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Shrinking the Pentagon



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Now that Joe Biden is slated to take office as the 46th president of the United States, advice on how he should address a wide range of daunting problems is flooding in. Nowhere is there more at stake than when it comes to how he handles this country's highly militarized foreign policy in general and Pentagon spending in particular.

Defense spending increased sharply in the Trump years and is now substantially higher than it was during the Korean or Vietnam War eras or during the massive military buildup President Ronald Reagan oversaw in the 1980s. Today, it consumes well over half of the nation's discretionary budget, which just happens to also pay for a wide array of urgently needed priorities ranging from housing, job training, and alternative energy programs to

public health and infrastructure building. At a time when pandemics, high unemployment, racial inequality, and climate change pose the greatest threats to our safety and security, this allocation of resources should be considered unsustainable. Unfortunately, the Pentagon and the arms industry have yet to get that memo. Defense company executives recently assured a *Washington Post* reporter that they are “unconcerned” about or consider unlikely the possibility that a Biden administration would significantly reduce Pentagon spending.

It’s easy enough to understand their confidence. Many of the officials rumored to soon be appointed to lead the Pentagon, including a number of former Obama administration figures, have spent the past few years working, either directly or indirectly, for defense contractors. Not surprisingly, then, their policy prescriptions emphasize some of the most expensive and risky military technologies imaginable like hypersonic weaponry. The expected next secretary of defense, Michèle Flournoy, has already insisted that Washington needs to make “big bets” on unmanned systems and artificial intelligence. Of course, she won’t be the one who will pay the price if they fail — or even if they succeed and take money that might have been used for crucial domestic purposes like health care in a pandemic moment.

Still, contrary to the wishes and hopes of the military-industrial complex and figures like Flournoy, there is a growing congressional interest in trying to bring runaway Pentagon spending under control. This July, for instance, Representative Mark Pocan (D-WI), Representative Barbara Lee (D-CA), and Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) pushed parallel measures in the House and Senate to cut Pentagon spending by 10%, a savings of more than \$70 billion that could have been put to good use elsewhere, including aid to increasingly desperate low-income communities. Although their initiatives lost, the very fact that they were proposed may be a turning point in a Congress that, for years, has signed off on whatever the Pentagon asked for, without resistance of any sort.

Think of those votes on Pentagon budget reductions as just the beginning of a long-term effort to tame that out-of-control institution. Representatives Pocan and Lee, for instance, created a defense-savings caucus in the House focused on going after misguided Department of Defense spending. During campaign 2020, both Joe Biden and the Democratic platform emphasized that this country and the world can indeed be made safer while spending less on the Pentagon.

Clearly, the fairy-tale explanation that more spending equals better security needs to be ditched. Will it happen soon? Who knows? At least it’s time for the rest of us to begin thinking about how much less should be spent on the Department of Defense and how to ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent more wisely.

A Pentagon Spending Agenda for the Biden Administration

In reality, it's not that complicated. Pentagon spending could easily be reduced substantially even as the world was made a safer place. For that to happen, however, its budget would have to begin to deal with the actual challenges this country faces rather than letting billions of dollars more be squandered on outmoded military priorities and artificially inflated threats supposedly posed by our biggest adversaries.

One [blueprint](#) for doing just that has been put together by the Center for International Policy's Sustainable Defense Task Force, a group of former White House, Pentagon, and congressional budget officials, retired military officers, and think-tank experts from across the political spectrum. They have crafted a plan to save \$1.25 trillion from proposed Pentagon spending over the next decade.

As that task force notes, for durable reductions in such spending to become feasible, this country's leadership would have to take a more realistic view of the military challenges posed by both China and Russia.

In recent years, the regime in Beijing has indeed been increasing its military spending, but when it comes to an armed presence in the Pacific region and the ability to make war there, the United States remains staggeringly stronger. As a start, it has an arsenal of nuclear weapons [five to six times](#) as large as China's (though, of course, using it would mean a planetary Armageddon). And while Beijing's influence is primarily focused on its own region, the U.S. military has a historically unprecedented global reach, deploying nearly [200,000](#) troops overseas garrisoned on at least [800](#) military bases scattered across continents, and maintaining [11](#) aircraft carrier task forces to patrol the global seas. In reality, the sort of "arms race" with China now being considered will be costly and unnecessary, while only increasing the risk of war between those two nuclear-armed powers, an outcome to be avoided at all costs.

