

Pentagon Budget Headed For House Rewrite

By David Lerman, Bloomberg News

Members of the House Armed Services Committee take out their red pens this week to rewrite President Barack Obama's defense budget. The Republican-controlled panel is preparing to reverse much of Obama's plan for defense spending cuts when it votes Wednesday on its version of the defense authorization bill. Committee leaders already have made clear their intention to boost funding for battle tanks, Navy destroyers and missile defense.

Seeking to reverse what he called "a strategy founded on hope," California Representative Howard "Buck" McKeon, the committee chairman, said he wants to slow Pentagon plans for a 5.5 percent reduction in troop strength by fiscal 2017.

"Shrinking our end strength by upwards of 120,000 troops, as the administration proposes, means having to increase the level of troop rotations and deployments," McKeon said in a Washington speech last month. "That's unacceptable."

The panel also is poised to reject the administration's request for two new rounds of military base closings. The early maneuvering underscored how difficult it may be for Obama to make good on his plan to save \$487 billion over 10 years by trimming military spending.

"Our hope is that our strategy will not be picked apart piece by piece," Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said at a Pentagon news conference last month.

Committee leaders began doing just that last month, setting up a showdown over proposed spending cuts. A subcommittee bill authorizes more than \$300 million to avoid a proposed temporary shutdown of production lines for General Dynamics Corp.'s Abrams tank and BAE Systems Plc's Bradley Fighting Vehicle.

Lawmakers also took steps to block a Pentagon plan that would retire one version of Northrop Grumman Corp.'s Global Hawk unmanned aircraft. An additional \$260 million would be provided to avoid mothballing about 18 drones.

The panel is also prepared to restore funding for a Virginia-class attack submarine that the Navy struck from its fiscal 2014 plan to cut costs. The Navy intends to buy two submarines each year, while it offered funding for only one in 2014. The boats are built jointly by Huntington Ingalls Industries Inc. of Newport News, Virginia and General Dynamics' Electric Boat shipyard in Groton, Connecticut.