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ANALYSIS

Time for Tough Choices

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There is excitement at the Pentagon over President Trump's pledge to undertake a buildup of the country's military. Support for the new president's defense agenda is also found among many on Capitol Hill, with Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain proposing to add roughly \$430 billion to the defense budget over the next five years.

A strong case can be made for enhancing the country's defenses. Much of the defense spending increases following 9/11 focused on operations against radical Islamist terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Iraq. Relatively little was spent on new equipment, while a substantial slice of the increase went to recruit and retain troops needed to undertake large-scale, seemingly open-ended operations.

Several new weapon systems were cancelled. To protect soldiers in the field, however, over \$40 billion alone was spent on heavily armored troop transports, for which the Pentagon now has little use. The result was a "hollow buildup," with little in the way of new equipment heading to the field, while combat vehicles, planes and ships in the force continued aging, often at an accelerated rate due to the pace of combat operations.

In addition to contending with rapidly rising personnel costs and the consequences of the “hollow buildup,” America’s armed forces now face a far more formidable array of threats than during the decade or so following 9/11. Three revisionist powers seek to overturn the rules-based international order in regions long considered vital to U.S. security by presidents of both political parties. China, Iran and Russia are all engaged in acts of intimidation, coercion and even low-level aggression against American allies and security partners. Simply put, the military confronts rapidly growing threats with relatively fewer resources.

This presents Mr. Trump with a strategic choice: boost the military’s ability to preserve a stable balance of power in the Western Pacific, Europe and the Middle East, or encourage further aggressive behavior from the revisionist powers.

Unfortunately, like the Red Queen’s Race in Alice in Wonderland, the Pentagon will have to run hard just to stay in place. According to outgoing Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work, the Obama administration’s Defense Department’s program is short an average of \$88 billion a year over the next five years. So even if Mr. McCain’s budget increase becomes reality, the Pentagon may not be able to execute its existing plans, let alone undertake significant upgrades to its capabilities.