Insight

Defense Sequester Threatens National Security

RACHEL HOFF | JANUARY 29, 2015

Yesterday, the Senate Armed Services Committee held a hearing on the impact of sequestration on national security. It was perhaps the grimmest assessment yet of the effect of sequestration, as all four service chiefs unanimously testified to the devastating impact of the defense budget caps on the U.S. military.

Unless Congress acts to roll back sequestration, the military will face nearly $1 trillion in budget cuts over the next 10 years. Evidence of sequestration's detrimental consequences is already apparent. Most fundamentally, military leaders say they are unable to meet the requirements of the Defense Strategic Guidance, the Pentagon's marching orders, under the defense budget caps. The implications of this under-resourcing in each branch of the military were the topic of yesterday's hearing.

General Raymond Odierno testified that Army capabilities are already significantly reduced, as only one in three brigades are at the desired level of combat readiness. Admiral Jonathan Greenert affirmed the readiness problem, saying that only one-third of the Navy's contingency response forces are ready to deploy within 30 days. General Mark Welsh testified that the Air Force is now the smallest it has ever been. And General Joseph Dunford warned that half of non-deployed Marine Corps units are experiencing shortfalls in personnel, equipment, and training. In addition to readiness, all of the service chiefs agreed modernization and morale are suffering major losses as a result of sequestration. And each service chief testified that if sequestration returns in fiscal year 2016, these capability reductions will only get worse.

As the Senators questioned the panel, an all-too-rare moment of bipartisan agreement emerged: Republicans and Democrats alike recognize both the senselessness and recklessness of across-the-board, arbitrary defense budget cuts. In fact, Angus King, the new Independent Senator from Maine who caucuses with the Democrats, provided some of the most biting indictments of sequestration, saying it was "designed to be stupid." He asked each service chief if he agreed that "American lives are being put at risk by this policy." (All four agreed.) Senator King also asserted, "The sequester is like invading Brazil after Pearl Harbor," since mandatory domestic spending is the real driver of the deficit—not defense.

Uncertainty is troublesome in any environment, but particularly destabilizing when it comes to national security. In the past year, the world has become a more dangerous place. Uncertainty and instability are on the rise in nearly every corner of the globe, and global threats range from nuclear proliferation to terrorism to humanitarian crisis to inter-state conflict to pandemic disease. In the face of these threats, the defense sequester threatens to reduce our military capabilities. That is not sound policy.

Sequestration was never supposed to be policy. It was a political threat, and its implementation represents the worst kind of political failure. Congress should act to reverse sequestration and, as Senator McCain advised, return to a strategy-driven budget—not a budget-driven strategy.