



How to cut the defense budget

By U.S. Rep. Mike Coffman

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Congress is facing extraordinary pressures to reduce the deficit, and there is not an area of government spending that should be immune from budget cuts, including the Department of Defense. I am confident we can make reductions to the defense budget that will not compromise our national security by doing three things: shifting from a counterinsurgency to a counterterrorism strategy; closing overseas military bases; and transferring active-duty units into an expanded National Guard and Reserve.

Shift in strategy: In early 2004, Osama bin Laden said one of his goals was to "bleed America to the point of bankruptcy." In some ways, our strategy of counterinsurgency has played into his hands. Our current doctrine is a high-cost nation-building strategy that has worn out our military. Our focus must shift to counter- terrorism, where threats are removed as they emerge, using special operations forces working in concert with indigenous elements to defeat the asymmetric capabilities posed by both insurgencies and terrorism.

We are now down to 40,000 troops in Iraq and, by the end of the year, all U.S. military forces will be completely withdrawn from the country. During the surge in Iraq in 2007 and 2008, there were up to 170,000 troops there. The cost in 2011 alone is estimated at \$49.3 billion, down from a peak of \$142.1 billion in fiscal year 2008 at the height of the surge.

In Afghanistan, President Obama has proposed a phased withdrawal plan that will shift operational control to Afghan security forces by 2014. We currently have about 100,000 troops in Afghanistan, at a projected cost of \$118.6 billion for this fiscal year.

Somalia and Yemen are the templates for future operations. In both nations, we employ a counterterrorism strategy that leverages a very light footprint of specialized personnel and equipment to carry out surgical strike operations against al-Qaeda's leadership. Our efforts in Yemen and Somalia have yielded promising gains against al-Qaeda without the large-scale conventional deployments that have defined our counterinsurgency/ nation-building missions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Closing military bases: The Cold War ended in 1989, yet we still have 79,000 troops stationed in Europe with 45,000 of them in Germany alone. The total cost of our military presence in Europe is projected to be \$8.6 billion for this fiscal year. Only four of our 28 NATO allies are fulfilling their requirement under the NATO charter to spend at least 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense because they are relying far too heavily on the United States to provide it for them.

We need to remain a member of NATO but should close our military bases in Europe.

We still have 28,000 U.S. military personnel assigned to bases in South Korea, yet we have not had U.S. troops stationed along the demilitarized zone that separates North Korea from South Korea since a new security agreement was reached in 2003. The projected cost of our military presence in South Korea for this fiscal year is \$3.35 billion, with an additional \$13 billion in proposed base construction costs scheduled over the next 10 years.

We need to move in the opposite direction by canceling the new construction and instead systematically start reducing our troop presence. To demonstrate our ongoing support for stability on the peninsula, we can participate in regularly scheduled joint military exercises with the South Korean military instead of maintaining large permanent garrisons. As we close our bases in South Korea, we could pre-position heavy weapons and equipment that will enable our forces to quickly mobilize in the event of escalating tensions with North Korea.

Expanding the National Guard and Reserves:

Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates repeatedly warned Congress that if the trajectory of personnel costs continues to rise, it will crowd out the acquisition budget for weapons and equipment, ultimately running the risk of turning our military into a hollow force. Gates likened this situation to our European NATO allies who have the personnel but lack the necessary weapons and modern equipment to be an effective fighting force.

The best way to reduce personnel cost is to expand the size of the National Guard and Reserves in exchange for commensurate, conditions-based reductions in our active-duty

components in order to achieve a significant cost savings.

For example, the average cost of an active-duty U.S. Army soldier is \$130,000 per year, not including retirement pay and retiree health care benefits. That same soldier costs \$43,000 in the National Guard and \$37,000 in the Reserves. Including the difference in Reserve retiree health care benefits and pay versus active-duty retirees, the savings are even greater. The average Reserve component retiree cost is less than 50 percent of an average active-duty retiree.

The United States currently maintains an active-duty force structure of 1.42 million with 740,000 in the National Guard and Reserve components. We need to critically examine our entire force structure to see what active-duty units might be more suited for the National Guard and Army Reserve given the evolving nature of the threats to our national security and the pressures to reduce spending.

Congress has a constitutional obligation "to provide for the common defense." It also has a responsibility to the taxpayers to provide for it in the most cost-effective manner possible.