

Opinion: Trump's Unremarkable Defense Playbook

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When President Donald Trump took office last Jan. 20, there were a lot of questions about whether his “high-beta” presidency would have a volatile impact on national defense. In a [commentary published by Aviation Week](#), I opined that it would be foolhardy to make predictions and that we needed some new “signposts and metrics” of force posture, defense spending and acquisition management to gauge the magnitude and direction of change that might emerge.

Revisiting these guideposts one year on, I am struck by how modestly Trump and Defense Secretary James Mattis have altered the defense posture they inherited. Although it may be too early to tell for the long haul of his term, the 2017 indications are that he employs military force in orthodox strokes, holds no special power with which to break the grip of deadlock over defense spending and regards acquisition management as a lever on domestic interests rather than military value.

Forces The new administration has had its most significant defense-policy impact on combat deployments. My guidepost concerned U.S. force levels in Afghanistan, which at the time Trump took office totaled 8,400 personnel. Following a summer-long debate testing the president’s “instinct to pull out,” he announced a recommitment to Afghanistan and authorized Mattis to double down the forces assigned to it. By late fall, U.S. troop numbers had increased to 14,000, the airstrike campaign had intensified fourfold, and NATO had agreed to contribute 3,000 more soldiers to the mission.

Although these increments of soldiers deployed to Afghanistan are very small in proportion to the total force, they indicate the enthusiasm for military activism that the Trump administration is imprinting on national defense. “America First does not mean America alone,” wrote the national security advisor and director of the National Economic Council, of the president’s surprisingly orthodox view of America’s role in the world. “It is a commitment to protecting and advancing our vital interests while also fostering cooperation and strengthening relationships with our allies and partners.”

Budgets The most ineffectual defense-policy initiative of the Trump team concerns the budget. My guidepost for defense spending was the current-dollar total (“Base” plus “Overseas Contingency Operations”) of discretionary Pentagon budget authority in 2017 and 2018, the baseline of which in the Obama administration’s plans summed to \$1,208 billion (\$589 billion for 2017 and \$619 billion for 2018). By comparison, Trump’s impact on defense spending for 2017 is straightforward and small: Following the Omnibus Appropriations



Act for 2017 that became law in May, the Pentagon had \$599 billion of total discretionary budget authority, an increase of about \$10 billion, or 1.7%, over the Obama baseline. Trump's impact on defense spending in 2018 is more indeterminate, both because Congress has failed to enact a full-year appropriation and because the defense budgets proposed by the administration (\$631 billion) and approved by the House (\$658 billion) and Senate (\$646 billion) all exceed by more than \$40 billion the statutory limits imposed by the Budget Control Act.

Assuming that even the smallest of these budgets can attract the nine Democratic votes in the Senate required to pass it into law, it still would enable an increase of only about 2% over the Obama baseline. That's effectively flat in real terms and well short of the 4-6% annual increases that Mattis has testified are needed just to sustain the existing U.S. military posture.

Acquisition His December 2016 contretemps with [Boeing](#) and [Lockheed Martin](#) over the costs of their aircraft notwithstanding, Trump's impact on acquisition management has been imperceptible. My guidepost here is the [F-35A](#) variant unit cost, which, when low-rate initial-production Lot 10 was announced in early February, came in at the entirely unsurprising price of \$94.6 million. Since then, indications persist that achieving still more substantial reductions to the aircraft's price is proving difficult. The program's new manager, Vice Admiral Mathias W. Winter, proclaimed in September that he expected agreement on a lower-priced Lot 11 as soon as mid-October, but the year ended with no such announcement. In early December, Under Secretary Ellen Lord told the Senate Armed Services Committee that she has had to launch a new "deep dive" into the costs of the F-35, a familiar preoccupation of her predecessors. Indeed, since Inauguration Day, any attention the White House has given to acquisition management or defense-industrial policy has shifted its aim from costs and efficiencies to jobs and industrial security.

However ironic and perhaps welcome, team Trump turned in an unremarkable year for defense posture.

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