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Heritage takes aim at defense spending critics' key argument

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As the debate ramps up on defense spending for next year, the influential Heritage Foundation is seeking to debunk a longtime argument for slashing the Pentagon's budget — namely, that the U.S. doesn't need to spend so much because it already outspends so many other nations combined.

In a [paper](#) provided to POLITICO in advance of its publication, the conservative think tank argues that the comparison — long used by critics of the defense budget — fails to take into account the different factors that drive military budget requests in the U.S. and abroad.

"Statements such as 'the U.S. spends more on defense than the next eight countries combined' evoke an appearance of excess, but give no consideration to the decisions driving defense spending or the factors contributing to costs across national economies," the authors, Rachel Zissimos and Thomas Spoehr, contend.

The report asserts that differences in personnel costs and purchasing power mean the same amount of funding can support militaries of vastly different sizes, compositions, and capabilities — invalidating dollar-for-dollar comparisons.

For example, it estimates that China and Russia — the two nearest peer-rivals to the U.S. — have 1.7 times and 2.5 times the purchasing power in their domestic markets. When those measures are considered, U.S. defense spending in 2016 was only \$54 billion more than those two countries combined, the authors calculate.

Additionally, country comparisons ignore the unique nature of U.S. defense requirements, such as the need to project power abroad and a global network of logistics and support that underpins it. They also fail to account for the higher personnel costs of the United States' all-volunteer force.

"We need to move away from talking only about the topline," Zissimos told POLITICO. "The budget should be sized to our obligations and to the national security strategy."

The Trump administration has proposed a budget of \$603 billion for the fiscal year that starts Oct. 1 and key House and Senate oversight committees have moved to increase the topline. Last

month, the House Appropriations Committee approved a \$658.1 billion bill and the House Budget Committee agreed to a \$621 billion defense topline.

Whether such amounts are realistic in the current political and fiscal environments another matter; the Budget Control Act still caps national defense spending at \$549 billion for fiscal year 2018, leaving few options short of changing the law to significantly boost military funding.

And the heritage argument is unlikely to sway those who believe strongly that the military could still defend the nation with significantly fewer resources.

Indeed, a number of national security analysts argue that fewer threats exist to the country's core national interest than in the past.

"The world is not on fire, there's a lot of exaggerated commentary," said John Glaser, associate director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. "The world is safer than it has ever been."

Furthermore, costly increases in procurement and to improve the readiness of conventional forces won't necessarily bolster counterterrorism or stabilization operations, which account for many of the military's requirements, Glaser added.

"Military spending should reflect political goals," he said. "I think we currently do have sufficient funds to pursue our strategy."