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02.07.2021

America's Nearly $1.3 Trillion National Security Budget Isn't Making Us Any Safer

Photograph Source: United States Army – Public Domain

President Biden's first Pentagon budget, released late last month, is staggering by any reasonable standard. At more than $750 billion for the Defense Department and related work on nuclear weapons at the Department of Energy, it represents one of the highest levels of spending since World War II — far higher than the peaks of the Korean or Vietnam wars or President Ronald Reagan's military buildup of the 1980s, and roughly three times what China spends on its military.

Developments of the past year and a half — an ongoing pandemic, an intensifying mega-drought, white supremacy activities, and racial and economic injustice among them — should have underscored that the greatest threats to American lives are anything but military in nature. But no matter, the Biden administration has decided to double down on military spending as the primary pillar of what still passes for American security policy. And don't be fooled by that striking Pentagon budget figure either. This year's funding requests suggest that the total national security budget will come closer to a breathtaking $1.3 trillion.

That mind-boggling figure underscores just how misguided Washington's current "security" — a word that should increasingly be put in quotation marks — policies really are. No less concerning was the new administration's decision to go full-speed ahead on longstanding Pentagon plans to build a new generation of nuclear-armed bombers, submarines, and missiles, including, of course, new nuclear warheads to go with them, at a cost of at least $1.7 trillion over the next three decades.

The Trump administration added to that plan projects like a new submarine-launched, nuclear-armed cruise missile, all of which is fully funded in Biden's first budget. It hardly matters that a far smaller arsenal would be more than adequate to dissuade any country from launching a nuclear attack on the United States or its allies. A rare glimmer of hope came in a recent internal memo from the Navy suggesting that it may ultimately scrap Trump's sea-launched cruise missile in next year's budget submission — but that proposal is already facing intense pushback from nuclear-weapons boosters in Congress.

In all, Biden's first budget is a major win for key players in the nuclear-industrial complex like Northrop Grumman, the prime contractor on the new nuclear bomber and a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM); General Dynamics, the maker of the new ballistic-missile submarine; Lockheed Martin, which produces sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs); and firms like Honeywell that oversee key elements in the Department of Energy's nuclear-warhead complex.

The Biden budget does retire some older-generation weapons. The only reason, however, is to fund even more expensive new systems like hypersonic weapons and ones embedded with artificial intelligence, all with the goal of supposedly putting the United States in a position to win a war with China (if anyone could "win" such a war).

China's military buildup remains, in fact, largely defensive, so ramping up Pentagon spending supposedly in response represents both bad strategy and bad budgeting. If, sooner or later, cooler heads don't prevail, the obsession with China that's gripped the

White House, the Pentagon, and key members of Congress could keep Pentagon budgets high for decades to come.

In reality, the principal challenges posed by China are diplomatic and economic, not military, and seeking militarized answers to them will only spark a new Cold War and a risky arms race that could make a superpower nuclear conflict more likely. While there's much to criticize in China's policies, from its crackdown on the democracy movement in Hong Kong to its ethnic cleansing and severe repression of its Uyghur population, in basic military capabilities, it doesn't come faintly close to the United States, nor will it any time soon. Washington's military build-up, however, could undermine the biggest opportunity in U.S.-China relations: finding a way to cooperate on issues like climate change that threaten the future of the planet.

As noted, the three-quarters of a trillion dollars the United States spends on the Pentagon budget is just a portion of a much larger figure for the full range of activities of the national security state. Let's look, category by category, at what the Biden budget proposes to spend on this broader set of activities.

The Pentagon's "Base Budget"

The Pentagon's proposed "base" budget, which, in past years, has included routine spending for fighting ongoing conflicts, was $715 billion for fiscal year (FY) 2022, $10 billion more than last year's request. Despite complaints to the contrary by advocates of even higher Pentagon spending, that represents no small addition. It's larger, for instance, than the entire budget of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. No question about it, the Pentagon remains by a long shot the agency with the largest discretionary budget.

One piece of good news is that this year's request marks the end of the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) account. That slush fund was used to finance the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also included tens of billions of dollars for pet Pentagon projects that had nothing to do with current conflicts.

