

# Trump's Empty Promise on War Savings

Although President Trump promised to avoid unnecessary wars, he still is seeking a major increase in the already gigantic U.S. military budget, a risky contradiction, says Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

President Donald Trump has always had contradictions in his "tough guy" national security policy. For starters, he has proposed a nearly 10 percent increase in defense spending, but also claims that his demands for U.S. allies to spend more on defense are producing results.

And during his campaign, he alluded to the need to stay out of unneeded wars. If allies pay more and the United States stays out of pointless brushfire wars, the U.S. government could seemingly spend less, not more, on defense.

However, allied defense spending is probably not going to increase that much. Our wealthy allies have long allowed the United States to spend most of the money on security, so that they can use their money to compete with U.S.

commercial interests on the world market without fully opening their markets to American products and services. Trump is right to pressure the allies to do more, but they really won't unless the United States tells them they are mostly on their own to provide security.

Also, it remains to be seen whether an American president with already the most powerful military in human history, both absolutely and relatively (the United States spends on defense what the next seven highest spending countries do), can avoid the temptation to needlessly meddle in the affairs of other countries. Recent presidents from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama have been unable to resist the urge.

Trump succumbed to the lure of playing to his political base by demonstrating that he was tougher than his predecessor by launching a mere cosmetic cruise missile strike against Bashar al-Assad's Syria for allegedly using chemical weapons. Furthermore, his generals are pressuring him to re-escalate the long-lost war in Afghanistan.

Apart from these contradictions in the use of conventional military forces, Trump has promised to overhaul a nuclear arsenal that he has called "obsolete." Barack Obama left him an expensive program – \$1 trillion over 30 years – to revamp the nuclear triad of bombers, land based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office estimated that the cost of that gargantuan program has already skyrocketed 20 percent to \$1.2 trillion. If past defense programs are any guide, the expenses will continue to escalate over time, because the government procures weapons using a highly regulated and inefficient

manner.

And Trump's post-election promise that the United States "must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability" has not even been figured into his already bogus budget of substantial tax cuts paid for by fantasy levels of economic growth (like the "cooked" budgets of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, which racked up huge budget deficits and thus accumulated mounting national debt).

### **Unnecessary Upgrades**

Upgrading the oldest and most vulnerable of the legs of the triad – the land-based ICBMs – would be among most costly parts of the Trump administration's military buildup. The good news is that the United States could get rid of this leg of the triad and not be any less safe. The same could be said of the aging U.S. nuclear-capable bomber force. In short, after the Cold War, the United States no longer needs all the 1,550 nuclear warheads allowed by the 2010 treaty on strategic weapons with Russia.

For decades, the Chinese wisely avoided getting swept up in the farcical nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. They developed only a minimum long-range nuclear deterrent – enough long-range missiles to inflict enough atomic damage on other countries to deter them from attacking China with nuclear weapons. (This policy might change because the Chinese believe expensive and destabilizing U.S. missile defenses could begin to nullify this minimum deterrent.) China used savings from avoiding a nuclear arms race for economic development at home, which helped it to become a global economic powerhouse.

The United States needs to do the same to effect a much-needed economic renewal. U.S. ballistic missile submarines are still the quietest in the world and are invulnerable to attack. After scrapping the unneeded bomber and land-based missile legs of the triad, more resources could be funneled into buying a new generation of such submarines. Also, the destabilizing new U.S. cruise missile could be cancelled.

Fewer nuclear weapons platforms and launch vehicles would require fewer warheads, thereby also allowing a reduction in the expensive nuclear infrastructure, including closing some of the redundant nuclear laboratories. Pricey strategic missile defenses could also be scrapped, because they still don't work very well and may motivate other countries, such as China, to just build more warheads.

Despite President Trump's rhetoric, over time, he will not be able to afford unneeded defense profligacy, especially in nuclear weapons. The triad should be reduced to a "monad" of submarines and their invulnerable ballistic missiles and maybe even to a level of such platforms and armaments that provide minimum nuclear deterrence.

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