China's real twenty-first-century challenge to this country isn't military at all, but political and economic in nature. Its leadership has focused on increasing that country's power and influence through investment programs like its ever more global [Belt and Road](#) infrastructure initiative. Despite many problems, such efforts are clearly giving Beijing the sort of growing global clout, especially in the America First era of Donald Trump, that a hopeless attempt to match U.S. military power never could. Add to this one other factor: if there's to be any hope of preventing future pandemics from ravaging the planet, curbing the growing impact of climate change, or reviving a global economy that's distinctly in the dumps, increased cooperation and transparency between the two greatest powers on the planet, not confrontation, will be a necessity.

As for Russia, a relatively shaky petro-state, its primary tools of influence in recent years have been propaganda, cyber-threats, and "hybrid warfare" on its peripheries (as in its use of local allies to destabilize Ukraine). Despite its still vast nuclear arsenal, Russia does not represent a traditional military challenge to the United States and so shouldn't be used to

justify another pointless Pentagon spending boost. To the extent that there is a military challenge from Russia, it can be more than adequately addressed by various European nations with the United States in a limited, supporting role. After all, European members of NATO cumulatively spend more than three times what Russia does on their militaries and far outpace it economically. Keep in mind that this just isn't the Cold War era of the previous century. In reality, Russia's economy is now smaller than Italy's and Moscow is in no position to engage in an arms race even with the nations of Western Europe, no less Washington.

Despite its disastrous forever wars in distant lands, if the institution still often referred to as the "Department of Defense" were to refocus on actual national defense rather than global military domination, it could, as a start, instantly forgo a number of ill-conceived and staggeringly expensive new weapons systems. Those would range from plans to "modernize" the country's already vast nuclear arsenal by buying a new generation of nuclear-armed bombers, missiles, and submarines at a cost of up to \$2 trillion to the fantasy of building up from current levels to a 500-ship Navy.

High on any list of programs to be instantly eliminated would be a proposed new Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). As former Secretary of Defense William Perry has pointed out, ICBMs are among "the most dangerous weapons in the world" for a simple reason: a president would have only a matter of minutes to decide whether to launch such missiles upon being warned of another power using similar weaponry to attack the U.S. Since, in the past, such warnings have proven anything but accurate, new weaponry of this sort will only increase the chances of an accidental nuclear war being started. The Pentagon has, however, already given the giant arms maker Northrop Grumman a sole-source contract and \$13.3 billion to develop just such a new weapon, a down payment on a program that could ultimately cost \$264 billion to build and operate. Funds like those could go far to meet other genuinely pressing national needs.

As for the nuclear arsenal's upgrade as a whole, the organization Global Zero has outlined an alternative nuclear posture that would halt the Pentagon's costly nuclear "modernization" plan, eliminate ICBMs altogether, and reduce the numbers of nuclear-armed bombers and submarines. The idea would be to switch the U.S. to a "deterrence only" strategy and dump the elaborate and dangerous nuclear warfighting scenarios the Pentagon now swears by. The ultimate goal would, of course, be the global elimination of such weaponry, as called for in the U.N. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which is slated to enter into force early next year.

Then there's that dream (or nightmare) of a future Navy to deal with. Building up to a fleet of 500 ships is not just unaffordable, but a sign of the degree to which the Pentagon has an urge to run stark raving mad with taxpayer dollars. Even a previous plan to build 330 ships was so mismanaged that it left the Navy 50 ships short, \$11 billion over budget, and years

behind schedule. Rather than seeking to preserve the capability to have warships virtually everywhere on Earth all the time, the Navy set up to surge into areas of tension could be roughly half the size of the 500-ship one and still be powerful beyond words.

More savings could easily be found by ending the procurement of unworkable weapons systems like Lockheed Martin's disastrous F-35 jet fighter. Already the most expensive weapons program ever undertaken (at a cumulative cost of [\\$1.7 trillion](#) over its lifetime), the Project On Government Oversight has determined that the F-35 [may never truly be ready](#) for combat. Upgraded versions of current jet fighters integrated into a smaller Air Force would save tens of billions of dollars and be more effective.

President Trump's cherished [Space Force](#) is a bad idea that predated his presidency but received a major boost during his tenure. A new military bureaucracy geared up primarily to spend more money, it could [cost](#) tens of billions in the years to come while only increasing the risk of an arms race in space.

You could add to the above billions in savings from cutting waste and bureaucracy at the Department of Defense. To cite just two obvious examples, the Pentagon routinely overpays for spare parts and sustains a work force of more than [600,000](#) private contractors, many of whose jobs are either redundant or could be done more cheaply by government employees. Symbolic of the broken nature of the procurement process, the Air Force seriously contemplated paying [\\$10,000 for a toilet seat cover](#) and one contractor charged so much for a spare part that it stood to make a [4,451% profit](#) on it. Fixing the Pentagon's procurement system and rolling back spending on private contractors could save hundreds of billions of dollars over the next decade.

