

Military restraint: A new bipartisan proposal

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It's a rare day when people as politically different as defense secretary Robert Gates, liberal Democratic congressman Barney Frank and libertarian Republican congressman Ron Paul agree on something. But all three have said recently that the time has come to cut the U.S. military budget.

Gates proposes trimming the military budget by \$100 billion over the next five years by cutting weapons programs that were designed for the cold war era and by reducing Pentagon bureaucracy and inefficiency. Gates has a fight on his hands, though. Even deficit hawks resist ending weapons systems that provide jobs in their districts.

Frank and Paul have more radical ideas. They want to reduce Pentagon spending by a trillion dollars over the next ten years. Like Gates, they would cut expensive and unnecessary weapons systems. But they also want to pull the troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan faster than the Obama administration is projecting, and they would substantially reduce the U.S. military footprint around the world. They question why the U.S. should continue to pay so much of the bill for defending European allies and Asian countries like South Korea and Japan.

Paul thinks the U.S. could defend itself with a military budget that is 30 percent of what it is now—provided that it adopts a noninterventionist foreign policy. He harkens back to the vision George W. Bush announced in his first presidential campaign, when Bush insisted that the U.S. should eschew nation building and adopt a more humble profile in the world.

The bipartisan Sustainable Defense Task Force, commissioned by Frank, agrees with this shift in thinking. It calls for a policy of restraint, one that responds to danger but does not go looking for it. The task force recommends a strategy called “offshore balancing”: rather than having troops stationed in bases all over the world, the U.S. would rely more on the navy to respond to threats as they arise.

Many of Paul's libertarian positions are untenable, but he spoke the truth when he told CNN that the American empire "is going to end because we can't afford it." With the national debt rising sharply, there is no alternative to cutting the military budget—unless one wants to increase taxes dramatically or cut crucial programs like Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

The government has some tough choices to make in the coming years. But more and more people recognize that the best choice is clear: reduce and rethink the military budget and focus on job creation and on programs of education, health and welfare at home and abroad.