

Reading One

The U.S. Military Budget Continues Its Historic Ascent

This year, the United States military budget is on course to reach historic highs, continuing a long trend of budget increases backed by both Democrats and Republicans.

President Biden's proposed budget for the Department of Defense in 2022 is \$715 billion, representing an [increase](#) of approximately \$10 billion over last year's budget – despite Biden's move to wind down the U.S. war in Afghanistan. This spending figure does not include funds for Veterans Affairs, management of the country's nuclear weapons, or other military spending – [costs](#) that bring the total to well over \$1 trillion.

Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.), who chairs the Congressional Progressive Caucus, challenged Biden's proposed hike in military spending: "We're in the midst of a crisis that has left millions of families unable to afford food, rent, and bills," she said. "But at the same time, we're dumping billions of dollars into a bloated Pentagon budget. Don't increase defense spending. Cut it—and invest that money into our communities."

Critics have often pointed out that the massive sums going to the military dwarf most other areas of federal spending. They argue that if some of this money were redirected it could have a major impact in addressing social problems. A 2020 report by the Institute of Policy Studies [found](#) that money from even a 10 percent cut to the military budget could end homelessness in the U.S., create more than a million jobs, fund free college educations for over 2 million low-income students, and much more.

Robert Reich, an economist and former Secretary of Labor, is one of the many voices who has criticized the country's tradition of military budget increases. Reich's views were detailed in an April 13, 2021, article by John Nichols, a national affairs correspondent for The Nation. Nichols [wrote](#):

"The Pentagon already spends: \$740,000,000,000 every year, \$2,000,000,000 every day, \$1,000,000 every minute," says the former secretary of labor [Robert Reich]. "The last thing we need is a bigger military budget."

Unfortunately, that's what the president is seeking. This has led Reich to announce that he is "frankly disappointed that Biden's proposing \$715 billion for the Pentagon—an increase over Trump's \$704 billion defense budget—instead of moving back toward Obama-Biden era levels of defense spending, or less."

"Or less" is the right direction, especially at a moment when Republican deficit hawks are circling in preparation for attacks on domestic spending that is essential for working families who have been battered by the coronavirus pandemic...

Congressional Progressive Caucus chair Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.) is blunter: "We're in the midst of a crisis that has left millions of families unable to afford food, rent, and bills. But at the same time, we're dumping billions of dollars into a bloated Pentagon budget. Don't increase defense spending. Cut it—and invest that money into our communities."

That's not a radical response. When Data for Progress surveyed voters nationwide last year about budget priorities, 56 percent supported cutting the Pentagon budget by 10 percent to pay for fighting the coronavirus pandemic and funding education, healthcare, and housing. Sixty-nine percent of Democrats expressed enthusiasm for the proposed cut, which was striking. Even more striking was the 51 percent support it got from Republicans.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/biden-military-budget/>

Of course, there are many Americans who support growing the military budget. Some experts argue that the U.S. military presence in bases throughout the world helps to lend stability to the global economy and protect U.S. interests. The current budget is designed, in part, to develop the United States military into a force capable of preventing the further rise of China. In fact, Hal Brands, professor of international affairs at John Hopkins University, argued in a June 6, 2021, article for Bloomberg.com that Biden's proposed budget is too small and does not do enough to address this challenge. The budget, he [wrote](#):

... continues a trend, established under the Trump administration, of reorienting American defense strategy toward the threat posed by hostile great powers but then underfunding the investments and reforms needed to implement that strategy....

This wouldn't matter so much if the U.S. still had the luxury of treating China as a problem on the distant horizon. But that's no longer the case. The indications are mounting that a moment of real military danger — the point at which Chinese President Xi Jinping might be willing to attack Taiwan or otherwise assault the regional status quo even at the risk of a showdown with Washington — could arrive in 2025, rather than the generally held previous estimate of 2035. There is, then, something incongruous about a situation in which high-ranking military officials publicly warn that the U.S. could face an incredibly daunting conflict with China in the Taiwan Strait just a few years from now, and the administration then takes a steady-as-she-goes approach to defense spending.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-06-07/the-pentagon-s-flatlining-budget-is-good-news-for-china>

