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With so much funding for the Defense Department now on the chopping block — particularly the potential for \$600 billion in cuts under the debt limit agreement — America's ability to defend itself and confront emerging threats is at serious risk.

These cuts come when each service is already facing heavy operational requirements, with three wars and significant readiness gaps.

The signs of nearly a decade of combat and aging inventory are evident in each branch. Today, for example, barely half the Air Force fighter aircraft units are fully mission-capable, and that branch is likely to face an 800-jet shortfall in the next few years.

In fact, an F-15 fighter jet recently broke in half because of fatigue crack. Fuselage cracks also routinely plague the aging inventory of A-10 aircraft.

For the Marine Corps, its amphibious vehicles are more than 35 years old and can no longer fulfill their expeditionary mission. The Navy is well below the minimum number of ships required to sustain its readiness capabilities.

Each of these examples underscores why now is not the time to cut defense spending. We are a nation at war — fighting on multiple fronts. Significant reset burdens are not going away, and new threats continue to emerge. It's crucial that our military stay ready— which is near impossible with an anemic defense budget.

In 2009, then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned against the historical precedent of major defense cuts at the conclusion of the nation's wars. Even so, two years later, at the insistence of the Obama administration, Gates engineered \$180 billion in cuts — sold as efficiencies. Now, attention is being given to even larger cuts, thanks to the debt limit compromise.

Defense spending is not the reason for our more than \$14 trillion in national debt. Nor should it be identified as a primary revenue source to relieve the nation's fiscal troubles. There is indeed room for efficiency — but cutting for the sake of cutting is a dangerous proposition.

We cannot repeat the mistakes of the 1970s and '90s, and legislate across-the-board cuts that hollow out the force. The latest cuts, made during the '90s, included slashing a third of the Army's end strength, which left us ill-prepared to deal with the unforeseen attacks of 9/11.

Still, the Obama administration and some in Congress are calling for indiscriminate cuts — proposing everything from eliminating the MV-22 (currently used successfully by the Marine Corps and Special Operation Forces in Afghanistan) to cancelling the F-35 program. The F-35 loss is of most concern, given its role as the military's next generation fighter. It was to replace many of our aging aircraft and fill in the gap on fighter jets that the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps will soon face.

With the current operational tempo of our military over the past decade of war, it's obvious that each of the military forces looks likely to face a significant shortfall in equipment. We need adequate time and funding to boost equipment levels back to numbers necessary to sufficiently defend this nation — none of which can happen with most of the defense cuts on the table.

If we are willing to curtail force projection, we need to be honest about what that means for America's humanitarian role — as shown most recently in Haiti and Japan. It will be harder to track down terrorists before they attack us on U.S. soil. It will be far more difficult to protect our oceanic trade routes from countries like China. It will be difficult to fully support Israel in the event of an attack.

In essence, curbing military force projection means a diminished global mission for the nation's armed forces.

We can all agree that we must be judicious with every taxpayer dollar allotted to the Pentagon. But we must also invest in the requirements needed to keep our country safe today and in the future.

It's irresponsible to offer up a sizeable amount of defense dollars to spend elsewhere, without first understanding the impact it would have. Much will be risked if, as Gates said, "the political leadership of this country decides that it must reduce the investment in defense by hundreds of billions of dollars."

The Pentagon is already addressing \$178 billion in savings and efficiencies. Yet even before they can work through that, they are now being told to prepare for additional cuts in the \$400 billion range over the next decade.

To make matters worse, Pentagon officials have not been given any analysis to explain where that number came from — and neither has Congress. It remains unknown what effect these cuts will have on our forces and their ability to complete their missions overseas and protect America from emerging threats.

Defense dollars must not be used as a scapegoat, or as part of a temporary solution to our fiscal problems. Now is not the time to arbitrarily cut defense spending.