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5 on 45:

On Trump's defense budget proposal

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

O'HANLON: Greetings, it's Mike O'Hanlon and I'm going to talk about the defense budget proposal from President Trump. I'm speaking before his State of the Union address, although I'm guessing we've probably got most of the details that we'll have even after the speech has been delivered, and as you know, most of the real programmatic detail will have to await later in the spring when the full budget request is presented to Congress for its consideration. That's another way of saying that, just to remind people of the obvious point, this is not going to be the budget of the United States government just because President Trump likes the idea or says it should be. It's a budget proposal. Until the 1970s the president didn't even make a proposal because as we know in our Constitution, Congress appropriates money. The president's role formally and legally is just to either sign or veto, but he doesn't write the legislation or the appropriating mandate. And so this is a suggestion by President Trump. And while a Republican Congress may have a lot of the same priorities that he does, we shouldn't assume they will have the exact same ones down the line.

Okay, that's all prelude, now let me say a couple of the specific things about what I do and don't like about this proposal. And let me start with what I do like, just to be a little positive and give Mr. Trump the occasional word of support from an unlikely location on Massachusetts Avenue.

And I think that the 54 billion increase in military spending, which would be essentially taking us up to a higher plateau—in other words the annual budgets would

heretofore be 54 billion higher than had been previously expected, and therefore get us up to something in the range of \$650 billion a year. That's essentially what I called for in the book I wrote last year called the *\$650 Billion Bargain: The Case for Modest Growth in America's Defense Budget*. And that number that I'm using, \$650 billion, that includes the regular Pentagon budget for normal peacetime preparation activities, that includes the war costs for Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, and that also includes the nuclear weapons costs that are housed within the Department of Energy budget, just to be clear on what I'm talking about

Anyway, Trump wants to increase that by 54 billion, and that's sort of where I would go. Let me clarify one thing very, very emphatically: 54 billion is the increase relative to the so-called sequestration level of the Budget Control Act, that 2011 infamous piece of legislation which no one expected to really apply the way it ultimately did, because there wasn't a deal to supersede it. That is the thing that gave us sequestration in 2013, which meant essentially across the board cuts in many different accounts in the defense and non-defense discretionary budgets, because Congress was unable to come up with any other, better proposal. And so that lower number, the sequestration level, is something we've usually avoided except 2013.

So Trump's not actually increasing by 54 billion above where we had been or where Obama projected, he's increasing really by more like 20 billion relative to where Obama had been or where Obama projected. In other words, it's not that big of an increase, it's about a 4% increase in the Pentagon budget. And you might say, well only a longtime Washingtonian like a Brookings scholar could call \$20 billion a modest amount of money but it is, just as I say, 4% of the Pentagon budget, and more

importantly it is much less than the growth Mr. Trump plans in the force structure of the military. So in his previous speeches on the subject, he said he wanted to grow the size of the Army or the Navy or the Marine Corps combat force by roughly 10-15%. It varied a little from service to service. This is not nearly enough money to do that. So Trump comes in underfunding his own proposal, if you will, and that's certainly one thing I don't like about it. The amount of money is roughly correct to my mind, but to come in with an amount of money that's far less than the requirement would be means that he's going to wind up starving accounts somewhere else for long term modernization or innovation or training or what have you if he keeps to his current plan. So one thing I don't really like about what I've heard so far is the numbers don't seem to match with the planned increase.

But the worst thing of all, and I'll use my final thought on this, is that the 54 billion being cut from other programs is not a smart way to govern in my judgment at this point in history. Let me focus just on the foreign aid account and give one example. We are fighting hard, working hard with Iraqis to help liberate Mosul, the city in the north of that country that ISIS has been controlling. Once that city is back in government hands, it has to be stabilized and rebuilt. The Iraqis need help to do that because oil prices, their main source of income, have plummeted. I think we're going to have to give them more foreign aid, not less, or the military victory we will have achieved could fall apart again as the Sunni and Shia bicker. So I want to keep foreign aid adequate to deal with security threats like that.

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