

Pentagon chief proposes \$115 billion increase in military spending

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US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel released a five-year budget plan for the Pentagon Monday which calls for restoring all the cuts in future military spending contained in the current spending deal between the Obama administration and congressional Republicans.

The plan takes as its point of departure the \$496 billion in spending authorization for Fiscal Year 2015, which begins October 1, 2014, set under the bipartisan budget deal last December. This does not include an additional \$80 billion in spending on the war in Afghanistan, set aside in an overseas contingency operations fund.

Thereafter, however, the budget plan assumes that the sequester cuts for FY 2016 and subsequent years will not take effect. Hagel and Dempsey warned that those cuts would dramatically worsen the readiness and effectiveness of the US military, essentially demanding that Congress rescind them, which would add \$115 billion to military spending over the five-year period.

While the Hagel plan has been portrayed in the American media as a drastic scaling back of the US military—with headlines focusing on the cutback in total Army personnel to a level last seen before World War II—the real content of the budget is a shift in the military strategy of American imperialism.

Instead of protracted wars of occupation like Iraq and Afghanistan, involving hundreds of thousands of ground troops stationed overseas for many years, the Pentagon restructuring is geared to different types of warfare envisioned in coming decades.

The Pentagon plan would reduce the size of the active-duty military by 13 percent and the reserve force by 5 percent, but it would increase the size of US Special Forces by 6 percent, adding about 3,000 troops. These are the units that have been deployed to Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and other strife-torn countries in Africa

and the Middle East, in addition to the ongoing war in Afghanistan.

At the other end of the combat spectrum, the Pentagon plan is geared to a major war against China, which would involve attacks by sea, air and cyberspace, with less emphasis on significant ground combat on the Asian mainland, the only form of battle in which China, with its enormous manpower, might have an advantage.

A war against Iran would be a lesser example of the same type of conflict and could perhaps serve as a trial run: instead of a land invasion of a country four times the size of Iraq, with three times the population, the preferred strategy of US imperialism involves crippling the country with air, sea and cyberwar attacks, accompanied by a blockade to strangle its economy and starve the Iranian people.

Such strategic considerations explain many of the decisions outlined by Hagel and General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a press conference Monday.

Hagel proposed, for example, to eliminate the entire fleet of Air Force A-10 attack aircraft, originally designed to destroy Soviet tanks in the event of a full-scale conventional war in central Europe. The A-10 is currently used as air support for ground troops in Afghanistan, but this capability would be replaced by increasing the number of Apache helicopter gunships, shifting all those now in use by the National Guard to the regular Army.

The Navy is being reconfigured for military operations in the Western Pacific, as part of the overall “pivot to Asia,” which will increase the proportion of US military assets deployed in the Asia-Pacific region from the present 50 percent to 60 percent or more.

Hagel proposes to develop a new frigate design that would likely replace the littoral combat ship, or LCS,

which was originally developed for naval operations in critical waterways like Strait of Malacca, through which much of China's trade and fuel supplies pass. Four US littoral combat ships were stationed last year at Singapore, but new orders for such ships are being halted.

At the press conference, Hagel hinted that the modernization of Chinese naval forces had made the LCS obsolete. "We need to closely examine whether the LCS has the protection and firepower to survive against a more advanced military adversary and emerging new technologies, especially in the Asia Pacific," he said.

Hagel warned more generally that many US military advantages were being eroded. "The development and proliferation of more advanced military technologies by other nations mean that we are entering an era where American dominance on the seas, in the skies and in space can no longer be taken for granted," he told reporters.

Hagel proposed the retention of all 11 US aircraft carriers, rejecting a proposal to mothball one carrier for budgetary reasons. But he warned that if Congress did not rescind the sequester cuts, such a reduction in carrier strength would be unavoidable. To underscore this blackmail threat, he ordered the carrier USS George Washington to enter long-term refitting this year, a process that could become an outright scrapping in the unlikely event Congress fails to pay up.

In addition, the Pentagon plan would retain 11 naval cruisers, previously scheduled for retirement, and modernize them to extend their life as air-defense platforms.

At the press conference and in subsequent meetings with congressional leaders, Hagel and Dempsey focused attention on the need for fiscal discipline, by which they meant, not significantly scaling back the gargantuan American military machine, and limiting its worldwide operations, but carrying out a program of military aggression more cheaply and efficiently. "This is a time for reality," Hagel said. "This is a budget that recognizes the reality of the magnitude of our fiscal challenges ..."

In practice, this means cutting subsidies and benefits for military servicemen and veterans. "Personnel costs reflect some 50% of the Pentagon budget and cannot be exempted in the context of the significant cuts the

department is facing," Adm. John Kirby, the Defense Department's top spokesman, told the press. "Secretary Hagel has been clear that, while we do not want to, we ultimately must slow the growth of military pay and compensation."

The Pentagon plan calls for a symbolic one-year pay freeze for general and flag officers, while the 1 percent raise for lower ranks, provided in December's budget deal, will go forward. Retired military personnel will pay more for their health care, up from 8 percent to 11 percent of the total cost, although this figure remains far below the share that most civilian workers pay. Other changes in retirement benefits will await the outcome of a special commission studying military pensions, to report in 2015.

There will be significant cuts in subsidies for military commissaries at US bases, which will fall from \$1.4 billion to \$500 million. Housing subsidies will be capped, meaning that military personnel will begin to pay a greater share of the cost, as rents and utility charges rise.

Meanwhile, the gravy train continues for the giant corporations that have drunk deeply at the Pentagon's trough. Notably, stock prices for defense contractors like Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman and General Dynamics rose Monday in the wake of Hagel's press conference.

According to one analysis, the Pentagon will end a four-year scaling back in weapons purchases and research and development, areas where most of the spending goes to US-based corporations. One key initiative is for a new and more fuel-efficient jet engine, where General Electric is a prime contractor. Hagel also reaffirmed future purchases of Lockheed's F-35 jet fighter, the most expensive warplane ever built.



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