

The U.S. and China in the FY2022 Budget Request: Service-Oriented Shopping Lists Without Strategy, Plans, or A Future

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The “good news” is that the United States has finally started to present specific military plans and budgets for competing with China – more than a decade after stating it would strategically rebalance U.S. forces to Asia, and some four years after the Trump Administration issued a new strategy focusing on China and Russia but without ever developing any clear plans to implement that strategy.

The summary of the U.S. regional strategy in the Overview of the National Defense Budget – which is excerpted in the first attachment to this commentary and on a military service-by-service basis at the OSD Comptroller site for the FY2022 budget proposal (<https://comptroller.defense.gov/Budget-Materials/>) does provide at least the broad outline of key force developments and procurement plans which can be tied to improving U.S. capabilities in the Pacific region and to deter and defend against China.

President Biden’s proposed defense budget for FY2022 also includes a detailed shopping list by major area of activity for a Pacific Defense Initiative (PDI) – a copy of which is also attached to this commentary.

That said, the budget request is little more than a glorified shopping list that is organized by military service without any clear strategy for an analysis justifying its impact on the military balance, specifically on its capabilities to defend and deter. It is also one where the Navy clearly attempts to tie every possible major procurement or spending request to the PDI, where the Marine Corps and Air Force make passing efforts, and where the Army largely stands aside.

These efforts are supplemented to a very limited extent on a military service-by-service basis in the individual service budget requests listed in the OSD Comptroller site for the FY2022 budget proposal.¹ However, only the Navy makes even a passing effort to actually tie its individual budget request to China, the Pacific, Russia, or any other threat, and it makes no serious effort to link its request to anything approaching a real strategy.

This simply isn’t good enough. After talking about strategy-driven budgets for years, there still is virtually no effort to provide any form of net assessment of the current trends in balance or on the various forms of war fighting capability, and there is little to no effort to provide any specific picture of how rapidly the proposed spending will alter the balance.

There is no analysis of how the Chinese military efforts – described in the Department of Defense’s annual reports to Congress on China’s military power, entitled, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, 2020* – have accelerated in recent years relative to the U.S. or what the estimated trends are for the future – estimates that can easily be made in broad terms using unclassified sources.

No effort is made to address the specifics of how the budget will cope with the major shifts taking place in China’s nuclear forces, missiles, and long range strike capabilities; its naval developments beyond total fleet size; its shifts in the air balance and air/missile development; China and Russia’s growing military ties; China’s strategic use of its belt and road efforts to meet its strategic objectives; or the specifics of efforts to improve joint U.S. capabilities with any given ally. No

comparisons are made of the progress in military and civil research and development, of STEM capabilities, or of the comparative efforts to address joint all domain operations and warfare.

Few projections of any kind go beyond the next fiscal year. Analysis – to the near vanishing extent it exists – seems to consist of statements that tie anything in the budget proposal that can be tied in some way to the Pacific (and especially anything that floats) meets a national need to compete with China. The end result is that the content of the FY2022 defense budget request is the strategic equivalent of letting a child write his or her own shopping list for a visit to a candy store, and providing adult supervision only to the extent of placing casual limits on how much the child can spend.

¹ United States Department of Defense, “Defense Budget Materials: FY2022,” *Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer*, 2021, <https://comptroller.defense.gov/Budget-Materials/>.