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Back to full spectrum; Keeping the A-10; Arsenal plane; Warming up for future fights....

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EMBRACING "NEXT-WAR-ITIS"

With its Fiscal 2017 budget request, the Pentagon is shedding its posture of focusing almost exclusively on counterinsurgency and the all-out pursuit of terrorists, saying the threats posed by near-peers, such as Russia and China, are now its top priority. While the fight against ISIS and terrorism broadly will still be vigorous—and would get a huge boost in the spending plan now before Congress—the "base budget" request clearly emphasizes investment in modernization, research, and development geared for a future, high-end fight.

The $582.7 billion budget request marks a full pendulum swing away from the policies of just seven years ago, when then-Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates fired the Air Force's top leaders partly because of what he viewed as their "next-war-itis"—what Gates considered to be the inexcusable sin of continuing to prepare for high-end major-nation warfare instead of bending every dollar and asset available to the lower-tech fights in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The switch back to "full spectrum" readiness signals an acceptance on the part of national security leaders that the strategy of the Obama Administration—that there can't be a new Cold War if the US won't play along—hasn't worked, and that during America's long preoccupation with Middle East brush wars, its major competitors have gained ground technologically, and now pose a much bigger problem.

Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter, providing an early February "preview" of the defense budget, said the new spending plan takes "the long view" of challenges, which amount to "a return to 'great power' ... competition."

The budget proposal focuses on "the fights that might come 10, 20, or 30 years down the road." The US must confront "a new strategic era," Carter asserted.

"We're taking a strong and balanced approach to deter Russian aggression," he said in Washington, D.C., calling Russia the top existential threat to the US. "We haven't had to worry about this for 25 years," Carter noted, and "while I wish it were otherwise, now we do."

The world has "not stood still" while the US fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, Carter said, and the security environment is "dramatically different than the one we've been engaged in" since the first Gulf War in 1991.

China, Carter said, continues its explosive military spending and growth, and this fact will require the US to continue its "rebalance, so-called, to maintain stability" in the Pacific region.

Carter called out North Korea as the third-highest security challenge facing the US. American forces will have to remain ready to "fight tonight" on the Korean Peninsula because of Pyongyang's unstable and threatening behavior.

Iran is the fourth on the list of security challenges, Carter said. The nuclear weapons deal struck with Iran is a good one, he said, because it "doesn't limit us in the Defense Department in any way," but the US military will "still have to counter Iran's malign influence against our friends and allies in the region, especially Israel."

The fight against terrorism, and ISIS in particular, is the fifth-ranking challenge, Carter said. ISIS "must and will be defeated now" because it is "metastasizing in Afghanistan, Africa, and elsewhere." The anti-terrorism fight will likely continue for years, he said, and will get increasingly tough. This is because "destructive power of greater and greater magnitude" is falling into the hands of "smaller and more aberrant groups."

While DOD "must and will address all five of those challenges," doing so will demand "new thinking" and a recognition that the realm of potential combat has expanded beyond air, land, and sea, to "cyber, space, and electronic warfare."

CARRY A BIGGER STICK

Deterrence is the key for security in all of the nation-state scenarios, Carter asserted. "We must have—and [be seen] to have—the ability to impose unacceptable costs on an advanced aggressor that will either dissuade them from taking provocative action or make them deeply regret it if they do."

"The US military will fight very differently" than it has in the last 15 years, and will be readied to cope with "a high-end enemy," Carter said. Russia and China will be the pacing and "most stressing competitors." They are pursuing capabilities "that seek to achieve their objectives rapidly; before, they hope, we can respond." Although the US doesn't want a conflict with either country, "we also cannot blind ourselves to the actions they appear to choose to pursue."

To defeat ISIS, Carter said DOD is proposing to double its spending on Operation Inherent Resolve to $7.5 billion in 2017. He suggested that $1.8 billion of that will go to replenish depleted war stocks. "We've recently been hitting [ISIS] with so many GPS-guided smart bombs and laser-guided rockets that we're starting to run low on the ones that we use against terrorists the most," he said, specifying that the money would buy about 45,000 more munitions.

The Pentagon will back away from its proposed retirement of the A-10 Warthog until 2022, Carter acknowledged, saying broadly that more fourth generation aircraft will be retained than planned. The A-10 would be replaced by F-35s "on a squadron-by-squadron basis, so we'll always have enough aircraft for today's conflicts." However, it was revealed separately that the Air Force would buy five fewer F-35s in Fiscal 2017 than previously planned, to cover other modernization expenses.

The budget plans for a quadrupling of funds allocated to the European Reassurance Initiative, Carter said, from $800 million in FY16 to $3.4 billion in FY17. The money will fund additional force rotations from the US to Europe, more international exercises and training, more pre-positioned equipment, and "infrastructure improvements to support all this."

The goal, to be achieved by the end of 2017, is to create "a highly capable combined arms ground force that can respond

across the theater, if necessary," with Russia clearly the driving threat behind this development.

As adversaries have grown more adept with precision, stealth, and in the cyber and space domains, it will be necessary to invest heavily in future leap-ahead capabilities, Carter said. For three decades, the US enjoyed technological dominance in these areas, but no more.