And don't forget the savings that could be had from reforming how the Pentagon does business, including, for example, retaining intellectual property rights to weapon systems researched and developed with taxpayer dollars. As a Marine Corps captain [wrote](#) in the *New York Times* last year, the military too often lacks the "right to repair" its own equipment. Acquisition laws written in the interests of defense contractors need to be revised so that the Department of Defense can negotiate fair and reasonable prices and auditors need to be empowered to root out waste, fraud, and abuse.

And, of course, in an institution that has [never even successfully audited](#) itself, who knows what other savings might be conceivable were you to be able to get inside it and take a serious look at its finances — and financial shenanigans?

Obstacles to Change

Even if the Biden administration could be persuaded to take a deeper look at the Pentagon's spending priorities, it would still face immediate and stiff political obstacles. The jobs generated by the Pentagon's \$700 billion-plus budget (and the [political funding](#) of congressional representatives by defense companies) have created a broad constituency in Congress poised to block any effort to close unnecessary military bases or defund major

weapons programs. To policymakers in Washington, it seems to matter not at all that virtually any other form of spending would create [more jobs](#) than throwing money at the Pentagon. New infrastructure spending or a green-new-deal-style emphasis on creating a renewable energy economy would be guaranteed to generate at least one-and-a-half times as many jobs per dollar spent, while new expenditures on education would create twice as many.

Another impediment to change is the two-way [revolving door](#) between the Pentagon and the arms industry. Senior government officials go to work for weapons makers, using their contacts with former colleagues to curry favor for their corporate employers. Meanwhile, arms-industry executives head for the Pentagon and other military-related government posts where they make policies that favor their former (and possibly future) employers. Despite criticisms from both [President Trump](#) and [his son](#), Donald, Jr. about the damaging influence of that very revolving door, expect former Trump administration officials to set up shop as lobbyists, join the boards of directors of major defense contractors, and otherwise ally themselves with arms makers like Raytheon Technologies, Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and General Dynamics.

No one should be surprised either by early indications that figures with defense-industry ties will fill key policy positions in the Biden administration. [Robert Work](#), a former deputy secretary of defense and already an unofficial [spokesman](#) for the incoming administration, still sits on the [board of Raytheon](#). Michèle Flournoy, the most likely candidate for secretary of defense, and Anthony Blinken, whom Biden will [nominate](#) to be secretary of state, both work for a [private consulting firm](#) with undisclosed defense-industry clients. While this [practice](#) may not be as prevalent as under Trump — three of his secretaries of defense [served](#) as board members, executives, or lobbyists for General Dynamics, Boeing, and Raytheon, respectively — the role of former industry advocates and employees in the Biden administration is nonetheless guaranteed to cause conflicts of interest.

“Independent” experts at influential inside-the-Beltway think tanks are already receiving [millions of dollars](#) from arms manufacturers and the Pentagon in an ongoing effort to shape any debates about future spending. Meanwhile, individuals with close ties to that industry populate government panels like the congressionally mandated [National Defense Strategy Commission](#), which advocated in 2018 for a whopping 3%-5% annual increase in Pentagon spending. If their analyses of the supposedly abysmal state of national defense were true, a case would have been made for firing all the top civilian and military officials in the building, not for increased spending.

Possibilities for Change

The best hope for reducing Pentagon spending is the collision between that department’s never-ending, ever-rising desires and the overriding economic and political realities of this

difficult moment. It's simply not possible to fund pandemic prevention, as well as any kind of economic revival that would begin to address longstanding inequalities, no less a much-needed green revolution, while keeping the Pentagon budget at near-record levels. Something will have to give and it shouldn't be the civilian communities and businesses that have been most negatively impacted by the coronavirus.

As for politics, it's important to remember that this year's presidential election was decided primarily by voter concerns about Covid-19 and the economy, not by voters crying out for a continuation of America's endless wars or demanding yet more money for the Pentagon. The political clout of the military-industrial complex may diminish as Americans move forward, however chaotically, into a new era with radically different challenges to public health and safety.

The arms makers and their allies in Congress and the executive branch won't give up without a fight when it comes to the pandemic of Pentagon spending. You can count on that. A crucial question of this moment is: Will fear, exaggerated threats, and pork-barrel politics be enough to keep the Pentagon and its contractors fat and happy, even as the urgent priorities of so many of the rest of us are starved of much-needed funding?

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This article was distributed by TomDispatch.

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