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Trevor Thrall & Erik Goepner: Stronger military, but at what cost?

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THROUGHOUT THE presidential campaign, Donald Trump consistently called for more defense spending to rebuild an American military he characterized as “in shambles” and “a disaster.” Since taking office, he has said increased military spending is “more important” than balancing the budget. In his address to Congress last week, Trump made it official, promising “one of the largest increases in national defense spending in history.” Such a path is unwise and ignores the council of military and national security leaders. As early as 2010, the nation’s senior ranking military officer, Adm. Mike Mullen, referred to the nation’s debt as “the most significant threat to our national security.”

At the time, the nation’s debt burden was 90 percent of GDP, and the Congressional Budget Office labeled the country’s fiscal future as “daunting.” This past May, 22 prior secretaries of defense and other national security heavyweights, including President Richard Nixon’s secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, and President Jimmy Carter’s national security adviser, Zbigniew Brezinski, signed a bipartisan statement that read, in part, we “believe that our long-term debt is the single greatest threat to our national security.” By then, the debt had ballooned another 15 percentage points to 105 percent of GDP. The future looks much worse. The CBO estimates the nation’s debt will increase by more than \$9 trillion — and another 12 percentage points — over the next 10 years. On paper, Trump’s budget will offset the increases in defense spending with cuts elsewhere, but the numbers (not to mention history) strongly suggest that is unlikely.

Defense spending already accounts for half of all discretionary spending, Trump has promised to leave Social Security and Medicare untouched, and it’s unlikely Trump will cut from veterans’ services, infrastructure, or justice. That leaves a shrinking pool of \$388 billion from which to offset increases in defense. Additionally it ignores the half-trillion dollar deficit already projected for 2017 and his call for \$1 trillion in infrastructure spending.

This is alarming from a national security perspective because a nation’s military is only as strong as its economy. Large and technologically advanced militaries require vibrant and innovative economies. Crushing levels of national debt, on the other hand, stifle economic growth. The Soviet Union ignored this maxim during the Cold War, only to disintegrate under the weight of

an oversized military that its anemic economy could not sustain. And “unsustainable,” is precisely how the CBO, a nonpartisan agency established by Congress, has consistently characterized the nation’s future fiscal path.

Moreover, increasing defense spending today is unnecessary. The United States continues to field the most dominant military the world has ever known, driven by both the caliber of its people and the substantial financial investment made each year by the taxpayers. True, the military has been stretched thin by uninterrupted war over the past 15 years and budget caps have affected readiness and modernization. However, given how much the United States spends on defense relative to the rest of the world, it is clear that spending more money is not the answer.

The U.S. already spends roughly \$600 billion per year, which accounts for 36 percent of the world’s annual military expenditures. Potential adversaries such as China, Russia, and Iran account for 13, 4, and .6 percent respectively. Even the military opposes many of the specific proposals for increased spending. Trump’s call to expand U.S. nuclear capability flies in the face of Pentagon requests simply to modernize the existing nuclear arsenal, which itself is projected to cost \$1 trillion. Similarly, Congress’ unwillingness to heed military leaders’ requests to consolidate and close under-utilized installations represents an inefficient use of DoD resources. Most fundamentally, contrary to Trump’s drumbeat of dark messages and his assertion that Islamic State represents “an existential threat to our country,” Americans are safer than at any point in the past 50 years.

Data from the FBI show murder rates over the past five years at their lowest since the early 1960’s. Overall violent crime rates reflect a similar drop. And, as a researcher from the University of North Carolina recently noted, Islamist-inspired terrorists have carried out less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the 230,000 murders in America over the past 15 years. In light of the dangers of the debt, Trump and Congress should chart a more cautious fiscal path on defense. A good place to start looking for savings is the war on terrorism. The wars in the Middle East have already cost at least \$1.7 trillion since 9/11 and have led directly to the readiness and procurement challenges facing the military.

Reducing America’s footprint abroad would not only save tremendous amounts of money, it would also encourage U.S. allies to step up their security efforts, another of Trump’s priorities. If Trump and Congress don’t find a way to combat the national debt today, the United States will find itself at greater risk tomorrow.

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