



## **Looming budget fights in Congress could jeopardize military spending increases**

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Despite urgent concerns facing the military, defense priorities could get pushed to the back burner thanks to an onslaught of pressing matters awaiting Congress when members return next month.

With looming deadlines, debt ceiling concerns and demands from President Donald Trump, members will be hard-pressed to pass a larger defense budget, boost troop levels in Afghanistan and address military readiness in light of recent Navy warship collisions.

Adding to the uncertainty: emergency spending in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey that could impact the overall budget.

The overdue 2017 \$1.1 trillion budget was just approved in May, and new funding is needed for the 2018 fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

“It’s a big, giant cluster you-know-what,” Daniel Mitchell, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank in Washington, said of the issues facing Congress when it returns Sept. 5.

A default on the debt limit could spark a global financial panic, for example, he said. A government shutdown could trigger a repeat of the 16 days in 2013 when the military had to put training and maintenance on hold, and commissaries were among the family services that were affected.

While it’s too early to predict emergency spending for Harvey-related damage, it could help members address debt ceiling concerns and avert a government shutdown at the end of September.

“If Congress decided that it wanted to fold in some emergency spending to address Harvey damage, it could potentially make it easier to avoid a shutdown,” Molly Reynolds, a governance studies fellow at the liberal-leaning Brookings Institution in Washington, said Tuesday. “The logic would be that members would be reluctant to oppose a measure that contains money to help address the effects of such a massive natural disaster.”

Providing emergency aid could undermine Trump's threat to hold government funding hostage over his plan to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Congress could say, "At this point, it's not worth shutting down the government and depriving federal aid to Harvey victims" to get the wall, she said.

### **Political drama for Republicans**

The budget debate comes as Congress is looking to tackle tax reform and possibly revisit the health-care debate.

"Republicans desperately want to get something done; they feel a huge amount of self-imposed pressure to come up with a tax cut," Mitchell said. "I see a lot of political drama, and it will mostly be for show."

On Wednesday, Trump was expected to kick off talks pushing for tax reform, starting at the Loren Cook Company in Springfield, Mo. Trump will address employees, but not the public, according to the White House. Company officials were among the top Republican campaign donors.

Tax reform debate could sideline new defense spending plans.

"Defense issues are certainly a priority for Congress," Reynolds said. "Congress doesn't necessarily want them to get overshadowed, but to the extent that that they'll get attention in September, it will be affected by what else is going on."

In July, the House approved a \$696 billion defense budget. A nearly \$700 billion Senate proposal has seen much less traction. Either plan would require Congressional action to exceed current budget caps of \$549 billion.

If budget caps are exceeded, it raises the threat of sequestration -- automatic across-the-board cuts enacted under the Budget Control Act of 2011.

"Most everybody with a half a brain understands the military's been gutted because of sequestration, and they need relief yesterday," Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said on conservative Hugh Hewitt's Aug. 24 radio show.

"The Budget Control Act has taken the military spending down to historically low levels. We're on track to have the smallest Army since 1940, the smallest Navy since 1915, training and readiness has been very much compromised," Graham said. "The pilots don't fly enough. We have been using Band-Aid approaches to maintenance. ... Congress has shot down more airplanes and mothballed more ships than any enemy could ever hope to do."

Some experts contend that military issues will get addressed, but at a slower pace than many would prefer.

The House Armed Services Commission has set a Sept. 7 hearing to address Naval readiness after separate collisions of the USS John S. McCain and USS Fitzgerald. Sen. John McCain, R-

Ariz., has said Congress will also play a role in the increase in troops to Afghanistan, starting with a hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, which he leads. Congress has to approve new funding for the troop surge.

“I suspect there will be bipartisan support for a troop surge in Afghanistan,” said Jens David Ohlin, professor and vice dean of Cornell Law School in New York. “I think both Democrats and Republicans are concerned about the Taliban’s recent advances, and there will be enough support for increased spending on Afghanistan.”

In July, the House passed a broad spending package, the 2018 Make America Secure Appropriations Act, that included new funding for defense efforts, military construction and veterans’ affairs.

While the plan faces an uphill battle in the Senate, it signals that members are willing to place a priority on defense issues despite the bigger distractions that abound, said Reynolds, an expert on congressional issues.

“Issues that are important to the military are tied up in a number of these big fights that are coming for Congress,” she said. For example, raising the Budget Control Act caps for defense “is a key part of the broader budget fight, especially since doing so would require Democratic votes, and Democrats have, in the past, insisted that increases in defense spending are matched by increases in non-defense spending.”

#### **‘We have a lot of work ahead of us’**

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said in late August that he and Trump are working to address tax reform, government default, infrastructure legislation, short- and long-term funding goals and veterans’ issues, and “to pass the defense authorization and defense appropriations bills so we can support our troops and help implement an effective strategy” against Islamic State militants.

“We have a lot of work ahead of us, and we are committed to advancing our shared agenda together, and anyone who suggests otherwise is clearly not part of the conversation,” McConnell said in a statement.

But despite the optimism, many contend that another stopgap measure in the form of a continuing resolution is likely. That would trigger new challenges for the military, especially in terms of long-term planning.

Reynolds says some are expecting a continuing resolution, or CR, to keep the government operating until December.

“The length of that CR has obvious consequences for the military,” Reynolds said, “since longer CRs introduce more uncertainty.”