Senator John Cornyn: Defending Defense

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery
November 9, 2011
by John Cornyn

Thank you, Ken Weinstein.

It's an honor to be here at the Hudson Institute. For the last 50 years, your scholars and researchers have contributed to policy debates on a host of global issues.

Your perspective is firmly optimistic: you believe that free markets and free people can develop the new ideas and technologies that can help more people prosper in every region of the world. I agree with that perspective wholeheartedly.

My topic today is 'Defending Defense,' which is a turn of phrase I can't take credit for. Scholars at the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the Foreign Policy Initiative have gotten together to spread the word on how important America's defense budget is to our national security. 'Defending Defense' is the theme that they developed to coordinate their efforts, and which I've borrowed for own discussion today.

The questions before us are stark but simple: What are the threats to America’s peace and prosperity, and to the peace and prosperity of other free peoples who are America's allies, partners, and friends? What's America's strategy to meet those threats? And what capabilities do we need to implement that strategy successfully?

Every nation must ask – and answer – these questions. They are the challenge for which governments were formed in the first place, including our own. But today, Americans must answer these questions in the context of the most dynamic – and sometimes confusing – array of international challenges any nation has ever faced.

Of course, there's lots of good news in the world as well, and as optimists we should celebrate all of it.

Osama bin Laden is dead, and Al Qaeda has not successfully killed any Americans on our soil in the ten years since 9/11.

Muammar Gaddafi is dead, and other dictators and tyrants are under siege from their own people who are boldly standing for their liberty.

The threat of a major world war among great powers seems remote – at least in the short term. And the prospect of a catastrophic nuclear confrontation, which was our
constant fear during the decades of the Cold War, seems more unlikely – although it's still a risk we need to take seriously.

So the case for optimism on several national security challenges is clear, but so are the causes for concern.

Al Qaeda remains a serious threat to the United States and other free peoples, as do other terrorist networks including Hezbollah, HAMAS, and Lashkar-e-Taiba.

The Arab Spring faces an uncertain future in Libya, Syria, Egypt, and elsewhere.

U.S. troop withdrawals in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were ordered over the objections of some of our military commanders, and with very little consultation with the elected leaders in Baghdad and Kabul, could create sudden power vacuums in each of these countries that could further destabilize other nations.

Some nations already show signs of instability, such as Pakistan, which is currently armed with dozens of nuclear weapons.

North Korea and Iran also remain serious proliferation risks; In fact, just a few days ago it was reported that the International Atomic Energy Agency has concluded that Iran is now 'at the threshold' of its own nuclear capability.

China is modernizing its military. Russia may be reverting back to its autocratic roots and its imperialist ambitions.

And economic and financial uncertainty represent huge unknown risks for Europe, for China, and ultimately for every nation in the world.

Now more than ever, we need a coherent and compelling vision for America's role as a global leader: how we can meet the threats, mitigate the risks, and seize the numerous opportunities for the expansion of liberty and prosperity around the world.

Yet despite the promise of such a vision when he took the Oath of Office in January 2009, President Obama seems more aloof than engaged in U.S. foreign policy. In fact, earlier this year one of his advisors was quoted as saying that President Obama's global strategy was to 'lead from behind,' which actually has the ring of truth to it.

Sure, the President shows up now and again to 'spike the football' when a major tyrant or terrorist is killed. But there's a sense that each of his decisions are "one-offs"; not tied to any specific strategy.

And despite his remarkable rhetorical gifts, he doesn't seem interested in articulating America's role in the world either to the American people, or to our allies, friends, and partners.
What kind of vision am I talking about? I'm talking about the kind of vision the founders had when they wrote the United States Constitution, and created the institution of the Presidency, to give our Republic greater credibility with other nations in both war and peace.

It's the kind of vision President Harry Truman had during the early years of the Cold War, when he accepted America's new role as the leader of the free world, and helped create the alliances, institutions, and capabilities that ultimately defeated the threat of Communism.

And it's the kind of vision that President George W. Bush provided when I first came to Washington in 2002, and we were focused on how to defeat the threat of terror, and inspire a new generation of democratic reformers in the Middle East and beyond.

But today, 10 years after 9/11, we aren't seeing the same kind of strategic thinking that allows us to make good decisions about investments in our national security.

