



Trump's Promise To Boost Defense Was Just Bragging

Benjamin Friedman

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The biggest news about the Trump administration's release Tuesday of its \$603 billion 2018 defense budget proposal is that there isn't much.

The anticlimax comes partly because most of the details were already out, thanks to the "skinny budget" plan for discretionary spending released in March and a recent leak.

Moreover, the most newsworthy aspects of the proposal—its big cuts and chicaneries—came in non-defense areas and through 10-year projections that are little more than symbolic wish lists.

There's a bigger reason that Trump's budget is historically unimportant: Congress is going to ignore it. Even the 2018 plan seems more statement than realistic attempt to guide appropriations.

The breadth of the non-defense cuts used to fund the \$54 billion defense increase makes it easy for even vulnerable Democrats to oppose it. That, along with Trump's declining public support, even among conservatives, is why Republican backers won't stick up for his plan.

Even if the budget were less impolitic overall, its military spending increase would face long odds thanks to the cap on defense spending, which is \$54 billion less than Trump wants.

Under the Budget Control Act, if an annual defense appropriation exceeds its cap, the Treasury must "sequester" the excess, pulling proportionally from all accounts in that category. Contrary to much reporting, sequestration hasn't occurred since 2013, when it resulted automatically from the failure of the congressional supercommittee to come up with a deficit reduction plan.

Instead, Congress has cut a series of deals that raised the annual cap. Democrats made sure that the cap on non-defense discretionary spending went up by equal measure. The increases were paid for, in theory, by dubious future savings.

Further Pentagon relief comes through abuse of the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) budget, which is uncapped out of deference to the pretention that it is "emergency" spending for wars. The OCO budget is annually stuffed with non-war funding—now at least \$30 billion of it.

Congress will likely cut a deal of that sort again this year. Because changes to the caps take 60 Senate votes, Republican control of both branches affects bargaining dynamics less than it might seem.

The recent passage of the 2017 budget—midway through the fiscal year—is instructive. Senators Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer, the majority and minority leaders, essentially negotiated the deal and handed it to the president as a *fait accompli*. He could sign or veto and shutdown the government.

Despite the absence of funds for his promised wall, he grumbled and signed. There's no obvious reason for that pattern not to repeat itself with a budget deal later this year.

What's most notable about Trump's defense budget is what it wouldn't do, even if it were fully realized, somehow. It wouldn't deliver anything like the historical buildup Trump promised as a candidate and now brags about. Nor will it serve even the more modest goal of fixing the military's overhyped readiness problem, which the president refers to as "depletion."

The spending increase for 2018 would go largely to other priorities. Personnel spending would get a 3 percent increase, versus Obama's plans, which would cover pay increases and higher end-strength numbers in the ground forces. "Research, development, testing and evaluation," would get a 10 percent boost, which would largely benefit future weapons systems.

There is a small increase (2.1 percent) in "operations and maintenance," which in theory might go to readiness-enhancing things like training, equipment, and spare parts. But in practice that increase would largely go to cover the costs of the force's minor growth.

That means the military would get slightly larger but no more ready. In the longer term, the increases to force structure might generate demands on operational spending that budgets don't fund, meaning that Trump's limited buildup would exacerbate readiness problems.

Whatever happens with the budget, the president may just announce that he fixed the military, following his habit of declaring victory in contrivance of facts. Or he might blast Democrats for failing to back his buildup and blame any problems on them.

Republican hawks in Congress already blame Democrats for the same sin and Trump for not requesting more for the Pentagon. Democrats will say they are for a military increase too, just not without domestic spending increases.

What all this ignores is that even a smaller budget could end the military's readiness issues with better prioritization. There would be more to spare for readiness if the budget-makers in the White House, Pentagon and Congress didn't prefer to spend it on procurement and other priorities.

That reallocation would be especially feasible under a strategy that asked less of the military, allowing it be smaller and less strained.

The budget does usefully request another base closure round and a cut in foreign military financing, where we basically pay foreign states to buy U.S. weapons. Congress ought to preserve those measures as they toss the rest of the budget.

As I recently explained in the *Boston Review* , the irrelevance of Trump's budget is a generally good thing. Sticking to the budget caps, or better yet a lower cap including OCO funds, would force useful discipline on the Pentagon, potentially increasing efficiency and maybe even encouraging an overdue move toward restraint.

Benjamin H. Friedman is a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the Cato Institute.