

The Pentagon's Obesity Problem

John Feffer

America has a problem with portion control. U.S. restaurants serve enormous entrees, convenience stores sell “Big Gulp” cups of soda, and Americans routinely compete to see who can eat the most hot dogs or pizzas or chicken wings in ten minutes. It's not just the quantity. It's also the quality. Americans get as much as [one-third of their calories](#) from junk food. No wonder that Americans are fatter than citizens of any other developed country, with the [obesity rate twice](#) that of many European nations.

The Pentagon has the same problem with portion control. It has gone on a spending spree since the late 1990s and become enormously fat. The Pentagon budget has doubled in inflation-adjusted dollars since 2000. It's not just a quantity problem. The Pentagon has wasted enormous sums on outdated weapons systems, cost overruns with military contractors, and unnecessary administrative overhead. No wonder that the Pentagon is the world's biggest military spender. The United States is responsible for [43 percent of all global military spending](#).

The Pentagon's obesity problem is one of the factors that has brought the U.S. government to the verge of a stroke and economic paralysis. Our politician-doctors have prescribed essentially three solutions to the problem.

The mainstream of the Republican Party is urging the Pentagon to eat more. House Republicans recently passed their version of the 2013 defense budget, which weighed in at \$554 billion, \$4 billion more than the Pentagon itself ordered. The Republicans have also offered their alternative to sequestration – the \$1 trillion-plus cuts that will automatically go into effect at the end of this year if Congress can't agree on a deficit reduction plan – that leaves the Pentagon largely untouched. Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential candidate, has offered a military fattening-up plan that would add [\\$2.1 trillion on top](#) of what the Obama administration has proposed over the next decade.

The Obama administration, meanwhile, proposes to stay the course with approximately \$500 billion in Pentagon reductions in the next 10 years. That might sound like a lot of belt-tightening. But it would leave the military budget in 2021 [only 8 percent lower](#) than it is today. After the Korean and Vietnam Wars, by contrast, U.S. presidents reduced military budgets [by nearly 30 percent](#).

A third option, gastric bypass, would apply radical surgery to the Pentagon budget. Conservative lawmaker Tom Coburn (R-OK) has proposed cutting more than a trillion dollars over a decade from the military spending. The United Security Budget, a collective proposal spearheaded by the Institute for Policy Studies, not only urges similarly steep cuts in military spending but a redirection of funds toward programs that emphasize non-military resolution of conflict. These proposals are far more popular with the American public – Republicans and Democrats alike –

than the all-you-can-eat proposals of Republican militarists or the tepid cuts of the Obama administration. According to a recent [Program for Public Consultation poll](#), Americans want to see an average reduction of 18 percent in the 2013 military budget.

As NATO prepares to meet in Chicago next week, the prospect of U.S. military budget cuts and the ongoing reductions in European military spending should prompt a thorough repurposing of the alliance. Austerity is, in other words, an opportunity. NATO should use these cuts to finally remove obsolete Cold War systems such as tactical nuclear weapons or the 80,000 U.S. soldiers that still rotate through 28 major bases. It's an opportunity to reduce waste and redundancy, and revisit expensive systems like missile defense that have questionable feasibility. It's time to reverse the usual NATO conversation, which is about how to maintain spending at 2 percent of GDP, and discuss instead the real threats that face Europe and the United States and how best to meet them.

The problem is that the United State is responding to military austerity in all the wrong ways. America exports its obesity problem by selling our junk food (Coca Cola) and fast food restaurants (McDonald's) all over the world. Similarly, we are exporting our culture of military overconsumption.

So, for instance, the Obama administration is pressuring its European allies to spend more to close the gap in capabilities with the United States. "Burden-sharing" is all the rage these days in NATO circles. Even Canada, which increased its military spending from \$15 billion in 2005 to \$23 billion in 2011, came in for [criticism from U.S. Ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder](#) for placing "an unfair burden on those who spend the resources." Washington is throwing its weight around even more deliberately with European countries that are actually cutting their spending.

Worse, perhaps, has been the Obama administration's resurrection of a Clinton-era policy of facilitating U.S. arms exports to compensate for any losses our military contractors suffer as a result of Pentagon cuts. The United States has been the world's largest arms exporter for many years. With its Export Control Reform Initiative, the administration [wants to double](#) U.S. military exports by 2015. Modernization and "interoperability" have long been the rationales for increased purchases of U.S. weapons. These arguments apply even more to new NATO members from Eastern Europe and the Balkans that can little afford the expensive upgrades.

The United States uses various arguments to rationalize its military obesity, such as the rise of China or North Korea's nuclear program. But NATO has been scrambling for some time to identify a grand mission. The *raison d'être* put forward for the Chicago summit is rather weak. "With the financial crisis in Europe, severe deficit reduction measures in the United States and increased pressure on defence budgets, NATO's added value is to help countries work together," [announces](#) the NATO website. "NATO has the capacity to connect forces and manage multinational projects."

All this emphasis on connecting and togetherness will not keep NATO in business. NATO is designed to wage war, not make nice, and threat is the sustenance that keeps the alliance alive. The Soviet Union is a distant memory. Afghanistan is no longer a viable mission. The Libya war revealed that NATO doesn't have the firepower or the political will to go after every "rogue state" and human rights abuser on its borders. Non-traditional threats such as terrorism, piracy, and cyber attacks require a different set of capabilities.

The continuing global economic crisis requires NATO to submit every one of its expenditures to a serious review. In the meantime, the allies should embrace their new diet as well as a new lifestyle. For the United States and Europe, this means abandoning a dangerous addiction to military instruments and shifting resources to non-military means of resolving conflicts.

According to weight-loss specialists, it's much more difficult to diet alone. Instead of pressuring its European allies to eat more, the United States should embrace the idea of dieting together. Who knows: if NATO gets serious about reductions, it could even invite Russia and China to join the new weight-loss plan.

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