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Weapons acquisition in the US: Streamlining the Process

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Past attempts to reform the US weapons acquisition process have largely met with failure. However, the combined impact of the economic recession and the US' current woes in Iraq and Afghanistan may paradoxically give the Obama administration the opportunity to succeed where previous administrations have failed.

TWO OF THE most critical and visible challenges that the Obama administration is currently grappling with are the ailing US economy and the ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. In comparison, the issue of defence spending has been lost to the public view. However, the Obama administration's attempt to rein in defence spending underscores how inextricably tied defence spending is to the economic crisis and the problems in Iraq and Afghanistan. To be sure, attempting to cut defence spending, especially by killing off major systems programmes, is a considerable challenge, not least because it entails taking on powerful interests entrenched in the military-industrial complex. However, the combination of the US government's deteriorating finances and the imperatives of Iraq and Afghanistan have made the task easier, though hardly plain-sailing.

A Strategic Shift or a Budget-Cutting Exercise?

Leading the drive to reorient the Pentagon's budget from future weapons programmes to the immediate needs of the US' two wars is Defence Secretary Robert M. Gates. Secretary Gates' budget proposal would involve not only the cancellation of existing weapon systems programmes, but also the reallocation of billions of dollars from the development of future weapons programmes to the more pressing needs of the US' two campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. At risk are major weapon systems such as the army's Future Combat Systems and the navy's next generation of aircraft carriers.

Indeed, in campaigning for his overhaul of the Pentagon's budget, Gates has emphasised meeting the current needs of the US military over future weapon systems. In addressing the Army War College, he said that there was a misperception that "Iraq and Afghanistan were exotic distractions that would be wrapped up relatively soon" and that the weapons and hardware needed there were "fielded ad hoc and on the fly".

While it is highly debatable whether this constitutes a genuine strategic shift, or a budget-cutting exercise merely disguised as one, what is significant is that Gates' aggressive campaign to garner support from the military and defence companies to streamline the defence budget and overhaul the procurement process is in stark contrast to Donald Rumsfeld's tenure as Defence Secretary. In the six years that he presided over ever-increasing wartime budgets, Rumsfeld never had to kill weapon systems programmes and therefore never had to sell the idea of budget cuts or reforms to stakeholders.

The timing of this push to reform the weapons acquisition process is also significant: while past administrations have acknowledged the need for reforms, attempting to do so now amidst the sharp economic recession underscores how closely linked military power and economic power are. Paradoxically, the economic crisis could prove to be the very impetus to meaningful reforms of the defence procurement process as the issue of cost effectiveness gains increasing traction not only with policy makers but the general public.

Unexpected Support from the Air Force

The push to consolidate the Pentagon's budget via the cancellation of existing weapons programmes has gained unexpected support from the US Air Force. In an opinion editorial published in the *Washington Post* on 13 April 2009, Secretary of the Air Force Michael Donley and Air Force Chief of Staff General Norton Schwartz endorsed Gates' proposal to end production of the F-22 Raptor air superiority fighter, the most advanced and capable fighter in the US Air Force. This support is unprecedented, since historically the military has been deeply opposed to the cancellation of weapons programmes in which it has invested considerable resources, particularly weapon systems that are highly symbolic of its power.

Secretary Donley and General Schwartz have acknowledged that, given budget constraints, procuring more F-22s necessarily means less money to acquire much needed capabilities in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, command and control, as well as capabilities to conduct irregular warfare. More importantly, they write that "based on warfighting experience over the past several years and judgments about future threats", there is a need to re-evaluate the Air Force's orders for F-22s.

Essentially, this is a tacit acknowledgement that the F-22 has not proved useful in Iraq. Designed with sophisticated radar and stealth characteristics, the F-22 is optimised for air-to-air combat with ground attack capability. However, the airspace over Iraq does not present threats where deployment of the F-22 is warranted. In other words, as far as operations in Iraq are concerned, the F-22's characteristics are an 'over-kill', and therefore 'gold-plated'.

This is a significant development because it undermines the existing 'because we can do it, we must do it' technological imperative that drives weapons acquisition. The rationale is to obtain the most sophisticated weapon system, without necessarily matching it to current and most likely threats and needs. Current economic difficulties, and the consequent constraints on defence budgets, may finally force defence planners and the military to acknowledge that the complex and advanced weapon systems that are either in use or in development may not only be an overkill for conventional military operations. Indeed, they may also be ill-suited to irregular warfare and such acquisitions should either be scaled back or cancelled altogether.

Policy Implications

Defence budget reforms is a perennial policy agenda item, not only in the US but in other countries. The economic crisis and the resultant constraints in defence budgets is forcing policy makers to streamline weapons acquisitions and to overhaul the procurement process. The need to maintain capabilities that are commensurate with the military's objectives and missions while working within

the budget has made cost effectiveness the key guiding principle. The gold-plated weapon system is a luxury that is ill-afforded in an economic crisis. With the world's biggest military, with powerful embedded interests both in government and industry, conceding the need for drastic reforms amidst the economic crisis, defence policymakers will feel compelled to at least re-examine their rationale for weapons acquisition.

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