

Forbes: Lawmakers Plan To File Resolution Against Further Defense Cuts

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House Armed Services subcommittee leaders and colleagues plan to file a resolution that claims national security funding is the government's top priority -- and that any further reductions to the Pentagon's budget would cause significant harm to the United States.

The proposed resolution is designed to inform the congressional supercommittee tasked with finding at least \$1.2 trillion in savings that the House of Representatives is against further defense cuts, said Rep. Randy Forbes (R-VA), who chairs the House Armed Services readiness subcommittee and is spearheading the resolution as part of his "Strong Defense: Strong America" initiative.

"I think the unfortunate thing, as you know, the supercommittee is going to be moving on this, and we think this resolution could be a great symbol and signal to them about where the House stands," Forbes said in interview last week.

If the 12-lawmaker supercommittee fails to meet its mandate, it could trigger an additional \$600 billion in defense cuts as part of its sequestration. Forbes said he hopes his colleagues will file legislation that will undo sequestration measures if they go into effect. A resolution is non-binding.

"This is catastrophic kind of stuff when you're looking at some of the situations that we're facing right now with our military and the stress that they're under," Forbes said. "What I hope is going to happen then is that we actually can have legislation that says, 'Look, let's change what we're doing with this sequestration thing, and let's get a piece of legislation that works.'"

He said he is fairly optimistic that this counter-sequestration legislation could happen in the House, but is unsure about the Senate. Forbes did not vote for the Budget Control Act of 2011 that created the sequestration.

Forbes' spokesman said later that the congressman does not have any details on this legislation, just that he hopes someone files it. The congressman does not want to speculate on whether he would file at this point, the spokesman said. "We're doing everything we can to not reach that point," the spokesman said. "If we do reach that point, then we'll consider it. Until we get there, we're fighting the fight to stop it."

Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC), who chairs the House Armed Services military personnel subcommittee and is co-sponsoring the resolution, said he believes the primary function of the national government is supporting its defense. He also hopes that if sequestration goes into effect Democrats and Republicans "would come together to avert the cuts."

Congressional watchers believe lawmakers will work to avoid the sequestration measures, even if they get triggered. Under the budget control law, sequestration would not take effect until January 2013 -- giving lawmakers a year to find a solution, they say.

American Enterprise Institute resident scholar Norman Ornstein said that Congress has a history of finding a way around Draconian measures, such as what the sequestration could put into effect.

"What one Congress does doesn't necessarily bind a future Congress," Ornstein said. "They'll put it off; there are lots of ways of fudging it up."

"I just think the likelihood of the full sequester hitting defense -- which would mean dramatically slashing the defense budget -- is just about zero," Ornstein added.

Todd Harrison of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments said these sequestration caps do not tend to last very long. "When people start to see the real impacts of cutting [the] budget, whether defense or other parts of the budget, they usually don't like what they see and they change the legislation after the fact," he said.

However, Harrison noted, there is always a chance that the very divided Congress could struggle with coming up with legislation to change the sequestration cuts before they go into effect, making them a very real threat.

Ornstein said he is hopeful the supercommittee reaches its goals, but noted that it is anybody's guess as to whether they are able to, especially with some panel members who are "bedrock ideologues." He said, however, that he does not expect Forbes' initiative or the resolution to "do anything more than get a little bit of attention about the dangers of cutting the defense budget," Ornstein said. He said there will be cuts to defense -- the question is just how severe will they be.

Wilson said he would do anything possible to prevent further defense cuts, including filing legislation or working with appropriators and authorizers to fund the military. He pointed to the Justice Department's accusation this week that Iran plotted to assassinate Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States on U.S. soil as proof that threats against this nation continue.

"We've got to be prepared," Wilson said, noting this is personal to him having served in the national guard and having all four of his sons serve in the military. He said defense, which takes up about 18 percent of the budget, should not be hit with 50 percent of the sequestration cut. He is hopeful, however, that the supercommittee achieves its goals. The panel must produce its bill by Thanksgiving.

Forbes said he is concerned about the supercommittee because the only defense-minded person the panel is Sen. Jon Kyl (R-AZ). Kyl threatened during a speech last month to walk out of the supercommittee if other members call for new defense-spending cuts.

Forbes, however, is resolute against any more defense cuts, even if it means some defense cuts could prevent sequestration. He is also against raising taxes. Last month, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Rep. Buck McKeon (R-CA) said he would rather raise taxes than allow further defense cuts.

McKeon "respects and appreciates the remarkable energy, which reflects a committee consensus that defense has been cut enough," said his spokesman John Noonan when asked about Forbes' resolution.

The proposed resolution calls for further defense spending levels to be based on strategy and a determination of threats to the United States and its interests, and the capabilities and related costs needed to deter or defeat those threats.

"Spending on national security did not create the current budget crisis and further cuts to national defense will not solve it," the resolution states. It claims that decisions made in defense spending could have a detrimental effect on both the industrial base, the U.S. economy and the job market. Panetta had said a \$1 trillion cut to defense could cause unemployment to increase by 1 percent. Forbes said that the filing of the resolution is being delayed as more members sign on as original cosponsors. All subcommittee chairman, except for House Armed Services tactical air and land forces subcommittee head Rep. Roscoe Bartlett (R-MD), have signed on. At this point, 17 lawmakers have signed on to cosponsor the legislation with Forbes -- all Republicans. Forbes hopes to get the resolution marked up in the House Armed Services Committee quickly, and then get it passed on the floor.

But the committee's ranking member, Rep. Adam Smith (D-WA), disagrees with the resolution -- noting that while he is against "large and indiscriminate" defense cuts, "issuing dire warnings" about the impact of defense cuts does not solve the problem.

"Considering the dynamics of the budget debate, it is clear that the only way we can avoid steep defense cuts is to put revenue on the table," Smith said in a statement through his spokesman. "I urge my Republican colleagues to support increased revenues and to help avoid drastic cuts to defense."

Following the filing of the resolution, Forbes said he intends to schedule a series of dinners to bring members in and talk to them about the risk of defense cuts. "We'll focus on both sides of the aisle, but I can't promise you whether the Democrats come or don't come but our goal is to reach out to people," Forbes said.

A number of the leading Democrats on the House Armed Services Committee haven't been brought in yet, but Forbes said that's just because of a lack of time. He also has not reached out the Senate.

In addition to the strategic issues with defense cuts, Forbes said that they also hope to bring to light the economic ramifications of the cuts. He said unemployment will soar with these cuts. His initiative is also designed to highlight facts about defense cuts, with a number of the details based on a new House Armed Services Committee report released by Republican staffers last month.

"Part of what we're doing with all of this, we have been for weeks now trying to have the country and especially policy makers ask what we think is a very important question, which is, what are the risks we're assuming by not supplying the resources our combatant commanders need to defend us against the threats that America might have."

"That question wasn't being asked in Washington," Forbes continued. "We believe it's starting to be asked now." -- *Jordana Mishory*