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Fixing readiness doesn't require a spending boost

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A “readiness crisis” afflicts the U.S. military, according to congressional hawks eager to boost military spending. President Trump promises to reverse what he labeled the military's “depletion” in his dystopian inaugural address. That's an improvement over his campaign rhetoric, which labeled it a “disaster” in “shambles.”

In reality, there's no depletion or readiness crisis, unless it's a crisis that the U.S. military can't be everything that hawks want. The military does have readiness problems, but they could be addressed without raising total military budget. Those lamenting the state of military readiness ignore those solutions because they are using it to argue for a higher topline.

In principle, U.S. military readiness refers to the force's ability to perform its key missions. That means having units that are well-equipped, manned and trained. Two internal Pentagon tracking systems rate readiness on that score. That sounds simpler, but readiness' definition makes it tough to assess.

One reason is that its definition complicates assessment. The force's ability to accomplish its missions depends partly on future enemy actions, which are inherently uncertain.

There's also ambiguity as to what missions matter. Is a Marine unit that is prepared to strike at desert insurgents — but ill-equipped to land on contested Chinese beaches — unready?

Another complexity is that military readiness isn't an absolute good. Given limited resources, one cannot be fully prepared for everything all the time. Readiness should rise and fall as U.S. forces prepare for and exit conflicts.

These ambiguities mean that debates that appear to concern readiness are actually about other issues, like what to buy and what wars to expect. A telling example came last summer when former CIA Director David Petraeus and foreign policy scholar Michael O'Hanlon published two articles calling the “readiness crisis” a myth. They argued that while readiness is hardly perfect, vehicles are generally well-maintained and combat units well-trained and equipped for current wars.

Their argument produced a bevy of criticism from hawkish analysts. But these responses oddly accepted the basic point of contention — that readiness for current missions is hardly in crisis — before complaining about some other matter, like the force’s size, funding or preparation for future rivals.

Likewise, the service chiefs frequently complain about readiness in asking for budget increases. But they don’t put today’s readiness challenges in historical context or define what deviation from ideal is acceptable. They avoid claiming that readiness is in crisis and resent contentions that U.S. forces are enfeebled.

The U.S. military’s readiness problems are largely the fault of those that most loudly bemoan them. That includes Pentagon bosses and especially congressional leaders. They routinely reject three fixes that require no budget boost.

The first and best option is to ask less of the military. A defense strategy that prioritized among dangers, rather than trying to stabilize most corners of the earth, would leave the force less strained and allow cuts to force structure. The savings could fund the operational accounts that pay for the readiness of the force.

Second, even without a strategic shift, Congress could cancel complex platforms, like the Littoral Combat Ship or F-35, which suck up operational funding, and replace them with simpler alternatives — or do with less in some areas.

A third solution is to eventually free up funds for operational accounts by cutting spending on excess bases and by slowing the growth in personnel costs.

Congressional defense committees dismiss the first solution because they see U.S. military efforts as indispensable to world order, perhaps because of the spending indispensability requires in their districts. They reject the second option for similar reasons. Indeed, they reject it so thoroughly that they often do the opposite — shifting funds from operational accounts to acquisition at the expense of readiness.

The third option falls prey to concerns about cuts to local jobs and potential calumny about not supporting the troops.

Congressional Republicans aren’t especially motivated to fix the readiness crisis because they use it to pressure Democrats to increase defense spending. In that sense, they care less about readiness for current wars than readiness for the array of imagined future wars.

In Washington, readiness now seems to mean whatever the speaker wants from the military. We should discard the term in recognition of the fact that military spending choices are mostly about what to be ready for, not how to be ready for everything.

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