

Budget Woes Sign of a Dysfunctional Empire

Exclusive: The bloated military budget is justified on the assumption that the United States can and should police the entire world, but this approach is fundamentally unsustainable, warns Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

President Donald Trump's latest \$4.4 trillion budget proposal calls for boosting military spending by nearly \$200 billion over the next two years, and would balloon the national debt by more than \$7 trillion over the next decade. Pundits proclaim it "dead on arrival."

But the likely alternative, based on the recent congressional budget accord, will be an equally irresponsible combination of sky-high military spending and even more borrowing – signs of a dysfunctional empire unable to manage its decline intelligently.

The U.S. national debt now exceeds \$20 trillion, or \$170,000 per taxpayer. When the number was smaller two years ago, under President Obama, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell called it "dangerous and unacceptable." Yet, following last December's massive corporate and personal tax cut, and the subsequent agreement on new spending targets, Congress now envisions adding \$15 trillion to the federal government's debt over the next decade.

No serious analyst predicts any immediate disaster, but fast-rising levels of public debt, combined with extremely low levels of private savings, could set the United States up for another financial crisis. If interest rates climb, high levels of debt can rapidly drive up federal spending on interest. If another recession strikes, slashing federal revenues, the burden of debt can also soar.

While many domestic programs are slated to grow, a major contributor to the U.S. debt burden will be soaring military spending. The recent budget accord calls for feeding the military about \$80 billion more this year, and an additional \$16 billion more the next. The increase alone exceeds Russia's entire military budget (\$69 billion in 2016, the most recent year for which comparative data are available).

Even without these increases, the United States already spends more than twice as much on its military as China and Russia combined. Equally significant, the next 15 largest military spenders are all friendly powers or formal allies of the United States. That's why the only serious threats to U.S. forces come when

they insert themselves into local wars thousands of miles away.

The Indefensible Pentagon Budget

Commenting skeptically on the new Pentagon budget, Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., said, "It's very difficult to have that big of an increase in one year and then be able to use it wisely." That's especially true when so much current spending is used unwisely.

The Pentagon budget tilts heavily toward gold-plated weapons systems that continue to fail tests and evaluations. Congress is buying dozens of trouble-plagued F-35 Joint Strike Fighters each year, with a projected program cost of more than \$1 trillion, even though the plane is still not fully combat ready.

The Pentagon budget is also full of questionable programs, like the half billion dollars aimed at counter-narcotics initiatives in Africa and the Middle East, which were probed in a recent report by the Defense Department's Inspector General.

Much worse, the Pentagon's upcoming budgets contain about \$140 billion over two years for fighting wars that the United States has no business waging.

This fiscal year alone, for example, the Pentagon says it will spend \$45 billion fighting in Afghanistan. The Trump administration has no clear consensus even as to its goals in that country, much less how to achieve them.

All we have to show for 17 years of war in Afghanistan are thousands of lives lost and more than \$1 trillion spent. The Taliban today control more territory than they did at the end of 2001, and ISIS has become a growing menace. "I think there's an argument to be made that our national security is actually made more perilous the more we spend and the longer we stay there," says Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky.

The Nuclear Black Hole

And then there is the expanding black hole of spending on nuclear arms. Plans developed under the Obama administration, and recently augmented by Trump's Pentagon, call for updating America's nuclear missiles, bombers, and submarines at a staggering cost of \$1.7 trillion over the next 30 years.

With more than 4,000 nuclear weapons in our arsenal, many arms experts believe the United States is already vastly over-armed for the purpose of deterring any foreign power from launching a nuclear attack on the United States.

Yet President Trump's recent Nuclear Posture Review calls for building three new types of nuclear weapons. That expansion will only add to what Andrew Weber,

former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Defense Programs, recently called “the crushing nuclear weapons modernization spending tsunami in the 2020s.”

“Top defense officials have stated frankly that the Pentagon does not have a plan to pay” for the nuclear modernization program, wrote U.S. nuclear analyst Adam Mount in Foreign Affairs recently. “That figure will create serious tensions in a Pentagon wrestling with a dizzying array of other priorities: raising the readiness of U.S. forces, building new fleets of aircraft carriers, fighters, and attack submarines, and investing more funds in future research.”

Even worse than the waste of money is the potential that all these weapons will raise the risk of an accidental nuclear war.

“Today, the greatest danger is not a Russian bolt but a U.S. blunder – that we might accidentally stumble into nuclear war,” observed former Secretary of Defense William Perry and former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. James Cartwright in November. “This may sound counterintuitive, but if we scale back plans to replace the nuclear arsenal, we will actually improve our security. And we will save hundreds of billions of dollars.”

The Coming Fall?

The fundamental problem with the military budget is the underlying assumption that the United States can and should police the entire world – a view powerfully reinforced in the Trump administration’s recent National Defense Strategy document, with its hegemonic yearning for “dominant superiority in every operating domain.”

With some 800 military bases stationed in 172 countries, the United States is far and away the greatest empire the world has known. Our self-imposed mission, which guarantees ceaseless military engagements in conflicts around the world, creates unnecessary risks to American lives and to our economic security, not to mention our many foreign victims.

Those risks are multiplying as our national governance becomes ever more dysfunctional. Our national budget woes are a sign of the fact that maintaining U.S. military superiority around the world is becoming ever more unsustainable.

In his famous 1987 book *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Yale historian Paul Kennedy demonstrated a consistent link between economic and military strength. The link goes one way: a nation with robust resources can afford to build a strong military, but a nation with an oversized and overcommitted military may cripple its economy, undermining the very source of its strength. That’s what happens when empires get stretched too thin, like Great Britain’s

after two world wars.

As Kennedy predicted, and the Trump era is confirming, the American empire cannot last in its current form. The faster we cut it loose, the more chance we have of a soft landing that preserves our security and prosperity.

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