



Presidential candidates are short on defense spending specifics

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Given recent history, the next president can expect to face an even more unpredictable world than the one President Obama is dealing with. Russia, China, Syria, Iran, North Korea, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant — the list of security challenges is daunting. It will require smart policy choices backed by a powerful military to protect U.S. interests.

So far, the candidates have not sufficiently explained their approaches to military spending which, at \$580 billion for 2016, is half of the federal discretionary budget. The toughest talk comes from the Republicans who lean dangerously toward a one-dimensional view of American strength that is over-reliant on an all-powerful military.

“I will make our military so big, powerful and strong that no one will mess with us,” Donald Trump says. But what does that mean? This is the guy who extolled the power of nuclear deterrence in a recent debate, but didn’t know it relies on three types of forces — missiles, planes and submarines.

Like his rivals for the party’s nomination — Sen. Marco Rubio, Sen. Ted Cruz and Gov. John Kasich — Trump supports lifting the caps on the defense budget. Some of the candidates act as if these fiscal restraints were imposed by Obama, when in fact they resulted from a 2011 compromise between the White House and the Republican-led Congress. The caps are overly restrictive, but they have helped rein in out-of-control military spending.

Rubio wants to “restore military strength” by building more ships and submarines, reversing troop cuts, and expanding missile defenses. That would cost an additional \$1 trillion over the next 10 years, Benjamin Friedman, a defense expert at the Cato Institute, estimates. Although Cruz is eager to shrink the rest of the government, his plans to salvage a “shockingly undermanned and ill-prepared” fighting force would increase military spending by \$2.5 trillion over eight years, Friedman says. Kasich would also raise military spending, but more slowly than Rubio and Cruz.

Giving the Pentagon a blank check does not ensure security. It got most of what it wanted in the decade after 9/11, yet America still struggles to keep Afghanistan and Iraq from falling to insurgents.

The Republican candidates mislead the public when they say the military is hollowed out; it is the world's most advanced fighting force, with a larger budget than the next seven countries combined. Still, the endless wars have taken a toll on troops and weapons.

Before any infusion of new funds, the Pentagon, which has wasted billions of dollars on misguided programs, needs to prove it can be a better steward. Congress needs to reform the military health care program, whose costs are spiraling out of control. One place to save: Scale back the planned \$1 trillion, 30-year modernization of a nuclear arsenal that will never be used and spend the money on conventional weapons that are needed to fight ISIL and other threats. Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, unlike the Republican candidates, have said they are open to this.

Clinton has advocated the idea of "smart power," which relies on a range of tools, diplomatic as well as military, to keep the nation safe. She has said she would name a commission to study military spending. Sanders wants a "robust military" but opposes spending increases.

America needs a strong and technologically advanced military, but politically driven excessive investment in the Pentagon has too often meant short shrift for the State Department and its diplomatic missions, as well as cuts in domestic programs that hurt the most vulnerable citizens. It is crucial for the next president to get that balance right.