

President Obama's new defense strategy amounts to an "appeasement" and a sign of weakness to America's foes, local Republicans in Congress said Thursday.

Obama and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta laid out a plan developed after a "comprehensive defense review" to trim the nation's military commitments abroad and develop a "leaner" fighting machine.

Republicans seized on the plan as evidence that the United States is less safe under the Obama administration.

"Secretary Panetta's announcement directly signals to our friends and adversaries America's diminished ability to project power on a global scale and defend our interests during a very uncertain time," said Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla.

Even some Obama supporters were reluctant to fully buy into the plan.

Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., said there were "clearly" savings to be found in the defense budget, but he also thought Obama's plan "needs to be reviewed."

"Still, when you get right down to it, the Pentagon budget must continue to be fully sufficient for a simple reason: We have to protect our country," Nelson said.

Defense cuts are required under the Budget Control Act passed by Congress last year. But military spending could take an even bigger hit if automatic cuts prescribed by a bipartisan committee's failure to reach a deficit-cutting deal go into effect in 2013.

Panetta said such across-the-board cuts could be devastating. He argued that the reductions outlined Thursday were based on careful consideration about the direction the military should

take.

Rep. Allen West, R-Plantation, who served in the Army for more than 20 years, disputed that characterization. The Obama administration landed on a dollar number for cuts and then crafted a plan around that, he said.

Rebutting the president's reference to meetings with an array of defense leaders, West said the administration "sat down with themselves."

"It was based upon, 'This is going to be the budget of the military, and they'll just have to take the risk,'" West said. "I don't think that is the approach we should take."

Obama presented the strategy as "turning the page on a decade of war" and on military spending that grew astronomically in that time. Under his plan, spending would continue to grow, but at a slower rate.

Obama said he wanted to build up the U.S. presence in Asia and the Pacific region while drawing down in the Middle East, where combat has ended in Iraq and is winding down in Afghanistan. But he pledged not to reduce the military to the extent it is ill-prepared.

"The United States of America is the greatest force for freedom and security that the world has ever known," he said. "And in no small measure, that's because we've built the best-trained, best-led, best-equipped military in history - and as commander in chief, I'm going to keep it that way."

But Rep. Tom Rooney, R-Tequesta, said the president is compromising the military institution as well as national security.

"The president's new strategy relies on the flawed assumption that by retreating from the world and reducing the size of our military, we can make our threats go away," Rooney said. "This

strategy of appeasement has never worked.

"I believe that America should speak softly and carry the biggest stick. A strong, effective military is critical to deterring our enemies, keeping America safe and preserving our interests around the world."

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