

Obama set to veto any cuts to Pentagon war machine

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19 March 2015

The Obama administration is prepared to veto any cuts to the 2016 Pentagon budget, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter told the House Armed Services Committee in testimony Wednesday.

Carter said that President Barack Obama would reject any proposal that includes the sequestration caps imposed by the 2011 Budget Control Act, which the Democratic president supported and signed into law following the staged crisis over the debt ceiling that year.

The statement came as both major parties sought ways to circumvent the mandated cuts in military spending.

Obama, significantly, has made no threat to veto budget proposals imposing spending caps on vital social services. Indeed, while traveling the country touting relatively minor programs that are likely to be trimmed or eliminated in budget negotiations with the Republican congressional leadership, his administration is proposing to implement some \$400 billion in cuts to future Medicare and Medicaid spending, even as he seeks to slash corporate tax rates by up to 10 percent.

The president's threat to veto sequestration for the military while remaining silent over social spending dovetails with Republican policy, which centers on raising arms spending while offsetting it with even deeper cuts to domestic programs.

While the White House is arguing for ditching sequestration when it comes to military spending, the House Republicans this week made an attempt to square the circle with their budget proposal. It leaves the sequestration caps in place but adds tens of billions of dollars to the so-called Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) budget, a kind of off-the-books slush fund that pays for US military interventions abroad.

The Obama administration has requested \$561 billion for the Pentagon base budget, and OCO war funds of \$51 billion. The House Republicans have proposed \$523 billion—formally adhering to the sequestration spending caps—while pouring \$94 billion into the OCO with the idea that the military can dip into it to meet other spending needs. The two combined sums are roughly equal.

The Senate budget committee, meanwhile, submitted its own proposal Wednesday explicitly rejecting the OCO gimmick proposed by fellow Republicans in the House. Likewise pretending to abide by the budget caps for the Pentagon, it introduced its own gimmick, creating a “deficit neutral reserve fund,” which has no appropriations but serves as a placeholder for additional military spending to be negotiated later this year.

Carter's testimony Wednesday capped a series of appearances by both the uniformed chiefs and civilian secretaries of the armed services, all of whom issued the direst warnings of what would happen without substantial increases to Washington's gargantuan military budget.

Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James, for example, warned that sequestration “is going to place American lives at risk, both at home and abroad.”

“Missions will take us longer, it will cost us lives and create more injuries,” Army Chief of Staff General Raymond Odierno said.

General Martin Dempsey, chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, predicted that the US military's “forward presence will be reduced by a third,” meaning “less influence” in the world.

In his own testimony, Secretary of Defense Carter stressed the need to fully fund the global reach of American militarism, while making it clear that the Pentagon is preparing for even bigger wars, specifically

against China, Russia and Iran.

“Across the world,” Carter told the committee, it is only the US armed forces that “stand between disorder and order.” US troops, he said, “stand up to malicious and destabilizing actors”—i.e., anyone challenging US hegemony—“while standing behind those who believe in a more secure, just, and prosperous future”—i.e., US imperialism’s puppets and client regimes.

The Pentagon’s spending, he insisted, must be driven by the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, a document that insisted on strengthening the US military’s “global war-fighting capability” and elevated China and Russia as the most likely targets of US military action.

The Pentagon chief said the proposed budget “puts renewed emphasis on preparing for future threats—especially threats that challenge our military’s power projection capabilities.” He indicated that the reduction of troop levels in Afghanistan and Iraq following a decade of wars and occupations provided an opening to prepare the US military for far greater wars.

“Being able to project power anywhere across the globe by rapidly surging aircraft, ships, troops and supplies lies at the core of our defense strategy,” he said. Such unfettered ability to attack and invade anywhere was key to protecting US interests as well as to assuring “freedom of navigation and overflight” and allowing “global commerce to flow freely.” These last supposed principles have repeatedly been invoked in Washington’s escalating confrontation with Beijing over the South China Sea.

Carter specifically pointed to Russia, China, Iran and North Korea, warning that they “have been pursuing long-term, comprehensive military modernization programs to close the technology gap that has long existed between them and the United States.” He added that “significant investments” in both infrastructure and forces were needed “particularly in the western Pacific.”

Carter ticked off the budgets proposed for the main branches of the armed services and what they would pay for, giving a glimpse of the massive scale of the US war machine.

The Army, he said, would receive a base budget of \$126.5 billion, supporting the deployment of over 1 million troops—475,000 active duty soldiers, 342,000 in

the Army National Guard and 198,000 in the Army Reserve. In terms of major expenditures, the Pentagon is calling for \$4.5 billion to spend on attack and transportation helicopters.

For the Navy and Marine Corps, the proposed allocation is \$161 billion for 2016, paying for a fleet of 282 warships that year and 304 by 2020. The force consists of 386,000 active-duty and reserve sailors, as well as 222,900 active-duty and reserve Marines. The Navy’s proposed spending on new warships amounts to \$5.7 billion for 2016 and \$30.9 billion through 2020, paying for two new DDG-51 destroyers a year and two new Virginia-class attack submarines a year, while supporting 11 carrier strike groups.

The proposed budget for the Air Force is \$152 billion, supporting a combined force of 491,700 active-duty, guard and reserve airmen. It includes spending \$6 billion in the upcoming fiscal year and \$33.5 billion through 2020 to acquire a total of 272 F-35A Joint Strike Fighter planes, which have become the most expensive weapons system in the Pentagon’s history. Another \$2.4 billion will go to buy refueling tankers, and \$904 million will pay for an additional 29 MQ-9A Reaper drones in 2016. The Pentagon proposes to buy 77 of the remotely piloted assassination weapons by 2020 at the cost of \$4.8 billion.

In terms of the \$50.9 billion OCO war-fighting fund, the lion’s share, \$42.5 billion, will go to cover continuing US military operations in Afghanistan, while \$5.3 billion is proposed for the new US intervention in Iraq and Syria. Also proposed is \$789 million for a “NATO Reassurance” fund, which is to pay for the escalating series of provocative military operations on Russia’s borders.

Finally, Carter said that the Obama administration’s proposed Pentagon budget includes \$1 billion in 2016 and \$8 billion by 2020 for a key component in the preparation for global war: ensuring the “security, and effectiveness of our nuclear deterrent, as well as the long-term health of the force that supports our nuclear triad.”



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