabilities. Major modernization programs are now under way for strategic and ground forces; significant investment requirements for tactical aircraft remain; and an expanded shipbuilding program is planned.

This effort must be balanced. We should not make the mistake of trading systems and capabilities like baseball cards. An appropriate balance among strategic, land, sea, and air forces — and the infrastructure required to support them — is essential to maintain the flexibility required by our political leadership. Moreover, a balanced and sustained modernization effort translates into a warm industrial base which will provide a hedge against mobilization and force expansion scenarios.

Force Structure

In the face of significant budget reductions, the third option is to reduce force structure.

Because our force structure is not now large enough to support effectively our foreign policy commitments, my initial impulse is to reject such reductions. However, in committing ourselves to near-term readiness and to redressing inefficiencies in defense production and quantitative and qualitative deficiencies against the threat, there may be little alternative to reducing the overall size of our forces, should significant defense cuts occur.

Rather than make general reductions in personnel and O&M which are unrelated, the better management method is simply to reduce force structure. By taking force structure, we will ensure a balanced reduction in operations, training, logistical support, and civilian and military personnel.

I should emphasize that I do not favor these force structure reductions but will pursue them if budget pressures become too severe.

While some might charge that this is pure hyperbole, I would suggest they review the budget amendment of last October and the priorities set by Secretary Weinberger in March of 1981. The record will show that defense priorities consist of strategic force modernization, readiness, modernization, and force structure. Force structure growth is the last priority in the current five-year defense plan, and remains the last priority should significant reductions be imposed. When the Services made budget reductions last fall, all three took force structure. The Chiefs of Staff are united in their view that they would rather have a slightly smaller, fully manned and well-armed force structure than one which is, in effect, hollow.

Summary

So given the proposed balance between spending for defense and domestic programs, it is sheer hyperbole to couch the defense budget debate in terms of guns and butter. We have an economy which can produce both. Only a balanced, well-equipped, and ready national defense capability can provide the deterrent to aggression and the global stability upon which our security and our prosperity depend. We must not sacrifice, therefore, this essential capability for some momentary budgetary comfort. ■