

Past Is Prologue?

President Donald Trump's first defense budget left a lot to be desired for just about everyone on Capitol Hill, calling into question how much of the \$668 billion proposal will actually become law.

Democrats were, as expected, angry that Trump cut domestic programs deeply to foot the bill for defense, blowing past previously established budget caps by some \$54 billion for Pentagon programs.

But defense hawks were left wanting as well, making clear they want another \$40 billion next year to buy the aircraft, ships, and other weaponry they see as vital to securing the nation.

The summer legislative session is underway, and defense authorizers and appropriators are hard at work on their cornerstone bills, which manage to make their way through Congress each year.

In the end, the number for defense, as well as the detailed priorities, will require a significant compromise between the two parties on Capitol Hill and the Trump administration, which has listed a military buildup as one of its top priorities.

The topline for the base (non-war) defense budget—encompassing Pentagon spending, as well as national security programs at the Department of Energy and some other cats and dogs in the federal budget—was set in a 2011 budget law that also established firm limits for non-defense spending.

Over the last six years, Congress has managed to patch together a series of year or two-year compromises that have given the Pentagon a modest increase over those caps, but typically far less than what GOP hawks would like the military to have at its disposal.

The last agreement expired this fiscal year, so lawmakers will have to once again negotiate the defense—as well as the non-defense—figure before coming to any final decision on the budget.



Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson and USAF Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein prepare to testify June 6 on the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2018.

If the final appropriation for Fiscal 2018 exceeds the established caps and there is no agreement for additional spending, the indiscriminate across-the-board cuts known as sequestration would take effect.

If past is prologue, there will likely be some agreement reached this year that will provide more money for defense for at least Fiscal 2018.

But Trump's proposed \$54 billion plus-up—let alone the additional \$40 billion demanded by the Republican chairmen of the House and Senate Armed Services committees—seems like a pipe dream in this political climate, particularly as Democrats try to safeguard non-defense priorities like foreign aid that Trump cut deeply in his first spending proposal.

The path ahead for defense legislation will be filled with hurdles, perhaps none as big as the administration itself.

That then leaves it to appropriators on Capitol Hill to try to squeeze as much into the defense spending bill as they possibly can. One option is to add unfunded base-budget programs to the overseas contingency operations (OCO) account, not capped under the long-standing budget law.

But Democrats will, as in years past, balk at that move as a ploy and an end run around the caps. Unless non-defense programs receive a similar boost, they likely won't go for the maneuver, making it a risky proposition that could hold up all spending bills in the Senate, where the minority party can (and will) use the filibuster to kill legislation.

House lawmakers attempted the OCO gambit last year, but their colleagues in the Senate opted to take a scalpel to the defense bill instead. They made hundreds of surgical cuts to the defense budget, spreading the financial pain across the Pentagon's massive portfolio rather than gutting a handful of line items.

As a result, they were able to free up billions to pay for 74 F-35 strike fighters, 11 more than originally requested by the Obama administration, and other pricey weapons priorities, many that the military chiefs outlined in their annual budgetary wish lists sent to Capitol Hill.

The path ahead for defense legislation and all of the spending bills will be filled with hurdles, perhaps none as big as the administration itself. Lawmakers have become accustomed to this ritual of renegotiating the caps, but the administration is new to this particular dance.

A continuing resolution for at least the first several months of the fiscal year—and perhaps longer—seems to be a sure bet for Oct. 1 and beyond. That will cause heartburn at the Pentagon, as it always does. But Democrats and Republicans alike have shown repeatedly over the last several years that they are committed to pushing the defense spending bill to the President's desk for signature, even if that happens more than halfway through the fiscal year.

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