Critics of military spending have responded by arguing that defense hawks have perennially discovered new threats to justify ever-increasing budgets, even in times like the pandemic, when other needs are profound. Moreover, in an April 7, 2021, commentary in the New York Times, journalist Peter Beinart [pointed](#) out:

[China] spends less than one-third as much on defense as the United States does and has fewer than one-tenth as many nuclear weapons. China's military could indeed be a match for the United States in conflicts near China's shores, but globally, China poses a far greater economic challenge. To meet it, the United States must invest enormously in education and emerging technologies — the very investments that military spending will sooner or later crowd out.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/07/opinion/biden-defense-budget.html>

Given that it represents one of the largest areas of federal government spending, the size and trajectory of the military budget is critical in determining the nation's priorities in coming years.

For Discussion:

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
 2. According to the reading, what are some of the things that could be funded with even a modest cut to the military budget?
 3. Why do some experts, such as professor Hal Brands, believe that the military budget should be even higher than it is now? What do you think about this argument?
 4. How do you feel about the current military budget and the priorities it reflects? Do you support this allocation of resources, or do you believe that the money might be better used for other purposes?
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Reading Two

Youth and the Military

In recent years, the peace movement has not drawn much attention in the United States. But some young people are organizing to change that.

A new youth-led organization called Dissenters aims to bring the perspective of a new generation to anti-war activism, making connections between militarism and issues such as police violence and healthcare reform.

In a January 24, 2020, article for Brandeis University's weekly newspaper [The Hoot](#), Polina Potochevska interviewed a co-founder of the Dissenters chapter at Brandeis, Sarah Arthi Jacob. The organization, Jacob said, was launched by "seasoned organizers of color from across the country who work in prison abolition, anti-policing efforts and anti-occupation activism."

Jacob said the movement aims to unite strategies and values into "a cohesive movement to stop 'endless war' and militarism which first and foremost affects communities of color in the U.S. and around the world." Jacob noted efforts by students on campuses across the country to push universities to divest from the military industry, including companies such as Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, General Dynamics and Boeing.

While Dissenters is pushing for the government to reallocate funds from the military in ways that can aid local communities across the country, other students are debating whether Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) should be welcome in high schools.

JROTC, a counterpart to the military's program to provide officer training for college students, focuses on recruiting and preparing high school students for military service. Critics see the program as a

manipulative initiative that primarily targets poorer school districts and students of color.

Some students who have participated in JROTC report enjoying the program and feeling it was a means of personal development. In a June 4, 2021 [article](#) on Chalkbeat.com, a nonprofit news organization focused on reporting on urban school districts, independent journalist Alex Ruppenthal reported on some responses from Chicago students who were placed in JROTC courses in their schools.

Brianna Gordon, a former JROTC student who enrolled in the program at Chicago Vocational High School in Avalon Park, said it was an easy class that involved exercise challenges, drill team competitions, and wearing military-issued uniforms once a week. “I had a very, very bad attitude, and with them being very understanding and very strict, I learned how to control my attitude a lot,” said Gordon.

While some young people report positive experiences, a range of students, parents, and educators have criticized JROTC programs—particularly those programs that do not give students a choice in advance about whether to enroll.

Natasha Erskine, a former JROTC participant and U.S. Air Force veteran turned anti-war activist, told Chalkbeat that “the concentration of JROTC programs in predominantly Black and Latino schools raises similar concerns as the over-policing of students of color, an issue that has come under renewed scrutiny over the past year.”

Such criticisms have a long history. Veterans for Peace, an organization created by former members of the armed forces to promote alternatives to war and military spending, passed a resolution in 2003 condemning JROTC. The resolution [contended that](#) “The purpose of JROTC and military recruitment in our schools is the exploitation of children by adults for the purposes of violence” and that the program conditions young people to “unquestionably accept the nobility of war and the correctness and virtue of killing as a solution to problems[.]”

For Discussion:

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. What did you think about the viewpoint of Dissenters? How might this group’s approach to confronting militarism be different from that of activists in previous generations?
3. According to the reading, what are some of the arguments made for and against the JROTC program? What arguments seem most compelling to you?
4. What do the Dissenters and those opposing JROTC have in common?
5. Given the size of the U.S. military budget, why do you think most of us hear so little about it?