Dear Friends,

The United States is stumbling towards a trillion-dollar defense budget this year, full of warplanes that don’t fly and warships that can’t fight. New budgetary decisions show Congress is more concerned with how the military budget can be a jobs program, or open a new front in our political battleground, than with whether weapons programs will be delivered on time, on budget, or do anything to keep Americans safe.

For instance, while the budget process for fiscal year 2024 (FY24) is still not complete, it continues to provide for the development of dangerous and destabilizing new nuclear weapons. One example is the new, sea-launched nuclear cruise missile, which the Navy has flat-out said it doesn’t want.

This budget throws good money after bad on systems like the F-35 Lightning II, providing for at least 83 new (and still not fully tested and evaluated) F-35s, despite the fact that the program has proven itself to be one of the costliest, most faulty, and least ready weapons systems in our nation’s history.

To combat this trend of unaccountability, CDI has been working hard with members on both sides of the aisle. We have pushed lawmakers to cut the unfunded priorities mandate, supporting a bipartisan effort to curb service wish lists that go outside of the strategic budget process and add billions to the defense budget every year that the Pentagon didn’t even ask for.

We have worked hard with our coalition partners to reinforce guardrails against waste, fraud, and abuse in the National Defense Authorization Act through a steady campaign of advocacy and analysis that has helped introduce key legislation to force the Pentagon to identify contractors that fail to provide accurate cost and pricing data in their contract negotiations. And we have continued to serve as a major media resource for reporters and journalists who want to take on the absurdity of the current state of military-industrial-congressional relations.

Without a doubt, CDI continues to fill an essential niche in the national security space, providing serious, unbiased, and nonpartisan analyses on the state of the largest part of our nation’s discretionary spending.

In the pages ahead, I hope that we can offer you a view behind the scenes so that you can see just how hard we have been working to make a difference.

None of the crucial work that this team does would be possible without your help, so please continue your support and back our work if and where you can.

Thank you for all that you do to keep CDI in the fight.

Regards,

Geoff Wilson
CDI by the Numbers

BY GEOFF WILSON & JULIA GLEDHILL

This year’s National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and defense appropriations cycle has been incredibly fraught, with partisan infighting, dog whistle politics, and plenty of pork barrel spending all in the name of staying “tough on China” and preparing for the potential wars of tomorrow.

CDI has been focused on pushing for critical reforms in oversight measures while fighting to keep the Pentagon accountable to its servicemembers and American taxpayers. As part of this process, CDI staffers have spent hundreds of hours engaging with policymakers, their staff, and our coalition partners this year.

Here are some insights into our NDAA and appropriations work, by the numbers:

11 Veterans who flew in to join CDI’s Dan Grazier to advocate on Capitol Hill to protect the close air support mission.

40 Congressional office visits to advocate for the protection of close air support.

60+ The number of congressional offices CDI staff met with to discuss issues related to the NDAA and defense appropriations this cycle.

1 Amendment crafted with POGO’s support that’s already been adopted into the House NDAA. The amendment would require the Pentagon to track and publicly report when contractors delay providing certified cost and pricing data during contract negotiations. This reform would help the Pentagon better negotiate fair deals — and identify companies that repeatedly sabotage contract negotiations in their favor.

6 Letters in support of our NDAA priorities that CDI worked on with coalition partners to send to Capitol Hill.

58 Minutes POGO Executive Director Danielle Brian appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee. CDI helped craft her April testimony on the problems of undue influence and the military-industrial-congressional revolving door that has led to so many issues in our defense procurement process.

7 The number of amendments to the NDAA and defense appropriations bills that CDI staff worked on with members of Congress to draft or review.
Why The Bunker?

BY MARK THOMPSON

we launched The Bunker three years ago because the Center for Defense Information wanted a regularly published, irreverent scorecard on U.S. national security. It is something that was long overdue.

The Bunker itself was born eight years after the U.S. victory in World War II and has witnessed the nation’s slumping performance on battlefields ever since. As someone who has covered the U.S. military for more than 40 years — and as a long-time subscriber to Consumer Reports (a nonprofit, just like the Project On Government Oversight, the home of CDI) — The Bunker knows the U.S. military-industrial complex would never end up on CR’s recommended list. The weekly emailed newsletter (also posted later on POGO’s website) is our way of trying to figure out why.

It’s too easy to poke fun at the U.S. military’s foibles and fumbles. It’s tougher to dig in and find their root causes. You can start with the self-licking ice cream cone that is the military-industrial complex. Compounding the problem is congressional inertia when it comes to deciding what and where the U.S. military’s mission(s) should be. It simply caterwauls when defense procurement in members’ districts is cut, or when the military suggests that certain bases should be shuttered. Talk about a department of defense!

