

A radical view of defense budget cuts

DOUGLAS J. FEITH • | FEBRUARY 2, 2015 | 5:00 AM

President Obama's outlook on foreign and defense policy isn't conventional. If it were, he'd be exerting himself against the sequestration cuts ravaging the defense budget.

Modeled on the game of chicken (a la James Dean in "Rebel Without a Cause"), sequestration was invented in the 2011 Budget Control Act as a mechanism for crude, large budget cuts, half of which hit the Department of Defense. The law makes the cuts automatic and annual, unless Republicans and Democrats enact responsible deficit-reduction laws.

It was widely assumed that enough officials of both parties would view sequestration as the political equivalent of driving one's car over a cliff, and, to head it off, would swerve toward common ground. This was game theory gone wrong, however. It failed to produce mutual compromise, largely because President Obama appears not to see sequestration as a disaster. In fact, he may consider it an accomplishment.

Under President Obama, the defense budget has shrunk by hundreds of billions of dollars. The sequestration cuts are across-the-board, imposed without regard to the importance, quality or efficiency of the affected programs. Sequestration took hold in fiscal years 2012 and 2013. Limited relief from its effects was legislated for the next two years, but sequestration is set to hit again this year and hereafter.

Robert Gates, who served as President Obama's first secretary of defense, called the cuts "appalling" and "stupid." Blaming them on "political dysfunction," he said they've decreased America's military readiness and technological superiority.

Michelle Flournoy, who was President Obama's under secretary of defense for policy, and her Center for a New American Security colleague Richard Fontaine, denounced sequestration as "draconian defense cuts" that have "harmed military training and readiness, restricted deployments, undercut investments in modernization, and created a degree of uncertainty that is causing some of our best and brightest service members to vote with their feet." They divide the blame between Congress and the president, urging them to "work together to prevent the reestablishment of sequestration caps in 2016."

Leon Panetta, whom President Obama appointed to succeed Gates as secretary of defense, also criticized the president for failing to prevent the sequestration of defense funding. In a review of Panetta's recent memoir, New York Times correspondent Peter Baker reported: "For Mr. Panetta, the moment that crystallized his frustration with Mr. Obama came when the president made little effort to stop deep automatic budget cuts mandated by the sequester." The failure, Panetta said, reflected a lack of "fire," the absence of "the passion of a leader."

Perhaps that's right, but it may be that President Obama simply didn't share Panetta's desire to protect the defense budget. The president, after all, can get impressively fiery in the service of goals he actually favors.

Gates, Flourney and Panetta have mainstream national security ideas, well within the broad left-to-right consensus on basic foreign and defense policy thinking among most Americans since World War II. For example, mainstream ideas include:

- U.S. leadership in the world is necessary; others cannot be expected to step into its shoes if America fails to lead.
- America should act in the world to promote U.S. national interests, and when it has done so, America has generally been a force for good.
- As valuable as coalitions can be, America should protect its freedom of action.
- U.S. military strength is crucial for the defense of America and its allies and for the effectiveness of American diplomacy.

Not all Americans, however, have supported those ideas. A small but influential group, mainly composed of progressive academics, has challenged them for decades. Its members interpret U.S. history and view the world differently. They fault the United States for focusing narrowly on its own national interests rather than promoting "global" interests. They argue that American leadership has really reflected arrogance, selfishness and a bullying disrespect for the rights of others. America, they contend, hasn't been a force for good in the world — especially when it acted outside multilateral frameworks, such as the United Nations Security Council. According to this view, America and the world would be better off if U.S. presidents were more constrained and less concerned about preserving their strength and freedom of action. Foreign and domestic constraints on American action are good, they believe, whether they take the form of treaties, subordination to multilateral forums or reduced U.S. military capability.

This radically negative perspective appears to have little public support, which explains why popularly elected politicians generally don't give it full-throated support, even if they agree with it. But it's influential — perhaps even predominant — in progressive academic circles. Respected scholars at major American universities and think tanks promote it in their writings. These include Harvard's Samantha Power (now U.S. ambassador to the United Nations), Yale's Harold Koh (President Obama's former State Department legal adviser), Princeton's Anne-Marie Slaughter (President Obama's State Department policy planning chief), the Brookings Institution's Susan Rice (now national security adviser) and others.

Based on his own writings before he became president, and on much of what he has said and done as president, it seems that this perspective has strongly influenced President Obama's outlook on world affairs. To be sure, he hasn't been a model of ideological purity; no successful politician can be, especially in a democracy. But that doesn't mean he lacks ideological convictions.

The progressive academic critique of American national security policy is the intellectual thread running through so much of President Obama's national security record. Consider that record's key features:

- The president's apologetic June 2009 Cairo speech and sympathetic outreach to a number of America's enemies or opponents, including Iran, Russia, Syria, China and Cuba.
- Gestures and policies repudiating the traditional term "leader of the free world" and affronting allies such as Poland and the Czech Republic, Israel, Britain and France.
- The policy of "leading from behind" — that is, not providing leadership — during the 2011 Libya crisis, the ongoing Syrian civil war and the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine.
- Withdrawing prematurely from Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Failing to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability.
- Failing to punish Syrian dictator Bashar Assad's mass murder or his "redline" chemical weapons violations.
- Failing to provide strong support for the Kurds against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or for the Ukrainians against Russian President Vladimir Putin's territory-grabbing aggressions.
- Severely slashing the U.S. defense budget.

Sequestration of defense dollars constrains the United States in ways that progressive academics — of which President Obama was one — want the country to be constrained. When President Obama's former top defense officials criticized him for allowing the defense budget to be slashed, their main complaint was that he didn't fight hard enough to prevent it. The more profound problem, however, is that he seems to accept the reduction of U.S. military capability as desirable. It's telling that, in his Jan. 20 State of the Union speech, President Obama didn't say a word against the defense cuts.

Defense sequestration is not an example of lack of presidential leadership; it's a story of leadership in a radical direction.

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