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There is no shortage of threats facing America today or emerging on the horizon. In Afghanistan, our military is engaging a dangerous enemy while global terrorism, fueled by a radical ideology, will take more than firepower to defeat. All the while, Iran continues its march toward acquiring nuclear weapons, North Korea continually provokes its neighbors, and China is arming itself faster than any other country in the world.

Each of these threats is unique and presents its own set of challenges, which is why America's armed forces must be prepared on all fronts. This requires that we consistently strengthen our defense capability in preparation for threats even as we adapt to the asymmetric nature of the war in Afghanistan and the overall fight against terrorism.

The type of warfare encompassing the combat mission in Afghanistan is unlike anything our military prepared to face during the Cold War. During that era, American industry developed new technology and manufactured platforms capable of protecting our interests against the conventional threat of Soviet military forces. Many of these resources are still used today, giving our Marines and soldiers an added advantage on the battlefield.

Despite the longevity of most military equipment, the resources that originated during the Cold War are growing older, becoming increasingly unreliable and affecting core security capability, including the ability to project power worldwide.

Nowhere is this more evident than with the aging U.S. naval fleet and the current inventory of fighter aircraft - a point seemingly missed by Defense Secretary Robert Gates during a recent critique of the annual defense budget and our national security funding priorities.

Secretary Gates, in remarks at the Eisenhower Library, made a case for cutting defense spending amid wartime, specifically referencing the rising cost of health care, a top-heavy uniformed and civilian management structure and certain weapon systems. In some areas, there is an obvious need to cut spending and change the way the Department of Defense operates. Much-needed steps were taken this year to enact bipartisan legislation to reform the

weapon acquisition process, which will produce greater transparency and cost savings over time.

Similar legislation related to services, management and procurement, now before the Senate, also reduces any opportunity for waste and abuse of taxpayer dollars in the defense arena.

Together, these initiatives are consistent with Gates' call to scrutinize every dollar of the defense budget, reduce operating costs and streamline the acquisition process - initiatives that should be fully embraced and pushed forward against the bureaucratic resistance that seemingly overruns the Pentagon.

CUT RED TAPE, NOT FUNDS

Ask any Marine or soldier. They will tell you how much they dislike bureaucracy. As a combat Marine who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, and now a lawmaker persistently arguing for more roadside bomb infrastructure and surveillance resources in Afghanistan, I know this firsthand. Our servicemen and women must be our first priority.

This includes developing and manufacturing innovative resources that serve the combat mission today and strengthen our posture against future adversaries. On this aspect, Gates' suggested path is cause for considerable concern. Scaling back innovation and production will only weaken American security and erode any technological edge we have retained since the end of the Cold War.

Experience tells us exactly what happens when the defense budget is reduced and modernization falls off track. The Bill Clinton administration cut defense funding severely: in the case of the Army, by 40 percent. In the following years, defense spending was increased, but engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan quickly demonstrated the unfortunate impact of the Clinton-era cuts on the readiness of our military and its inventory of resources.

Right now, the average aircraft age is 24 years, compared with just nine years in 1973. At the same time, modernization funding continues to face as much as \$20 billion in shortfalls, more

so in recent years. Far fewer aircraft are under development and production, affecting both Air Force and Navy inventories, while the Navy faces numerous obstacles to its 30-year shipbuilding plan.

Meanwhile, China's trajectories for surface ships, submarines and fighter aircraft are steadily increasing. Other advancements by Iran and North Korea to acquire nuclear capability have been unwisely met with billions of dollars in cuts to our missile defense budget.

Still, our defense output is declining, whether measured by material resources or gross domestic product. It is now at 4 percent and projected at 3.4 percent by 2015.

Added investment in national defense strengthens security and the economy, providing quality jobs and opportunities for the next generation of scientists and engineers. We can be responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars without undermining our long-term defense capability. The debate over federal spending has helped to raise awareness on what government does with taxpayer money.

Even then, strengthening national defense must remain among our top funding priorities. New security threats will continually emerge, some far more serious than others, making it even more necessary that we are prepared to confront any situation that arises with a fighting force that is second to none.