But there’s barely a peep as the White House and Pentagon churn out national defense strategies that are impractical, illusory, and unaffordable. That’s why, even as U.S. defense spending closes in on $1 trillion a year, there are calls insisting we need to spend more. There’s just too much money — Pentagon contracts, military payrolls, campaign contributions — slopping around to impose any real rigor on U.S. defense spending. That leads to disasters like the $400 billion Air Force-Marine-Navy’s F-35 fighter, the $44 billion Air Force’s KC-46 aerial tanker, the Navy’s $13 billion-a-copy Ford-class aircraft carriers (planes not included), and the Army’s tank-like Future Combat Systems, put out of its misery after your $20 billion investment.

The Pentagon’s geographic commands — Africa, Europe, the Indo-Pacific, Latin America, and the Middle East — gird the globe. Only one — Northern Command — is dedicated to the defense of the U.S. Surprisingly, it was created only in 2002, 12 months after the 9/11 attacks. Seems curious that the Department of Defense has only one command dedicated to defense, but five earmarked for offense. Beyond that, The Bunker likes to brave the D.C. bloviation wind tunnel that whips potential foes into Darth Vader-like invincibles. There’s too much fearmongering and threat inflation when it comes to assessing the adversaries the U.S. faces. That mindset stands in sharp contrast to the brave and self-reliant revolutionaries, frontier settlers, and pioneering industrialists who made this nation great.

Let’s face it: We get the Pentagon we deserve. And we get it because we keep electing lawmakers who pledge allegiance to hometown pork, sprinkled with enough patriotism to make most of us tolerate excessive defense spending. The Bunker is the Center for Defense Information’s small-bore counter-attack on defense business-as-usual.
The Navy continues its struggle to deliver ships on time and on budget, threatening its ambitious — and misguided — plans to confront China. Rather than sinking even more time and money into programs that are years late and billions over budget, now is a good time to reevaluate the strategy that underlies the rationale behind them. A realistic appraisal of the global situation will show that the current narrative driving all defense policy decisions is flawed, and far more achievable alternatives exist to meet America’s security challenges.

Costs for the USS John F. Kennedy, the second Ford-class aircraft carrier, have increased again, and the Government Accountability Office warns there may be even more overruns to come as the project enters the final construction phase “when cost growth is most likely.” Navy officials were eager to keep down costs with the USS John F. Kennedy after more than 25% increases in the first-in-class USS Gerald R. Ford. Huntington-Ingalls Industries delivered the Ford to the Navy for a publicly acknowledged final price tag of $13.3 billion, but even that figure wasn’t enough to build a fully capable ship. Pentagon officials say they will use other “funding categories” to complete work needed to make the Ford ready for combat.

The watchdog office also warns that American shipyards are struggling to deliver submarines on time, due in part to a lack of skilled workers. The first Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine may be delayed due to struggles completing the design process, supplier issues, and too few workers. To make up for the lack of
skilled laborers, the shipyards are pulling personnel from the Virginia-class attack submarine production line. That is causing deliveries of new attack submarines to be delayed according to the GAO.

All of this means Navy leaders face severe challenges implementing their strategy to face China in the western Pacific region. On the heels of two decades of massive shipbuilding failures with the Littoral Combat Ship program and Zumwalt-class destroyer, the ongoing struggles building submarines and aircraft carriers will further frustrate Navy leaders as they attempt to build a fleet to confront China in the western Pacific.

There could be a silver lining, however — if the nation’s civilian and military leaders decide to search for one. They could choose to view this as an opportunity to change their approach and pursue a different strategy to preserve the global order that has existed since the end of World War II.

China does present a strategic challenge that threatens to upend the status quo. Chinese leaders should be taken at their word when they say they wish to become the leading world power by 2049. The growth of the Chinese economy over the past few decades allowed Chinese leaders to dramatically increase the size and capabilities of their military. But the military investments China has made are not the kind suited for foreign adventurism. Instead, its military leaders are building a force composed of relatively low-cost weapons to counter massively expensive American weapons. China’s strategy of “active defense” is not designed to project military power across the ocean. It’s meant keep foreign powers, especially the United States, as far away from its shores as possible.

The main effort of the Chinese strategy is the defensive system known as Anti-Access/Area Denial, or A2/AD. It is a network of land-, air-, and sea-launched weapons meant to “dissuade, deter, or, if ordered, defeat third-party intervention during a large-scale, theater campaign.” A2/AD is made up of shore-based missiles capable of striking targets out to 4,000 kilometers, and an anti-ship missile with a range of 1,500 kilometers. The Chinese have also fielded missile systems with a maximum range of 170 kilometers to defend against aircraft.

These A2/AD weapons create a defensive buffer that establishes an exclusion zone inside the “first island chain,” a line that extends from the southern tip of Japan through the Ryukyu Islands, past the western edge of the Philippine Islands, and then curls around the edge of the South China Sea.

When evaluated carefully, the current U.S. strategy of investing vast amounts of resources to build a force designed to overwhelm China’s defense network makes little sense. Attacking straight into the enemy’s strongest position is rarely a winning move in modern maneuver warfare.

