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To most Americans, the term “sequestration” does not mean a whole lot, at least right now, but it should, given the uncertain future facing U.S. national security.

Over the next 10 years, because of sequestration, the Pentagon will be forced to absorb \$500 billion in budget cuts that will strike at the heart of America’s military. Making this even more dangerous is the fact that the legislation triggering sequestration, the Budget Control Act, also imposed an additional \$450 billion in defense budget cuts for a total of nearly \$1 trillion of reductions over the next decade.

The next 10 years are sure to be no different from the last. In the Middle East, Iran is desperately searching to fill a regional power vacuum and enhance its weapons program, while threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz and targeting Israel with unapologetic provocation. Meanwhile, the United States still has an obligation to Iraq. There is a necessity for diplomatic support and engagement, even though the ground combat mission is over.

Africa is also experiencing power struggles of its own. The situations in Libya and Egypt are evolving, while Yemen and Somalia are acting as staging grounds for al-Qaeda. There is also the threat of Somali pirates in international waters. Multiple high-profile hostage situations and combat rescues show just how serious of a threat that rogue bands of pirates are to naval and commercial shipping lanes.

There is also the threat of North Korea with its aggressive pursuit of advanced aerial weaponry, Russia with its focus on arms modernization, and China with its large-scale and rapid military buildup. China’s display of hostility toward Taiwan — a friend and ally of the United States — also shows no sign of diminishing.

With all of this, more than 70,000 American troops are in Afghanistan, facing down a dangerous enemy. For the United States and other nations, interest in Afghanistan and the region will continue long after the last of the coalition ground forces leave and the next phase of the mission begins.

Ignoring America's obligation as a world leader and the patchwork of threats that exist today won't eliminate the risk posed by an Iran that one day acquires nuclear weapons or a North Korea that eventually acquires effective strike capability. More likely, these and other threats will develop more quickly and efficiently, putting the global interests of the U.S. directly in the cross hairs.

Through a robust national defense, the United States has always sent a clear message around the world that American intentions are good and we stand by our allies. The strength of the U.S. military has dissuaded conflict and suggested to adversaries that challenging freedom is a losing proposition. It was this deterrent, in fact, that won the Cold War and turned the U.S. military into the world's most effective fighting force.

Sequestration would change all of this, for the worse. In the words of Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, sequestration is a "nutty formula, and it's goofy to begin with, and it's not something, frankly, that anybody responsible ought to put into effect." He also said sequestration is the equivalent of "shooting ourselves in the head." Tough words, but Secretary Panetta is right.

Sequestration would produce the smallest ground force since 1940, the smallest Navy since 1915 and the smallest tactical fighter force in Air Force history. Ironically, the president's defense policy shift to the Pacific increases reliance on the Navy, but with the smallest fleet in nearly a century, controlling the oceans and projecting force will become an even more difficult and selective process, requiring prioritization that would create vulnerabilities elsewhere. Resetting America's armed forces after a decade-plus of combat action is another necessity that cannot be overlooked.

There is also a guarantee of pink slips throughout the uniformed services and every industry that directly supports the U.S. military. In San Diego, the military sustains hundreds of thousands of jobs, and billions of dollars in economic productivity. San Diego — even for all of its strategic value — is not immune to job loss and other economic impacts accompanying deep budget cuts.

Sequestration is a term Americans should get to know and understand, because it will have real and lasting consequences if left unchecked. The upside is that the risks and dangers can be avoided as long as Congress and the president act in the coming months.

The clock is ticking to stave off sequestration — a move that would signal to our friends and enemies alike that we uphold our promises and stand ready to defend our interests against any threat.