



Our military isn't depleted; it's overworked

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February 15, 2018

Both Congress and the White House solidified their requests for the 2018 and 2019 federal budgets within the last week to very similar effect — large increases in defense spending. But these plans have yet to be appropriated.

Congressional leaders tout their deal as a bipartisan, bicameral triumph. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) hopes the deal will “unwind the sequestration cuts that have hamstrung the military and jeopardized our national security.”

To break the cycle of continuing resolutions and the threat of government shutdown, Republicans and Democrats are prepared to compromise on a more-is-more funding strategy. In so doing, Congress essentially said the government doesn't need to manage its cash flow — it needs a bigger wallet.

The two-year deal will add \$80 billion in 2018 and \$85 billion in 2019 to the defense budget. That would increase defense funds to \$629 billion and \$647 billion for base expenses, respectively. Then, add to that roughly \$70 billion per year in Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funds intended to fund the War on Terror.

The Pentagon ends up with a whopping \$700 billion budget for 2018 and \$716 billion for 2019 — amounting to a roughly 17 percent increase by 2019 in the base defense budget from 2017 levels.

In total, with the cap increase and OCO accounts, the government will spend \$305 billion more on the military in the next two years than under a stricter enforcement of the Budget Control Act. Coupled with the proposed nondefense increases of \$63 billion and \$68 billion for each year, that number rises to \$436 billion over the existing caps.

Why the push for so much more? The president himself tweeted that this new budget would not only strengthen the military but “Also means JOBS, JOBS, JOBS!” But what he neglected to mention is that defense spending doesn't produce nearly as many American jobs as much as investment in other sectors.

Every \$1 million of defense spending would create 6.9 jobs — but between the public and private sector, that same \$1 million would create 19.2 jobs in elementary and secondary education, 14.3 jobs in health care and 9.8 jobs if invested in clean energy instead.

Recent budget fights focused on the Budget Control Act caps and gave both sides of the aisle a method of keeping each other's desired splurges in check. To raise the spending caps, both sides had to agree to amend them.

This usually led to modest hikes in military spending alongside modest hikes in nondefense spending — all under the guise of fiscal restraint.

The Budget Control Act intended not to cut or weaken the military, as McConnell said, but to slow its growth over time to allow for careful consideration of national security priorities. Asking our military to be prepared for every mission set under the sun is unrealistic and unfair to service members. Our military isn't depleted and weak — it's stronger than ever but overworked and asked to do too much.

Currently, the caps on defense spending stand at \$549 billion for 2018 and \$562 billion for 2019. This is an already large sum of money that doesn't even cover the funds labeled emergency and shifted into the OCO account that is exempt from the BCA caps.

Congress spent years under the Obama administration abusing OCO funds to bypass the spending restrictions and give the military a boost without renegotiating nondefense discretionary funding.

Under this administration, the funding that hawks dreamt about for years might be within reach. In past years, Office of Management and Budget Director Mick Mulvaney tried to finance a defense buildup by cutting nondefense accounts— targeting agencies and initiatives like the State Department and funding for the arts.

This new budget shows the tradeoff now lies not in managing competing priorities, but in cutting a deal with enough of an increase to non-defense spending to entice Democrats to sign onto bigger defense numbers.

One of the biggest flaws with this more-is-more strategy is that it completely discounts something that should be the foundation of American force structure: prioritization. The government must learn to prioritize mission sets and then fund personnel and weapons acquisition accordingly.

Throwing more money at an overworked military won't solve the problems this budget seeks to address — it will only create more waste.

White House documents claimed that inherent in the new budget would be a push for the Department of Defense to “pursue an aggressive reform agenda to achieve savings that will reinvest in higher priority needs.” What this lacks is any mention of which reforms, how much will be saved and how those savings will be reinvested.

It's disheartening to see that even reforms called for by all sides of the political spectrum, like another round of Base Realignment and Closure, which reap billions of dollars in savings annually, are noticeably absent from this budget.

If the OMB can't get behind reforms with such bipartisan support, it's doubtful that they'll tackle the even thornier problems like acquisition reform to attain any sizable savings. It's even less likely that those savings would actually be prioritized, as this administration and Congress show no signs of wanting to choose between options.

To ease the strain on our military, policymakers need to admit that sometimes you can't have it all. Even this budget comes with tradeoffs in the form of higher debt and deficits. It's time to get back to the basics of force structure planning and start prioritizing in order to build a sustainable future.

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