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Pentagon budget plan aims to upgrade its global power projection

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The Pentagon will use its substantial budget next year to modernize weapons systems, support allies abroad and cope with emerging challenges across the globe, Defense Department officials said Monday.

The emphasis is on deterrence.

Robert Scher, assistant secretary of defense for strategy, plans and capabilities, said the agency's "five evolving challenges" are counterterrorism and four troublesome countries: Russia, China, North Korea and Iran.

The Defense Department has proposed a budget of \$583 billion for fiscal 2017, nearly 2 percent more than the \$573 billion budgeted for defense in 2016. It includes more money for programs such as the European Reassurance Initiative, which aims to demonstrate U.S. support for European allies in the face of potential Russian aggression in the region, such as its takeover of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014.

"When Secretary (Ash) Carter got here, it was very clear that he assessed there was a new security environment," Scher said during a panel discussion with military budget officials at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "The strategic imperative is to deter, and if not deter, win the nation's wars."

The U.S. can upgrade its projection of global power through several programs, said Jamie Morin, director of cost assessment and program evaluation at the Defense Department.

The department has proposed investing more than \$40 billion in undersea capabilities, a domain where U.S. forces are already the dominant power, Morin said.

Some of that investment will go toward technical improvements to the Navy's Virginia-class attack submarines, tripling missile-firing ability, as well as moving toward adapting technologies like the Tomahawk missile for a variety of scenarios, including anti-ship, uses, he said.

For Benjamin Friedman, a defense analyst at the Cato Institute, there hasn't really been a marked change in strategy by the Pentagon. The U.S. has always been interested in projecting power abroad, and the budget proposal arguably seeks to preserve that capability, Friedman said in a phone interview.

The spending blueprint reflects the thinking behind the Pentagon's "third offset strategy," which seeks to provide the U.S. with a war-fighting advantage when facing a foe whose conventional warfare abilities match our own, Morin said.

However, Friedman said calling the Pentagon's plan an offset strategy is a misnomer. The first offset plan was created during the Cold War as a measure to combat the Soviet Union's superior manpower with a large nuclear arsenal, he said, whereas the Pentagon in 2016 is mainly improving existing technologies.

Friedman, who believes the U.S. should pursue a more restrained foreign policy, said that in most discussions, offset has just come to mean a response to an enemy's capability.

"To me, it's the Chinese that have an offset strategy to combat our naval and air force ability with area denial," he said.

China has begun to exert its claims over the South China Sea, which includes island chains like the Spratlys and Paracels, which are claimed by several other nations, including U.S. allies like Japan. It has also begun building its own islands atop coral reefs and constructing military facilities there. The U.S. has mounted several freedom of navigation patrols near those islands, essentially showing China that the U.S. does not recognize its claims to a 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around them.

Faced with adversaries such as China that have the ability to deny U.S. access to certain regions, the Pentagon must develop new ways to project power, Morin said.

"Adversaries and potential adversaries need to understand ... the capabilities the U.S. can bring to bear if we need to defend allies and American interests," he said. "That's at the heart of global deterrence."