Instead, our strategic thinking is being driven by dollars and cents and not common sense.

As you know, the Budget Control Act passed by Congress this past summer created a 'Super Committee' of legislators to try to find a way to reduce our deficit, and help our nation avoid the kind of financial catastrophe that we are seeing in Greece and other nations.

The Super Committee faces a deadline of November 23 to make their recommendations, a little more than two weeks from now. And we're all required to vote on those recommendations right before Christmas.

If this process fails, then "sequestration" would take place. And the base defense budget would fall 14 percent in real terms over just three years, according to the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, even as our troops continue to fight multiple wars, and other security threats loom on the horizon.

Keep in mind that these 'sequestration cuts' to our national defense would be in addition to the cuts already made under the Budget Control Act – which are up to $489 billion over 10 years, and the 'efficiencies' previously recommended by Secretary Gates, which are a little less than $180 billion over five years.

What about these cuts we've already made? What do they mean for our men and women in uniform? The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Greenert, gave us one example. He recently testified: 'Since 2000, the number of ships in the Fleet decreased by about 10 percent. Yet, in the last four years alone, demand for carrier strike groups doubled, and requests for amphibious ready groups grew by 70 percent. As a result, each ship is underway about 15 percent more per year than in 2000, lengthening deployments and making deployments more frequent.'
Fighting two-and-a-half wars over the last ten years has put a great strain on the force. So this should be a time for rebuilding and retraining, not retreat.

But "retreat" is the only way to describe what would happen to our military forces under the sequestration process. For example: the United States Army currently has 100 Army maneuver battalions. But according to estimates by the House Armed Services Committee, the current round of defense cuts in the Budget Control Act could cut that number to 78. And sequestration could drop it further – to as few at 60.

In the same way, the Navy currently has 288 ships in the fleet. That could drop to 263 under current law, and 238 if the sequestration process occurs.

And the Air Force, which currently has 1,990 fighter planes, could face cuts of entire "air wings" according to Defense Secretary Leon Panetta earlier this week.

These aren't just lower numbers. These are greatly reduced military capabilities to meet present and future threats.

But don't take my word for it. Secretary Panetta has also cautioned strongly against further cuts to defense, particularly through the sequestration process. As he put it: 'This mechanism would force additional cuts to defense of about $500 billion, or roughly $1 trillion in total – cuts that in my view would do catastrophic damage to our military, hollowing out the force and degrading its ability to protect the country.' He also said: "It is a blind formula that makes cuts across the board, hampers our ability to align resources with strategy, and risks hollowing out the force.'

The Army Chief of Staff, General Ray Odierno, has said much the same thing. In his words: 'Cuts of this magnitude would be catastrophic to the military and – in the case of the Army – would significantly reduce our capability and capacity to assure our partners abroad, respond to crises, and deter our potential adversaries, while threatening the readiness of our All-Volunteer Force.'

Our military leadership is trained not to panic. But you can hear the grave concern in these voices. And you can hear their frustration that America's strategic commitments are being defined by the budget, instead of the other way around.

They are also frustrated that under the sequestration process, the cuts would be arbitrary and reckless because they would not reflect any strategic assessment of what military capabilities America really needs.

I believe we need to listen to the Pentagon's leaders, both civilian and military. And that means giving them the tools and resources they need to defend our nation.

That means before looking at the spreadsheet, we really need to look at the map. And see what capabilities other nations are developing, and therefore what capabilities we will need to continue to defend our interests and deter potential adversaries.
For example: China is developing a 'carrier killer' ballistic missile that could destroy an entire aircraft carrier, and therefore deny access to U.S. forces in the international waters that are within its range.

So if we want to reassure our allies in Japan and South Korea that America will keep its commitments to them; if we want to prevent a military invasion of Taiwan; if we want to maintain freedom of movement for American forces in the Western Pacific; that means we need: better defenses to counter long-range ballistic missiles, such as China’s carrier killer; state-of-the-art submarines that can operate in environments where surface ships would be highly vulnerable; and a long-range bomber that can penetrate the most advanced air defense systems in the world for surveillance, reconnaissance, or to destroy any target that's a threat to us.

