

How Defense Austerity Will Test U.S. Strategy in Asia

BY *Michael C. Horowitz*

Recognizing the vital role that a peaceful and stable Asia-Pacific plays in ensuring overall global security, the United States has announced plans to rebalance its overall defense efforts toward the region. At the June 2012 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated that “all of the U.S. military services are focused on implementing the president’s guidance to make the Asia-Pacific a top priority.” Unfortunately, the looming “fiscal cliff” facing the United States has large-scale implications for its role in Asia. The 2011 Budget Control Act includes almost \$500 billion in automatic cuts to defense spending that will be triggered if Congress fails to pass a deficit reduction bill by January 2, 2013. These cuts would come on the heels of existing reductions of about \$487 billion, intended to increase efficiency and decrease the size of ground forces over the next ten years. Consequently, U.S. decision-makers face the difficult task of both addressing current financial realities and implementing an ambitious new strategic agenda in the Asia-Pacific.

CONSEQUENCES OF BUDGET CUTS

Decisions about defense spending are integrally linked to the United States’ overall strategy in the Asia-Pacific. Given ongoing uncertainty surrounding North Korea, China’s continuing development of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, and disputes over the East and South China seas, maintaining a robust presence in the region will be a high priority for any future administration. However, sequestration or other major defense cuts could undermine perceptions of U.S. resolve in the Asia-Pacific and make core

U.S. allies such as Japan and South Korea doubt Washington’s willingness to invest appropriately in relevant capabilities. Concretely, such cuts could make it more difficult for the United States to maintain its current presence.

The United States’ predominant military strategy for ensuring continued superiority in the Asia-Pacific is air-sea battle (ASB)—an operational concept designed to help the U.S. Air Force and Navy jointly respond to A2/AD challenges, enhance deterrence, and ensure freedom of action around the world over the next generation. Implementing ASB will require significant investments in advanced technologies, including long-range precision-strike capabilities and submarine modernization. Furthermore, ASB primarily involves investments in the air force and navy, raising questions about how best to rebuild the readiness of the army and marines. There is a trade-off between providing relatively equal budget shares to the services—potentially reducing inter-service rivalries—and rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific. Even within the air force and navy, there are disagreements about which programs represent the highest priority for the U.S. military.

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One concern is the potential for large decreases in the procurement of F-35s—the multirole replacement fighter for the air force and navy. Unless the military can find substitutes, further cuts, beyond those already planned, could potentially make it more difficult for the U.S. military to control the skies in a future confrontation in the Asia-Pacific. Decreases in F-35 procurement could also make U.S. allies less likely to purchase the F-35, thereby reducing interoperability with allied Asian militaries and further raising F-35 unit costs. Budget cuts may also lead to the scaling

back of plans to purchase the full slate of Virginia-class attack submarines that the navy has requested. Given China's continuing investments in submarines and antiship missiles, the modernization of the U.S. fleet is critical to maintaining U.S. naval capabilities in the Asia-Pacific, particularly for antisubmarine warfare and strike operations. Major cuts could affect the size of the navy, in terms of ships afloat, and compromise the United States' ability to project power in crisis situations.

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At even greater risk of funding cuts is research and development. R&D into next-generation robotics, a new long-range bomber, and C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) is essential to guaranteeing U.S. military power over the long term. R&D for basic programs is also likely to be on the chopping block during periods of defense austerity. One example is the X-47B drone designed to launch from and recover to aircraft carriers. Decreases in funding for such cutting-edge programs could undermine the United States' long-term capacity to control the commons in the Asia-Pacific. The unparalleled access the United States enjoys to air, sea, and space could decline if other nations develop new technologies capable of placing legacy platforms such as large carriers or manned fighters at risk. Rising powers in the region are not standing still. The United States will only maintain its conventional superiority if it continues investing in R&D that will pay off with new weapon systems down the road.

CONCLUSION

All sides in the ongoing debates about the appropriate size of the U.S. defense budget believe that a strong military commitment to the Asia-Pacific region is critical to U.S. national security interests. Budgetary politics, however, could create conditions of defense austerity that make it more difficult for the United States to achieve its security objectives. Whether or not sequestration occurs, Washington needs to ensure funding for programs critical to achieving strategic success in the Asia-Pacific over the long term, not just in the next few years. Such programs include:

- Carrier-capable drones and other next-generation robotics programs
- C4ISR programs to ensure joint air-naval readiness
- Modernization of attack and nuclear submarines

Cuts mandated by defense sequestration could put Washington's ability to properly fund ASB at risk and undermine perceptions among U.S. allies and potential adversaries of the United States' willingness to pay the costs of being engaged in the Asia-Pacific. Even if defense sequestration does not occur, the United States will have to make difficult choices about what to fund. The road for navigating these issues will only begin to become clear after the upcoming presidential election. However, uncertainty about the defense budget and its implications for the Asia-Pacific could remain well into 2013. ♦

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