While off-budget emergency spending has typically only been used in the initial years of a conflict, OCO became a tool to evade caps on the Pentagon's regular budget imposed by the Budget Control Act of 2011. That legislation has now expired and the Biden administration has heeded the advice of good-government and taxpayer-advocacy groups by eliminating the slush fund entirely.

Unfortunately, its latest budget request still includes $42.1 billion for direct and indirect war-spending costs, which means that, OCO or not, there will be no net reduction in

spending. Still, the end of that fund marks a small but potentially significant step towards greater accountability and transparency in the Pentagon budget. Moreover, congressional leaders are urging the Biden administration to seize savings from the ongoing Afghan withdrawal to sooner or later reduce the Pentagon's top line.

As for what's in the base budget, there are a number of particularly troubling proposed expenditures that warrant attention and congressional pushback. Spending on the Pentagon's new Intercontinental Ballistic Missile — known formally as the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent — has nearly doubled in the new proposal from $1.4 billion to $2.6 billion.

This may seem like small change in such a budget, but it's just a down payment on a system that could, in the end, cost more than $100 billion to procure and another $164 billion to operate over its lifetime. More importantly, as former secretary of defense William Perry noted, ICBMs are "some of the most dangerous weapons in the world" because a president would have only a matter of minutes to decide whether to launch them upon a warning of an attack, greatly increasing the risk of an accidental nuclear war based on a false alarm. In short, the new ICBM is not just costly but exceedingly dangerous for the health of humanity. The Biden budget should have eliminated it, not provided more funding for it.

Another eye-opener is the decision to spend more than $12 billion on the F-35 combat aircraft, a troubled, immensely expensive weapons system whose technical flaws suggest that it may never be fully ready for combat. Such knowledge should, of course, have resulted in a decision to at least pause production on the plane until testing is complete. House Armed Services Committee chair Adam Smith (D-WA) has stated that he's tired of pouring money down the F-35 "rathole," while the Air Force's top officer, General Charles Brown, has compared it to a Ferrari that "you don't drive to work every day" but "only drive it out on Sundays."

Consider that an embarrassing admission for a plane once publicized as a future low-cost bulwark for the U.S. combat aircraft fleet. Whether the Air Force, Navy, and Marines, the three services that utilize variants of the F-35, will stay the course and buy more than 2,400 of these aircraft remains to be seen. Count on one thing, though: the F-35 lobby, including a special F-35 caucus in the House of Representatives and the Machinists Union, whose workers build the planes, will fight tooth and nail to keep the program fully funded regardless of whether or not it serves our national security needs.

And keep in mind that the F-35 is only one of many legacies of failed Pentagon modernization efforts. Even if the Pentagon were to acquire its new systems without delays or cost overruns — something rare indeed — its expensive spending plans have already earned this decade the moniker of the "terrible twenties."

Worse yet, there's a distinct possibility that Congress will push that budget even higher in response to "wish lists" being circulated by each of the military services. Items on them that have yet to make it into the Biden Pentagon budget include things like — surprise! — more F-35s. The Army's wish list even includes systems it claimed it needed to cut. That the services are even allowed to make such requests to Congress is symbolic of a breakdown in budgetary discipline of the highest order.

The base budget also includes mandatory spending for items like military retirement. This year's request adds $12.8 billion to the Pentagon's tab.

Running Tally: $727.9 billion

The Nuclear Budget

It would be reasonable for you to assume that the Department of Energy's budget would primarily be devoted to developing new energy sources and combating climate change, but that assumption would, sadly enough, be wildly off the mark.

In fact, more than half of the department's budget goes to support the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), which manages the country's nuclear weapons program. The NNSA does work on nuclear warheads at eight major locations — California, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico (two facilities), South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas — across the country, along with subsidiary facilities in several additional states. NNSA's proposed FY 2022 budget for nuclear-weapons activities is $15.5 billion, part of a budget for atomic-energy-related projects of $29.9 billion.

The NNSA is notorious for poor management of major projects. It has routinely been behind schedule and over cost — to the tune of $28 billion in the past two decades. Its future plans seem destined to hit the pocketbook of the American taxpayer significantly, with projected long-term spending on nuclear weapons activities rising by a proposed $113 billion in a single year.