A better strategy would be to find ways of negating the adversary’s strengths. Even if the U.S. and its allies were able to punch a hole into the Chinese defense network, what then? The thought of landing an invasion force onto the Chinese mainland is so absurd as to be unthinkable. China is a large country that provides strategic depth. Chinese leaders would likely draw our forces inland until the supply lines are stretched and then trap and destroy the invaders.

Even without landing an invasion force, fighting a conventional air and naval campaign with a surface fleet within the first island chain would likely prove to be prohibitively costly. The Center for Strategic and International Studies conducted war games in late 2022 simulating a Chinese invasion of Taiwan and testing various allied responses. The authors found that in the most plausible conditions, the United States Navy would lose two aircraft carriers and between seven and 20 destroyers and cruisers.

A more effective and affordable option would be to build a force designed to defeat the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy if it ever launches an attack away from its shore-based covering fires. In an ideal case, such a strategy would be designed in such a way to raise the costs of going to war for the Chinese to prevent them from doing so in the first place.

The U.S. and its allies should invest heavily in submarines and long-range missiles moving forward. The Navy currently operates a fleet of 68
nuclear powered submarines. Nuclear powered submarines provide a significant range advantage over their conventionally powered counterparts because they are limited only by the amount of food they can carry. Nuclear submarines also make much less noise than the earlier, diesel submarines. But modern submarines do not need to be nuclear powered to be effective.

Case in point is the Swedish submarine HSwMS Gotland. It famously “sunk” the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan during a series of simulated combat missions in 2005. U.S. Navy leaders were impressed enough by the demonstration that they leased the 1,600-ton submarine and its crew for two years to test their ability to detect this potential undersea threat. They found that, for all the investments the Navy has made over the years in anti-submarine defensive systems, they could not detect the Gotland.

The Gotland-class submarines are equipped with Stirling engine air-independent propulsion (AIP) systems, rather than nuclear reactors. The boats can stay submerged for several weeks by burning liquid oxygen and fuel. The heat generated operates the Stirling engine, which is a closed loop system using expanding gas in a cylinder to push a series of pistons to create mechanical power. The nearly silent engine system powers a 75 kilowatt generator for the propulsion and to power the boat’s systems.

Air-independent propulsion submarines are significantly less expensive than nuclear-powered submarines. Sweden is developing a new AIP submarine, the Blekinge-class. These submarines are expected to cost approximately $600 million per copy. A Virginia-class submarine costs approximately $3.45 billion per copy today. It would be possible to get six of the smaller boats for the same price. The Virginia-class submarines also require a crew of 135 sailors to operate. The Blekinge-class submarines have a maximum crew of 35 sailors, reducing long-term operating costs.

Lower cost vessels are important because quantity matters in naval affairs. Sam Tangredi, a retired Navy officer and professor at the Naval War College, analyzed historical naval campaigns and found that the side with the larger fleet ultimately won in 25 of the 28 cases he studied. “All other wars were won by superior numbers or, when between equal forces, superior strategy, or admiralty. Often all three qualities act together, because operating a large fleet generally facilitates more extensive training and is often an indicator that leaders are concerned with strategic requirements,” Tangredi wrote.

Increasing the number of submarines in the U.S. fleet may also help calm tensions with China. Attack submarines are highly effective, sinking an enemy’s surface ships. And some submarines can be used to strike targets on shore by launching nuclear ballistic missiles and conventional cruise missiles. Submarines can’t be used to land large numbers of troops ashore as part of an invasion, however.

While submarines, and especially attack boats, can’t be properly classified as purely defensive weapons, it is similarly improper to call them offensive weapons as we would an aircraft carrier or amphibious assault ship. Force design is an important messaging tool. By showing the Chinese that we are more concerned about effectively countering potential aggression than we are about actively attacking or disrupting their sovereignty, we can potentially avoid further destabilization in relations.

A better way to describe the submarine’s combat function is as a spoiling weapon. The military defines spoiling attack as “a form of attack that preempts or seriously impairs an enemy attack while the enemy is in the process of planning or preparing to attack.” A force conducts a spoiling attack to disrupt the enemy’s plans and operations, rather than capture terrain or secure a wider objective.

A strategy designed to spoil any potential Chinese aggression in the open ocean makes much more sense than one geared towards projecting military power beyond the shores of the mainland. Considering the struggles the Navy has in building a fleet to implement the latter approach, a shift to the former by purchasing less expensive vessels of an already proven design would be the more prudent course of action.

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YOU CAN READ THIS ARTICLE ON OUR WEBSITE AT: pogo.org/shipbuilding-struggles
The Project On Government Oversight (POGO) is a nonpartisan independent watchdog that investigates and exposes waste, corruption, abuse of power, and when the government fails to serve the public or silences those who report wrongdoing. We champion reforms to achieve a more effective, ethical, and accountable federal government that safeguards constitutional principles.

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