

February 11, 2008 - Congress Eyes Defense Cuts

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The Army's multibillion-dollar modernization program, the Future Combat System, faces serious challenge this year.

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Congress will have a greater impact on the massive defense budget this year, looking afresh at many programs long thought to be a sure thing. This includes the Army's multibillion-dollar modernization program, the controversial Future Combat System (FCS).

A high-tech series of air and ground vehicles linked by a wireless network, FCS has faced criticism before for being expensive and complicated. Lawmakers have previously been quick to cut funding from the program. But senior defense officials acknowledge that this year the system is facing real trouble.

"The program is really in jeopardy, and I think it's on the ropes," says one senior officer, who wished to speak anonymously and only on background because of how sensitive the issue has become.

The fiscal 2009 budget released last week included \$3.6 billion for FCS, continuing a program now thought to cost \$120 billion by completion.

But recent comments by members of Congress, analysts, and even the Defense secretary himself, indicate all that money may not stay there long.

"Frankly, it is hard for me to see how that program can be completed in its entirety," Defense Secretary Robert Gates told a Senate panel last week. "But I think that in light of what are inevitably going to be pressures on the defense budget in the future, I think that that one is one that we will have to look at carefully."

FCS comprises about 14 vehicles, including unmanned aerial planes and tanks and other ground vehicles. The technology that links them all allows the soldier on the ground to be linked through a transmitter to the senior commander during an operation. It represents one of the most high-tech initiatives for land warfare.

But Congress isn't convinced.

Last year, lawmakers cut funding for FCS as they faced mounting pressure to protect troops in combat. They initially tried to "reallocate" as much as \$900 million that was earmarked for the program to help pay for body armor for soldiers, up-armored Humvees, Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) trucks, and other war needs.

Army officials balked, sounding what one staffer on Capitol Hill called a "general alarm," and dispatched several senior Army officers to the Hill to repair the damage. They feared that the cuts were the first of attempts to entirely kill off the program. Their efforts led to much of the funding being restored and ultimately only about \$200 million was cut from the program.

The pressures on the defense spending bill this year are different from the past: Congress is again trying to fund two wars; and the Army is attempting to expand the number of soldiers in its ranks while it recapitalizes its stock of aging equipment. The combination of these pressures, along with the expected change in the White House next year, gives Congress the opportunity to really look at the program. Some legislators have put the FCS in their sights.

One of the most vocal appropriators in Congress, Rep. John Murtha (D) of Pennsylvania echoed Secretary Gates' comments to an audience Thursday. Mr. Murtha, who sits on the Appropriations Committee and chairs its defense subcommittee, said he, too, doubts the program can be completed.

"[The Army] is doing it so slowly that they never get there," he said during remarks for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank in Washington. "I mean, they have no plan. I said you've got to take some risks, you've got to cut some stuff out."

Army officials acknowledge the high costs of FCS, but note that the program represents only an average of about 4 percent of the overall Army budget over the next several years. It doesn't make sense to replace "legacy systems," older, outdated platforms of the type worn out by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with anything but equipment suited for the next generation of warfare, they say.

"In today's era of persistent conflict, the Army budget is intended to carefully balance current force requirements with a pressing, sincere need to continuously modernize, to adapt, and to meet the changing world security environment," said Paul Boyce, an Army spokesman, in a prepared statement. "It is less expensive in the long run to build FCS than it is to continue to retool legacy systems."

The recent spate of negative comments against the FCS system are "worrisome," says Loren Thompson, a defense analyst at The Lexington Institute, a think tank based outside Washington, though he does not think they sound the death knell for the program.

Mr. Thompson does not call himself a supporter of the program, but he does say that it's the "closest thing" the Army has to a solution to some of its modernization challenges.

Thompson thinks Gates's recent pronouncement is a signal to the Army that it needs to communicate better the value of the program.

"If you look at what it's supposed to do, it's not that hard to understand, but for some reason the Army can't tell the story,"

he says.