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There are only a few expenditures by the federal government that match the importance of investing in a strong national defense. Even in the emerging era of budget discipline, adhering to the principle of fiscal responsibility is possible without impairing security, as long as the objective is to streamline and not arbitrarily cut defense spending.

With the national debt now exceeding \$13 trillion, all areas of government must be analyzed to achieve more efficiency and eliminate waste. But so far, among all of the president's department heads, only Defense Secretary Robert Gates has offered proposals to cut spending, which include eliminating the Joint Forces Command and trimming the Pentagon's top-heavy management structure. These might be good recommendations, but we cannot be too quick to cut defense spending without first considering its implications.

The predominant concern is with the Pentagon's search for cost savings in areas of production that favor fighting smaller conflicts typified by Iraq and Afghanistan. That's a dangerous proposition with potentially severe consequences. Our experience in the years following the Cold War proves that such a scenario is detrimental to readiness and security.

According to the bipartisan Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel tasked to review the Pentagon's own strategic assessments, America's military is inadequately preparing for emerging threats, particularly in Asia, and losing ability to project force worldwide. This warning should be taken seriously and weighed heavily against any attempt to categorically cut defense spending.

The panel, which just recently provided its critique to Congress, concluded that a "train wreck" will occur unless the defense budget is reordered and increased. It further identified a "significant and growing gap between the force structure of the military – its size and its inventory of equipment – and the missions it will be called on to perform in the future," citing escalating aerospace and maritime shortfalls.

Analyzing the size of the Navy, the panel recommended building a fleet of 346 ships, a

substantial increase from the current fleet of 282 ships and even higher than the Navy's goal of 313 ships. The challenge in this case squares with the fact that the Navy does not have a coherent shipbuilding plan, despite the obvious need to close the growing production gap, as well as the perspective emerging from within the Pentagon that the composition of carrier strike groups already in place is too much.

In light of the Quadrennial Defense Review panel's report, there's no question that the current shipbuilding plan should be recalculated. Doing so would not only strengthen the Navy's ability to project force. It's also one of the best forms of economic stimulus and job creation.

Ship construction and repair facilities are located in many areas of the country, including Virginia, Mississippi and, of course, San Diego, which is also a principal homeport of the naval fleet. That distinction helps San Diego attract some of the most innovative businesses that directly support the military community. Adding more ships would create jobs and help boost local economies.

The same goes for the aerospace industry. Many of the unmanned aerial vehicles utilized in Afghanistan are manufactured in San Diego, while plenty of other companies that hire local workers are involved in building auxiliary aerospace components.

In San Diego alone, defense spending amounts to \$26 billion in economic activity and provides 328,080 jobs, underscoring the importance of the military's relationship with the regional economy and workforce. The same benefits are evident in other communities too. There are few better ways to create jobs than to invest in national defense.

In today's world, there is no shortage of security challenges. North Korea and Iran are working to develop nuclear weapons. China's military is growing at an alarming rate, giving rise to the importance of maintaining conventional assets and capability. These threats are too serious to ignore but as we fail to properly fund our defense forces, we do exactly that. And in the process, communities like San Diego lose most.

What must be avoided is any situation where the defense budget is treated the same way it was at the end of the Cold War, making us underprepared and incapable of responding to certain threats. A "peace dividend" didn't work then and it won't work to our advantage now.

The next step in this process involves Congress and its obligation to determine annual defense spending. Gates' recommendations offer a good starting point and each proposed cut deserves consideration on the basis of impact to readiness, jobs and other factors. But, even then, our national security interests must always come first.

We can have a more efficient defense budget while also providing added investment to strengthen the defense base and adequately prepare for future threats. Any attempt to further undermine our ability to protect American security must be prevented at all cost.