He noted that the Pentagon's Strategic Capabilities Office, which Carter created in 2012 to rapidly field new technologies, will get an unspecified boost in 2017 funding, as part of an overall $71.4 billion Pentagon research and development program. But rather than try to introduce vast fleets of all-new gear, the emphasis will be to "build on what we have" and increase the capabilities of extant systems, "keeping current capabilities viable for as long as possible."

Carter said a top priority of the SCO will be to adapt the micro-technologies found in smartphones—cameras, sensors, micromechanical systems—and put them on weapons, such as the Small Diameter Bomb, to allow advanced targeting "through commercial components."

Another initiative will be in swarming autonomous vehicles, such as "micro-drones that are really fast, really resistant," that can be "kicked out the back of a fighter jet moving at Mach 0.9" or "thrown into the air by a soldier in the middle of the Iraqi desert." These small vehicles would also be produced through additive manufacturing, or 3-D printing.

Carter said the long-term research done on railguns will soon produce longer-range, higher-speed artillery shells that can also be used for point defense. Fired out of existing gun barrels on Army artillery or Navy ships, the weapons will be capable of "defeating incoming missile raids at a much lower cost per round and thereby imposing higher costs on an attacker."

THE FLYING AIR FORCE MAGAZINE

Finally, Carter said the Pentagon will adapt "one of our oldest aircraft"—he didn't immediately identify which one—and turn it into an "arsenal plane," which will function as "a very large airborne magazine, networked to fifth generation aircraft that act as forward sensor and targeting nodes."

A major shortcoming of the F-22 and F-35, the Air Force's two stealth fighters, is that their internal weapons carriage is limited. The arsenal plane concept would seem to address this shortcoming by allowing the stealth fighters to designate targets for long-range weapons carried by the magazine aircraft well out of enemy air defense range. The project is an example of how the Defense Department will combine "different systems already in our inventory to create whole new capabilities," he said.

Submarines would also get a big increase, to the tune of "more than $40 billion over the next five years," to equip them to carry more Tomahawk cruise missiles, more than tripling each sub's capacity from 12 to 40 Tomahawks each.

The Navy's F-18 Super Hornet fleet would also be bolstered, to ensure a full supply of carrier-based striking power until the F-35C version of the Joint Strike Fighter is available in larger numbers. As a tradeoff, Carter said, the Navy will reduce its buy of littoral combat ships.

Cyber capabilities would be increased department-wide by $7 billion in Fiscal 2017 and $35 billion over five years, Carter noted. The money will go to build better network defenses and cyber "training ranges" on which to exercise them.

Space capabilities would get an increase of $5 billion. Carter said the US is no longer "waiting to invest until the threats [in space] are fully realized." Space is no longer a "sanctuary" and the increase would fund ways to "identify, attribute, and negate all threatening actions in space." The US depends on space for its military capabilities, and some adversaries "want to take that away from us," Carter said.

Some of the money to pay for these initiatives will come from reductions in Defense Department overhead costs, which Carter said would amount to "$8 billion over the next five years." He also pledged to propose some revisions to the Goldwater-Nichols defense reforms of 1986 to further streamline the defense organization. A review, he said, had been underway for several months, and Carter promised decisions "in [the] coming weeks."

The US no longer has the luxury of focusing on a single type of threat, Carter asserted. Echoing the old complaint from his predecessor Gates, Carter said DOD sometimes concentrated on "whatever big war people thought was coming over the horizon" to the detriment of the fight at hand. That approach "won't work for the world we live in today," he said.

The US can't choose the fights it wants to engage in and "we have to do both" the big wars and small ones, Carter said. "That's what this budget is designed to do."

A CHANGE IN CLIMATE

The Defense Department in January started assigning various responsibilities for dealing with climate change. This comes after multiple Pentagon studies over the last 20 years identifying serious strategic challenges emerging from climate change, with the effects already affecting the world security situation.

Pentagon Directive 4715.21, dated Jan. 14, said that all mission planning and execution will henceforth include the effects of climate change on the DOD mission; taking those effects into consideration when developing plans and procedures, and "anticipating and managing any risks that develop as a result of climate change to build resilience."

The most recent Pentagon assessment of the risks of climate change, published last July, noted that rising world temperatures are producing tangible effects requiring action by DOD. Among them, the Arctic Ocean is now largely ice-free during the summer months, prompting far more commercial traffic—and Russian naval activity. Given Russia's recent unpredictable and aggressive actions on numerous fronts, this increased military presence in the Arctic in turn requires a greater US Navy response. It also requires the ability to operate in an area formerly often only accessible by submarines.

The report also noted that most coastal Navy ports and some lowland bases near the ocean are increasingly subject to flooding and more destructive storms. This mandates more resilient infrastructure and places for forces under storm threat to safely relocate.

The undersecretary of defense for acquisition, technology, and logistics is to develop a series of "boards, councils, and working groups to integrate climate change considerations" in Pentagon policies and plans, and determine how climate change will drive "life cycle analyses" for various systems and compel the purchase or modification of various systems.

Other defense entities were tasked to assess how they will have to change or gear up to combat the effects of global warming and to assess "challenges and opportunities" arising from it. ✪