Defense spending will increase, experts say

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In the wake of Tuesday's terrorist attacks, defense experts say Congress and the Bush administration will probably agree to boost defense spending beyond already planned increases.

The question is how the money will be spent and whether efforts to fight terrorism will get a higher priority than new weapons systems such as the F-22 and the joint strike fighter.

DEFENSE **Analysts say that the defense budget will rise in wake of attacks, but that the debate will be about how to spend added funds.**

In the short run, analysts expect leading Democrats to mute their earlier criticism of President Bush's proposed defense budget, although there will still be debate about the details, particularly the proposed national missile defense plan.

"The Congress knows it would be political suicide to niggle over the president's budget request for defense," said Robert Killebrew, a defense strategy consultant and retired Army officer.

"This is certain to lead to an increase in defense spending above what was expected," said Loren Thompson, executive director of the Lexington Institute, a defense think tank. "More importantly, we will be changing our spending priorities."

President Bush has asked Congress to approve $329 billion in defense spending for the budget year starting Oct. 1, $33 billion more than this year. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has said that the increase, the largest since the mid-1980s, is still not enough to address all the military's problems.

But much of the additional money is slated for personnel costs, upgrading facilities and repairing and maintaining existing weapons. Bush has proposed spending $61.4 billion on weapons purchases, $1.4 billion less than projected by the Clinton administration.

Killebrew said that the first priority of Bush and the Congress should be to make a serious commitment to preventing future terrorist acts and to tracking down and punishing terrorists.

The key to doing that is an extensive upgrade of both military intelligence gathering and the Central Intelligence Agency, even if it means forgoing buying some new weapons.

"We need to spend a lot more money on intelligence," Killebrew said. "Intelligence things suffer in the defense budget because we'd rather buy tanks and airplanes rather than software and linguists."

Killebrew said that the military could use many of its existing weapons systems better, but that he believes that missile defense should remain a high priority. Terrorists willing to kill tens of thousands of victims wouldn't hesitate to fire a missile with a nuclear warhead at a major U.S. city, he said.

This report contains material from Bloomberg News Service.

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