THE TEA PARTY SAVES DEFENSE

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, AUG 14 2011

The intransigence of the Tea Party Republicans during the recent US debt ceiling negotiations has apparently saved the US defense budget from deep cuts that had seemed almost certain a month ago. The negotiations pushed a full agreement onto a special legislative committee which is to report in the fall. If the committee fails in its task or its report is not accepted by the Congress and the President then automatic cuts, equally apportioned between civilian and defense agencies, are mandated to take place over the next decade. The reductions will be taken from current base budgets, which in the case of defense does not include war costs such as fuel, ammunition, and pay for reservists called to active duty) adjusted for inflation. Factoring in reductions agreed in the deal setting up the special committee, the cuts come to $850 billion over the decade or roughly 15 percent of the projected defense budget.

This is a victory for those who favor a large US defense budget (I am not one of them though many European officials may be given the shield it provides). The US defense budget is on a security panic/regret cycle of 15-25 years. There have been four post-WWII peaks: Korea (1953), Vietnam (1968), the Reagan Build-up or Cold War surge (1986) and the current war on terror (2010?). The cuts are about a third from peak and have been shallower in recent downturns. Fifteen percent is a particular victory if the cycle this time is a long one because the $85 billion cut is supposed to be a floor. Of course, future Congresses are not truly bound the agreement, and the reduction is taken all at once rather than applied gradually as is normally the case. Nevertheless, expectations a month ago were that defense would likely be the biggest loser of the US debt crisis. Now, it is likely just another victim.

About the author:

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