

All Mattis on Deck

Defense Secretary James N. Mattis has had the unenviable job of presiding over his first budget drill—including the distribution of an additional \$54 billion for defense accounts next year—without any of his key civilian lieutenants in place.

Typically, a small army of Pentagon appointees, from the military services to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, weighs in on the annual budget, helping establish policy and priorities for a department that consumes more than \$600 billion annually.

But President Donald J. Trump has been slow to name his picks for the Pentagon's most prestigious posts, leaving Mattis as the sole Trump appointee through much of the formation of the Fiscal 2018 budget request.

By early April, Heather A. Wilson, the President's choice for Air Force Secretary, was the only defense nominee officially pending before the Senate. With about a month to go before the anticipated release of budget details, Trump had voiced his intention to nominate several people for other top jobs, including key budget positions like deputy secretary and comptroller.

In mid-March, the administration claimed a topline for defense spending that exceeds budget caps for next year by \$54 billion to help improve what the new Commander in Chief considers a depleted military.

Trump has made clear that aircraft, including advanced fighters, and ships are among his top priorities. But the administration won't reveal the individual line items and their justifications until the full budget release later this spring, giving the department time to match the budget to the administration's policies.

With Mattis alone at the Pentagon for the first several months of the administration, the task of drafting the budget falls to those who remain in the department, including Obama administration holdovers like Robert O. Work, who continued in his role as the No. 2 civilian. Many of those officials are budget veterans and perfectly capable of drafting the 2018 proposal, but their priorities may not line up with the new administration's.

Meanwhile, career civilians and military officials are always heavily involved in the budget process but, in the absence of Senate-confirmed appointees, presumably have more sway this year. Like Obama holdovers, however, they do not have a stake in the politics and policies of the new administration.

All of this means that, while the budget will get done, long-term policies may have to wait until next year. The administration's first real crack at using the defense budget to set the national security agenda likely will come in Fiscal 2019, after Trump's picks have settled into the Pentagon.

In the meantime, however, Mattis and his team, once they receive Senate confirmation, will have to sell the request to Congress, a task made all the more difficult because of the additional defense funding requested for next year.

Indeed, the \$54 billion plus-up seems to have irked both sides of the aisle before the release of the formal budget request.



Secretary of Defense James Mattis, here with Army Gen. Joseph Votel, head of US Central Command, is alone at the top.

Defense hawks such as the chairmen of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees don't think it's generous enough and would like to see another \$37 billion added to the Pentagon topline next year to pay for the military's stated requirements, such as accelerated purchases of the F-35 strike fighter, and to boost lagging readiness levels.

During Wilson's March confirmation hearing, Senate Armed Services Chairman John McCain (R-Ariz.) warned of a modernization bow wave facing the service, ticking off a number of expensive programs like the F-35, KC-46A tanker, and B-21 bomber.

"There is simply no way all of these important, yet expensive modernization programs will fit into the Air Force budget as constrained by the Budget Control Act," McCain said. "It will be your task to develop and make the case for a path through this tremendous budget crunch."

Democrats—particularly in the Senate, where 60 votes are required to pass any contentious legislation—may pose an even more difficult challenge to the Trump administration's proposed defense boost.

The minority party has opposed previous GOP efforts to raise defense caps without a similar increase in nondefense spending. With deep cuts proposed at the State Department and for domestic programs, Democrats may wield their filibuster power to get more of their priorities funded. The result could be a stalled appropriations process across the federal government.

Senate Appropriations Ranking Member Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) stressed during a March hearing that national security doesn't fall only to the Defense Department, arguing that failure to invest in America will make the world less secure.

"While we must ensure that we do not have a 'hollow force,' we must also avoid a 'hollow country,'" he said. "That is precisely what President Trump's budget proposes," Leahy asserted.

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