

Shaky Assumptions about Military Spending

6 Reasons to Keep the Defense Budget Sequestration Cuts

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About Lawrence J. Korb: Lawrence J. Korb, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, served as assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration.

Unless Congress acts to repeal sequestration, the core defense budget (exclusive of war costs) for FY 2013 will be “only” \$472 billion, about \$50 billion less than the Pentagon requested. There are at least six reasons why Congress should not act.

1. First, a budget of \$472 billion is more than sufficient to protect our national security. In inflation adjusted or real dollars, this is what we spent in FY 2007, the penultimate year of the Bush administration, when not even defense hawks were complaining about the budget being too low. Additionally, this budget would keep real defense spending above the Cold War average, despite the fact that we then faced an existential threat from Soviet Russia, a real “geopolitical foe.”
2. Second, in real terms, the core defense budget has gone up for an unprecedented 13 straight years. As Dick Arme, the former House leader, has noted, despite their rhetoric, the Pentagon has not yet made any real reductions.
3. Third, if Congress allows sequestration to remain in effect over the next decade, the total reductions in projected levels of defense spending will be \$500 billion or 14 percent, much smaller than previous reductions. Dwight Eisenhower reduced defense spending by 27 percent in real terms over eight years, Richard Nixon by 29 percent in six years, and Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton by 35 percent in 11 years.
4. Fourth, reducing defense spending by \$500 billion over the next decade will help reduce the federal deficit, which military leaders, like former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mike Mullen, correctly label the greatest threat to our national security.
5. Fifth, sequestration will force the Pentagon’s leaders to make the tough decisions, which even they admit they have not had to make over the past decade. These include: reforming the military retirement, healthcare, and compensation systems, as recommended by their own task forces; canceling or reducing the numbers of unnecessary or underperforming systems like the V-22 and the F-35; and cutting our nuclear arsenal to a realistic level, as recommended by the Air War College’s School of Advanced Air and Space Studies.
6. Sixth, and most important, the alarmist claims of those opposed to cuts are bogus. Even with a FY 2007 level budget, the United States will still spend more on defense than the next 17 nations combined, most of whom are our allies, and three times more than the Chinese. We would still have more ships than the next 11 navies in the world combined, more manned and unmanned aircraft than any other nation, and a total ground force (active duty and reserve) of 1.5 million highly-trained people. As Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was forced to admit, even with these cuts the United States will still be a global power.

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