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# The Fiscal Year 2023 Defense Budget Submission: A Strategic Intellectual Vacuum

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# The Fiscal Year 2023 Defense Budget Submission: A Strategic Intellectual Vacuum

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If you enjoy reading shopping lists – grocery, gift, or the budgets of the military services – then you will love the Department of Defense’s (DoD) Fiscal Year 2023 budget justification. If you actually care whether the shopping lists meet our nation’s national security needs, the budget justifications, which are available on the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) Comptroller’s web page, usually provide little more than buzz words – and the sections that do refer to strategy often border on vacuous nonsense.<sup>1</sup>

The initial documentation presenting the FY2023 budget is slightly better in this regard than in FY2020 and FY2021, but only slightly. The first page of the DoD budget brief does provide the crude outline of some elements of a strategy,<sup>2</sup>

- FY23 Budget supports and implements new National Defense Strategy
  - Recognizes China as our key strategic competitor and pacing challenge
  - Russia remains an acute threat to interests of U.S. and our allies
- DoD will advance our priorities through:
  - Integrated deterrence
  - Campaigning
  - Building enduring advantages
- FY23 Budget funds the Joint Force we need to execute our strategy
  - Lethal, resilient, sustainable, survivable, agile, responsive
  - Budget enhances our capabilities across multiple areas
  - Prioritizes capabilities to counter China or Russia: space, nuclear triad, cyber

These goals, however, are filled with buzzwords that could be used to justify virtually any U.S. defense program and budget. Worse, from this point on, the Department-wide and military budget data that appear in the OSD Comptroller’s web pages fail to seriously address any key aspect of strategy. The most they do is to reference the existence of a national strategy – a strategy that presumably exists somewhere in an unknown classified corner of the defense universe. In many cases, it is clear the FY2023 submission is referring to a strategy of the Biden administration rather than the strategy documents that former president Trump issued in the first two years of his administration.

To the extent there is any common thread in the submission’s content that can be associated with the Biden administration’s strategy, it may be OSD’s repeated use of the term “integrated deterrence.” Admittedly, this particular buzzword serves a better purpose than trying to justify national defense spending on the basis of “disintegrated non-deterrence.” It is not, however, a definable goal, much less a strategy.

The reset of the FY2023 budget summary issued by OSD rarely mentions how any given budget activity will help the U.S. meet a given threat, and it places even less emphasis on any meaningful specifics about supporting joint operations, deterrence, hybrid warfare, and cooperating with strategic partners. One example of a particularly useless generalization appears on page five, when the budget summary states that the FY2023 budget “allows the Department to meet the Nation’s most solemn obligation – protecting the security of the American people.”<sup>3</sup>

The whole tone has a strange “business as usual” character in the middle of a global crisis where both U.S. and NATO allied forces clearly need massive restructuring. NATO and the war in

Ukraine are only mentioned as a \$6.5 billion line item in the FY2022 supplemental, and they are mentioned in terms so vague as to be nearly meaningless. Page 14 does have a subsection on “Countering Russian Aggression” that states that the budget submission,<sup>4</sup>

- Recognizes Russia as an acute threat. Its government is pursuing a political, economic, and military strategy that seeks to fracture NATO.
- Optimizes Joint Force responsiveness to deter aggression in the U.S. European Command area of responsibility by continuing to work with allies to make complementary investments that enhance the readiness and capability of the entire regional partners.
- Invests \$4.2B to continue to adapt capabilities to the evolving threat and strategic environment and also fund \$0.9B for Security Cooperation programs to support capabilities and capacity of allies and partners.
- Our European investments continue to provide assistance to Ukraine through the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative.

These words say nothing substantive, however, about how to accomplish these objectives or how the U.S. will deal with the massive changes in the strategic environment that will emerge from the Russian invasion and the war.

At the same time, the FY2023 budget submission is equally vague in dealing with China and the Indo-Pacific. The document does not mention China by name, and its list of “Indo-Pacific Investments” does not reflect any clear aspect of the data the White House produced in the Biden administration’s new Indo-Pacific strategy. It only states that the “Indo-Pacific Investments” started or sustained in the FY2023 budget include,<sup>5</sup>

- Prioritize China as the preeminent pacing challenge while developing capabilities and operational concepts in the Indo-Pacific.
- Support the requirements of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command to maintain the comparative military advantage of the United States.
- Pacific Deterrence: \$6.1B in Critical investments include integrated fires, new missile warning and tracking architecture, construction to enable enhanced posture, funding for Defense of Guam, and multinational information sharing, training, and experimentation.

There are no words which mention how any given aspect of the proposed budget will meet the threat posed by North Korea, Iran, terrorism, and extremism.

The report does list some priorities later in the section on “Secretary of Defense Strategic Priorities,” which are then separated by category.<sup>6</sup> To the extent that they focus on key aspects of defense, there are some useful data in the one page summaries of key Department-wide expenditures on how the U.S. will modernize nuclear forces (\$34.4 billion as listed on page 9), missile defeat and defense (\$24.7 billion as listed on page 10), long-range fires (\$7.2 billion as listed on page 11), space and space-based systems (\$27.6 billion as listed on page 12), and cyberspace (\$11.2 billion as listed on page 13). However, these lists do not provide any indication as to the kind of strategy, the overall program, the threats addressed by the proposed actions, and the longer-term budget involved.

Another separate list of readiness expenditures is also totally useless since there is no indication of whether the spending will correct past shortfalls or meet future needs.<sup>7</sup> The sections on “Building Enduring Advantages” do touch on some potentially important efforts in research and development and artificial intelligence, but they have so little detail as to be nearly meaningless. The same is true of the potentially important efforts to improve the defense industrial base and supply chain.<sup>8</sup>

As for the future, the FY2023 budget submission does call for projected budget rises. The OSD budget summary calls for DoD spending in discretionary budget authority to rise from \$715 billion in FY2022 to \$773 billion in FY2023, and then to rise in steady annual increments to \$828 billion in FY2027.<sup>9</sup> The spending estimates, however, do nothing to explain a real Future Years Defense Program (FYDP).

The baseline for the projected budget rise between FY2022 and FY2027 seems to be little more than the result of applying a fixed rate of annually increasing line items to a total of \$788 billion in FY2027, plus add-ons for “purchase inflation,” “compensation growth,” and another category costing \$6 billion to \$7 billion a year which is never even labeled. No aspects of how these rises “allow the Department to meet the Nation’s most solemn obligation – protecting the security of the American people” are explained.

The military service budget summaries seem designed more to allow one service to compete with another than to meet the needs of a common strategy, joint all-domain operations, or the needs to cope with a major threat. The Air Force submission also seems unusually rushed. The Army does a superb job of covering up its lack of content with good graphics and photos. The Navy/Marine Corps is a good graphic presentation but does at least touch briefly on actual strategy and the data on the threat, but seems to define “jointness as cooperation between the Navy and Marine Corps.” None of the service summaries make for particularly useful reading unless you are worried about the spending on some key item.

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<sup>1</sup> The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), Department of Defense, “Defense Budget Materials – FY2023,” 2022, <https://comptroller.defense.gov/Budget-Materials/>.

<sup>2</sup> The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), Department of Defense, *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request*, March 2022, [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2023/FY2023\\_Budget\\_Request.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2023/FY2023_Budget_Request.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request*, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request*, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request*, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request*, p. 4.