Nuclear Budget $29.9 billion

Running tally: $757.8 billion

Defense-Related Activities

This is a catch-all category, totaling $10.5 billion in the FY 2022 request, including the international activities of the FBI and payments to the CIA retirement fund, among other things.

Defense-Related Activities $10.5 billion

Running tally: $768.3 billion

The Intelligence Budget

There is very little public information available about how the nation's — count 'em! — 17 intelligence agencies spend our tax dollars. The majority of congressional representatives don't even have staff members capable of accessing any kind of significant information on intelligence spending, a huge obstacle to the ability of Congress to oversee these agencies and their activities in any meaningful way. So far this year there is only a top-line figure available for spending on national (but not military) intelligence activities of $62.3 billion. Most of this money is already believed to be hidden away in the Pentagon budget, so it's not added to the running tally displayed below.

National Intelligence activities: $62.3 billion

Running tally: $768.3 billion

The Military and Defense Department Retirement and Health Budget

The Treasury Department covers military retirement and health expenditures that should be in the Pentagon's base budget. Net spending on these two items — minus interest earned and payments into the two accounts — was a negative $9.7 billion in FY 2022.

Military and Defense Department Retirement and Health Costs: -$9.7 billion

Running tally: $758.6 billion

Veterans Affairs Budget

The full costs of war go far beyond the expenditures contained in the Pentagon budget, including the costs of taking care of the veterans of America's "forever wars." Over 2.7 million U.S. military personnel have cycled through war zones in this century and hundreds of thousands of them have suffered severe physical or psychological injuries, ratcheting up the costs of veterans' care accordingly. In addition, as we emerge from the Covid-19 disaster months, the Veterans Affairs Department anticipates a "bow wave" of extra costs and demands for its services from veterans who deferred care during the worst of the pandemic. The total FY2022 budget request for Veterans Affairs is $284.5 billion.

Veterans Affairs Budget: $284.5 billion

Running tally: $1,043.1 billion

International Affairs Budget

The International Affairs budget includes funding for the State Department and the Agency for International Development, integral parts of the U.S. national security strategy. Here, investments in diplomacy and economic and health activities overseas are supplemented by about $5.6 billion in military aid to other countries. The Biden administration has proposed overall International Affairs funding for FY 2022 at $79 billion.

International Affairs Budget: $79 billion

Running tally: $1,122.1 billion

The Homeland Security Budget

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was created by throwing together a wide range of agencies, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Transportation Security Agency, the U.S. Secret Service, Customs and Border Protection, and the Coast Guard. The proposed DHS budget for FY2022 is $52.2 billion, nearly one-third of which goes to Customs and Border Protection.

Homeland Security Budget: $52.2 billion

Running tally: $1,174.3 billion

Interest on the Debt

The national security state, as outlined above, is responsible for about 20% of the interest due on the U.S. debt, a total of more than $93.8 billion.

Interest on the debt: $93.8 billion

Final tally: $1,268.1 billion

Are You Feeling Safer Now?

Theoretically, that nearly $1.3 trillion to be spent on national security writ large is supposed to be devoted to activities that make America and the world a safer place. That's visibly not the case when it comes to so many of the funds that will be expended in the name of national security — from taxpayer dollars thrown away on weapons systems that don't work to those spent on an unnecessary and dangerous new generation of nuclear weapons, to continuing to reinforce and extend the historically unprecedented U.S. military presence on this planet by maintaining more than 800overseas military bases around the world.

If managed properly, President Biden's initiatives on rebuilding domestic infrastructure and combatting climate change would be far more central to keeping people safe than throwing more money at the Pentagon and related agencies. Unfortunately, unlike the

proposed Pentagon budget, significant Green New Deal-style infrastructure funding is far less likely to be passed by a bitterly divided Congress. Washington evidently doesn't care that such investments would also be significantly more effective job creators.

A shift in spending toward these and other urgent priorities like addressing the possibility of future pandemics would clearly be a far better investment in "national security" than the present proposed Pentagon budget. Sadly, though, too many of America's political leaders have clearly drawn the wrong lessons from the pandemic. If this country continues to squander staggering sums on narrowly focused national-security activities at a time when our greatest challenges are anything but military in nature, this country (and the world) will be a far less safe place in the future.

This column was distributed by TomDispatch.

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CounterPunch 01.07.2021