Another example is ballistic missile defense. Iran has the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the Middle East. And many military analysts believe that North Korea's ICBM is capable of reaching parts of the United States.

So if we want to defend our homeland and our allies from these weapons; and if we want to deter the risk of proliferation; then we will need to continue investing in missile defense technologies such as the Navy's SM-3 missile, the Ground-based Midcourse Defense system, and the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system.

Or what about America's capacity to maintain air superiority in any conflict? Chinese and Russian pilots already fly the highly capable Sukhoi-30 multi-role fighter and the Sukhoi-27 air superiority fighter. But they are not satisfied. Both nations are developing 5th generation stealth aircraft to oppose our F-22 Raptor as well as our new F-35 Lightning.

So if we want American pilots to fly better aircraft than their potential adversaries; and if we want to deter other nations from challenging America's air superiority; then we need to continue building the inventory of aircraft that can meet any threat.

Here's the point: other nations face economic and fiscal challenges just like we do. Yet they are making the investments in military capabilities they think they need.

China still has hundreds of millions of people in poverty. Yet it's made huge investments to upgrade its military forces.

Iran has been willing to endure years of economic sanctions in order to pursue its nuclear weapons program.

And North Korea has literally been starving its own people to feed its own military-industrial complex.

I don't want to see America get into an arms race with any nation. But if any nation wants to get into an arms race with the United States, I certainly hope President Obama intends to win it.
I also don't want to suggest that we can identify right now who our potential adversaries might be in the years ahead. As former Defense Secretary Robert Gates said: 'Our record of predicting where we will use military force since Vietnam is perfect -- we have never once gotten it right.' He added: 'There isn't a single instance: Grenada, Panama, the first Gulf War, the Balkans, Haiti, you can just keep going through the list, where we knew and planned for such a conflict six months in advance.'

So how do I suggest that we proceed? I say: Let's get the strategy right first. The Defense Department is still completing its Comprehensive Strategic Review of what the Budget Control Act will mean for our military capabilities, and what the strategic implications of those cuts really are. Without this analysis, without this strategic plan, Congress would be cutting blind, and we would not be cutting responsibly.

Let's also have Congress debate what America's commitments and capabilities should be. And let's have the President make a consistent and thoughtful case for his vision, both to the American people, and to our friends in other nations.

And then once we have a sound strategy, let's resource it appropriately.

Of course, this is not to say that we can't cut the Defense budget in the short term. We need to aggressively fight waste, fraud, and abuse wherever we find it.

For example, I find it shocking that financial mismanagement at the Defense Department is so prevalent that no one can effectively audit the Pentagon.

But I'm glad Secretary Panetta agrees with Congress that this is a problem, and that he has directed the Pentagon to become 'audit-ready' more quickly, by moving up the most significant deadline to FY2014.

The Pentagon also needs to rethink the way it develops and acquires major weapons systems. Over the last decade, the Pentagon approved purchases of several weapons systems, but then cancelled them, and wasted some $50 billion; with nothing to show for it.

The Pentagon must keep these programs on budget and on schedule, so that our troops get the tools they need to complete their missions, and so our taxpayers gain confidence that we are spending their money wisely.

Let me close on a note of optimism and hope. I firmly believe our budget challenges can be met. As Ronald Reagan once said: 'There are no easy answers – but there are simple answers. We must have the courage to do what we know is morally right.'

What's morally right is: bringing federal spending back to the level where we can afford it, without burdening the next generation under a mountain of debt.
I believe this nation has the moral courage to make the simple choices – not the easy choices – to do right by our children and grandchildren.

I also believe that America’s national security challenges can be met as well. The threats we see around the world are very real, but so too is the power of liberty to transform adversaries into allies.

We’ve seen it in America’s special relationship with the United Kingdom – against whom we fought for our independence.

We’ve seen it in America’s alliances with Japan and Germany – against whom my father, and other members of the Greatest Generation, fought in World War II.

And we are seeing it in Afghanistan, Iraq, and across the Middle East – where millions of people still have a chance to secure their liberty – thanks to the sacrifice and determination of so many Americans who have fought against the tyrants and terrorists.

I trust that you all share that same sense of optimism. But whether you do or not, I’d be happy to take a few questions anyway. Thank you.

**John Cornyn** is the junior United States Senator for Texas.