

Congressman: New Threats Could Halt Military Cuts

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NEWPORT NEWS -- The second-in-command of the House Armed Services Committee predicted Friday that the automatic defense cuts set to begin again next fall will be stopped because rising threats worldwide are swaying Americans to support a stronger military.

U.S. Rep. Mac Thornberry, a Texas Republican, toured Newport News Shipbuilding with four local congressmen. He said afterward that he expects that the remainder of more than \$500 billion in defense cuts set to be made over a decade -- known as sequestration -- will be changed or undone by late next year. The reductions are part of more than \$1 trillion in automatic cuts begun last year. Hampton Roads' economy, which relies heavily on defense spending, has already felt the effects.

"I can't give you the road map on exactly how that will be changed but I do know that as I travel around the country... people realize it's a dangerous world," said Thornberry, who might be in line to become committee chairman in January. "You just have to summarize the headlines any particular day to know that it is foolhardy to continue to cut defense. I think everybody understands that better now."

He and other members of Congress return to Washington next week and will seek to pass a short-term spending bill, known as a continuing resolution, to keep the government open when the new fiscal year begins Oct. 1. The resolution would continue paying for defense-related programs without interruption.

However, a full annual budget isn't expected to be considered until after the Nov. 4 congressional elections.

Thornberry and members of the region's delegation weren't ready to say whether or when the U.S. should put troops on the ground to deal with threats such as Islamist extremists in Iraq and Syria. But they contended that by its presence, a large U.S. military can deter such threats from rising.

"There may be differences of opinion about the use of military power to deal with any one of those threats," Thornberry said. "But there should be no difference of opinion about having the military power available to deal with this broad array of threats."

U.S. Rep. Randy Forbes, a frequent critic of President Barack Obama's defense policies, noted that Russia's actions in Ukraine and China's pressure on other countries have come at a time when the United States' military is shrinking.

"You don't need Americans at war; you need Americans in leadership," said the Chesapeake Republican, who also is on the armed services panel.

U.S. Rep. Bobby Scott reiterated his argument that building up the military requires new revenue. He has opposed cutting other government programs to shift more money to defense and was critical of Congress's decision last year to renew what's called the Bush tax cuts that were due to expire.

"You can't get this kind of (military) presence free," said the Newport News Democrat. "You need to put this money in the budget. When you spend all your money cutting taxes, you don't have any money left for defense. We need to figure out a way to get some more revenue on the table."

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Submitted by Jim Maxwell, NWSA President