

Budget Basics: National Defense

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Providing for the national defense is a key responsibility of the federal government. America's military is the strongest fighting force in the world. And it should be, since the United States spends more on defense than the next 14 countries combined. We can develop a defense budget that protects our nation against our most important threats in an affordable way.

The defense share of the federal budget has averaged 21 percent over the past two decades. In the past ten years the defense budget grew from about \$400 billion to \$700 billion, after accounting for inflation. Much of this increase in spending has been driven by commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan

Possible changes to our defense budget include: eliminating costly weapons systems, reducing troop deployments overseas, lowering the number of nuclear weapons, and reforming military pay and benefits.

Policy Options:

Eliminate costly weapons systems

Many of the new weapons systems currently under development represent very costly additions to the sizeable, existing U.S. conventional war capabilities. Some defense observers reason that our military capabilities already surpass—by wide margins—the military forces of our likely threats and that a number of the new, advanced systems are behind schedule, over budget, and proving to be less reliable and capable than originally promised. Instead of continuing to develop many new weapons systems, the U.S. government could modernize and replace existing weapons system, pare down its budget and still provide for a strong defense.

Reduce troop deployments overseas

The U.S. has over 1.4 million people serving the armed forces, with almost 300,000 serving in foreign countries. Supporting a uniformed force of this size, especially those deployed abroad, is expensive. Some experts believe that once we withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan, closing bases abroad and reducing troop strength would be possible, as the smaller U.S. presence would reflect a politically stable Europe, relaxed tensions with China, and a relative balance between North and South Korean conventional forces. A leaner military would maintain our important role globally while providing national security at a lower cost.

Scale back the number of nuclear weapons

The U.S. nuclear weapons program provided a powerful deterrent when the Soviet Union posed a significant threat during the Cold War. Many defense analysts argue that now that the Soviet Union has disintegrated, the U.S. needs far fewer warheads to maintain our security and deter potential enemies, and that we should reduce the size of the arsenal and limit funding for nuclear research.

Reform military pay and benefits

The U.S. relies on volunteer armed forces. Recruiting and retaining skilled military personnel is expensive, especially during wartime. According to the Congressional Budget Office, between 2000 and 2008, basic military pay rose faster than inflation and faster than average pay for private employees. The enlisted personnel saw their basic pay rise 13 percent, with senior enlisted personnel and officers seeing their basic pay rising 16 percent and 9 percent, respectively, after inflation. The annual across-the-board pay increases ignore overstaffing in some occupations and shortages in others. There are options available to reform military pay and benefits that would help the Pentagon to attract and retain the personnel it needs, especially once forces are withdrawn from Iraq and Afghanistan, while also reducing costs.

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