

THE POST'S VIEW

Opinion The U.S. could be safer — and it would cost less



By the [Editorial Board](#)
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May 25, 2023 at 5:01 p.m. EDT

Editor's Note: This editorial is part of a series that looks at the challenges of tackling the growing federal debt and the specific programs that drive it. Read the [first installment](#) on the debt problem and the [previous installment](#) on farm bill subsidies.

War and peace have one unlikely thing in common: It isn't hard to write a defense budget for either. Governments at war turn the spigots on; those at peace tend to shut them off. More challenging is drafting a military blueprint in a gray zone, when U.S. troops are not in combat but requests for military aid from allies are on the rise and threats of an even bigger crisis loom. Washington has provided more than \$45 billion in military aid to Ukraine since just before Russia's invasion; there is little sign of that conflict abating. China, meanwhile, continues to creep toward Taiwan.

But that does not mean the [\\$842 billion](#) President Biden suggested spending on defense next year — up more than one-third from \$630 billion in 2015 — should march into law unquestioned. At a time when dollars for all needs are in short supply and the nation's debt is rising unsustainably, the question cannot be by what percentage the Defense Department's budget should automatically grow this year. It should be: How do we ensure our military is best prepared for whatever comes?

One obvious answer: by spending smarter.

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However the current [debt ceiling](#) negotiations conclude, Congress should press the civilians who oversee our military to move more quickly from crewed to uncrewed systems, to speed the shift from surface to subsurface vessels and mine warfare; to hurry investment in cyberdefenses and secure communications; and direct the services to prioritize maintenance and spares over procurement of new systems, which often arrive without the funds for ordnance, upkeep and parts that make them reliably lethal. Significant savings could be realized over the next decade while making the military more nimble and more powerful.

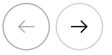
Congress would help matters if it stopped piling on funds for weapons and programs the Pentagon doesn't want. Each year, lawmakers add somewhere between \$15 billion and [\\$60 billion](#) to military budgets the Pentagon did not ask for. The Space Force, for example, [received \\$1.7 billion](#) more in December's continuing resolution than the Pentagon requested. Featherbedding is so fully entrenched in the annual budget games that 19 Pentagon agencies are required by statute to report to Congress on any "unfunded priorities" they could not get past the Office of Management and Budget on their way to Capitol Hill. Those reports are an invitation for lawmakers to fund them anyway. Over a decade, that unrequested spending could, by itself, top a quarter of a trillion dollars.

Submarines, both conventional and nuclear-armed, are among the country's greatest technological advantages. The Navy is a generation ahead of other nations below the surface and needs to stay ahead. That means building the Columbia class of nuclear missile subs and doing so in such a way that a related sub deal with Australia can also move forward. But surface shipbuilding priorities, oddly, too often resemble putting cart before horse. The Navy, dreaming of a 355-ship fleet, remains focused on building new vessels instead of maintaining those it already has. The Pentagon is far behind on ship maintenance, in both private and public shipyards; it needs to boost the ability of those facilities to repair more ships and find (or train) workers with the skills to do so. Otherwise, the Navy will [continue to cannibalize parts](#) from one ship to keep others afloat, retire vessels before the end of their useful life spans and [struggle to support missions overseas](#) because of an inability to keep the ships it already has ready for action.

Nor does it seem wise, in the era of cheap drones and relatively inexpensive missiles, to keep building large surface ships that require crews of thousands of men and women. Instead of buying a fifth Ford-class nuclear-powered carrier, it would be wiser to redirect some of those funds into renovating the undercapitalized shipyards that can keep the 293 ships that Congress has already bought combat-ready. Meanwhile, the service is woefully underinvested in both minesweeping and mine warfare at a time when these uncrewed devices can move, detect, identify and increasingly attack enemy ships on their own — with far less risk to sailors.

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The Editorial Board supports an [Air Force proposal](#), made in the interest of speeding weapons into warfighters' hands, that would allow the Pentagon to reprogram up to \$300 million per year without congressional approval. Given that Congress can take a year to approve a Pentagon budget, military planners need the flexibility to buy many items — particularly software — more quickly. But the Air Force has fairly come under questioning (even from [some Senate Republicans](#)) for spending so much on short-range fighters at the expense of longer-range strike, tanker and cargo programs. The F-35 Lightning might someday prove that it is worth the [\\$412 billion taxpayers will spend](#) just to build it, but it is not clear what sustaining role the fighter can play over the Taiwan Strait if pilots lack “depth of magazine” — i.e., ample munitions — they’ll need to fight. As one former Pentagon planner put it: We can send 500 fighters to Asia in a few days, but they will run out of ordnance a few days later. The Air Force needs to shift dollars out of expensive airframes and engines and into missiles — and the industrial base that can produce them.

As for the Army, it is enjoying something of a renaissance, as a number of its legacy weapons systems — from armor to artillery to a host of smart and dumb munitions — have taken center stage in Ukraine’s war with Russia. The Reagan-era Patriot missile defense system, for example, has outperformed in the theater, but the battle for control of the skies in Ukraine is a reminder that a more concerted effort by Army planners around air defense — a somewhat neglected mission inside the service — would help our allies in both Europe and Asia. At the same time, command focus on recruiting — and making the work of recruiting an important career move — would [bolster the case](#) for having more than 450,000 troops on active duty when a hefty portion of service personnel will never deploy. In general, the services all have too many people in uniform doing jobs that civilians could do. Fixing that mismatch could save nearly \$20 billion over 10 years, the [Congressional Budget Office estimates](#).

The Pentagon is launching an overhaul of the nuclear triad — expected to cost [a half-trillion dollars or more](#) — that should not be undertaken without fuller consideration of alternative [approaches](#). The Air Force hopes to buy 100 B21 Raider bombers to replace the B2 and B1s; the service should [revive plans to pilot](#) some of the new bombers remotely. The Air Force also wants to modernize the Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile system, spread in silos across North Dakota, Montana and Wyoming. That upgrade could be delayed for a decade with little threat to the nation’s ability to deter or win a nuclear conflict. [Some have argued](#) that it would be more pragmatic to convert sub-based Trident missiles for land-based silos than replace the Minuteman with a new generation of Sentinel ICBMs.

Other needs get lost in the push for big-ticket platforms. There is a shortage of predictive analytics that would help commanders anticipate attacks before they occur. The services should prioritize artificial-intelligence-driven systems to create false targets that can confuse enemies into seeing 100 planes, ships or tanks where perhaps only a dozen exist. Soldiers and sailors need more in the way of redundant communication networks and self-healing cyberdefenses to stop the enemy from disrupting command and control. And then there’s the easy stuff: Lawmakers, widely outspoken in their worry about China, have yet to fully fund [the Philippine base-sharing arrangement](#) that the Biden administration negotiated with the government of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Such a move would send a strong signal of joint resolve to Beijing, especially after years of harsh words between Manila and Washington.

For much of the past eight years, Congress has not asked the Pentagon to spend more smartly. It has mostly just asked the Pentagon to spend more. It is time for a more hardheaded approach.