Weekly Report

National Security Division
Week ending February 1, 2019

Items of Interest

Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on China and Russia

On January 29, the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) conducted their first open hearing of the new 116th Congress. Attending on behalf of The American Legion was National Security Policy Advisor Jeff Steele. The topic was Russia and China, the focus of the US' first new National Defense Strategy in a decade released last January. A noteworthy absence was Senator John McCain, who had long presided as chairman of the committee. The new chair is Senator James Inhofe (R - OK). (The committee roster for the new Congress is available here.) The following is a report on the hearing from the Atlantic Council, an American think tank in the field of international affairs.

The United States is Stronger With Allies, Says Atlantic Council's Damon Wilson

Amid intense partisan polarization and high-profile disagreements between Washington and its allies, Damon Wilson, executive vice president of the Atlantic Council, on January 29 made the case for the United States to preserve its alliances. "US interests are best served when Washington and its allies act in unison," Wilson told the Senate Armed Services Committee in Washington in a hearing on China and Russia.

As growing aggression from Russia and China becomes "the main geopolitical challenge of the 21st century," Wilson said, "the United States is much better positioned if it does not assume the burden of countering Beijing and Moscow alone."

While differences between Washington and its allies on issues such as trade and the Iran nuclear deal make the United States "look vulnerable to our adversaries," Wilson said, "the United States and its allies are more strategically aligned in grand strategy—enjoying the support of Republicans and Democrats—than they have been since 9/11, if not 1989."

Washington and its allies now uniformly agree that "the great challenge of the 21st century will be the competition between the free world and authoritarian corrupt state-led capitalism, chief among them China and Russia," according to Wilson.

This view, enshrined in the Trump administration's latest National Defense Strategy and largely accepted by both political parties, necessitates that the United States leverage its network of alliances "as a strategic comparative advantage over our adversaries."

For Russia specifically, "there is no possible successful strategy to confront [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's aggression without a strong NATO," Wilson said. At a time in which much attention has been paid to whether or not NATO allies are adequately paying the costs for the Alliance's defense, the United States must avoid openly questioning the value of the Alliance, he argued. "The public questioning of our commitment to the Alliance is dangerous and only weakens our position."

Asked by Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI) about the growing military threat from Russia, Wilson explained that the biggest contribution to continued Russian military aggression has been Moscow's "calculation about what they can get away with." In order to adequately deter Russia from taking further steps against its neighbors, including NATO allies in Europe, the United States must have "absolute clarity that there is firm resolve about Article V" commitments to common defense.

Wilson also noted that the Alliance has achieved significant progress in the last year "bolstering the Alliance's rapid reaction capabilities and hybrid warfare defense and promising to extend the Alliance's reach into the southern Balkans through further enlargement." He explained that allies have heard US complaints about burden sharing, spending an additional $41 billion on defense since 2016 and promising to spend $100 billion more by 2020 and $350 billion additionally by 2024.

This week, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg gave credit to US President Donald J. Trump for allies increasing their defense spending. "We agreed to do more to step up—and now we see the results. By the end of next year, NATO allies will add $100 billion extra toward defense," Stoltenberg said in an interview on *Fox News Sunday*. "So we see some real money and some real results. And we see that the clear message from President Donald Trump is having an impact."

Trump acknowledged Stoltenberg's comments in a tweet, declaring: "Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General, just stated that because of me NATO has been able to raise far more money than ever before from its members after many years of decline. It's called burden sharing. Also, more united."

But the United States needs to remember that "NATO is for our interest," Wilson argued, noting that the only time NATO's mutual defense clause was activated was in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

On the threat posed by China, Wilson said this must also be met with a united front with US allies, not just in Asia, but also in Europe where "China is becoming a greater geopolitical reality as it comes closer via cyberspace, trade and investment, and now military presence close to Europe's shores. The United States should confront any Chinese challenge with Europe as well as our Asian allies by our side."

Wilson conceded that while the disagreements between the United States and its allies, such as trade disputes and differences on policy toward Iran, "are real," the need to confront Russia and China "should inevitably drive Washington to bolster and expand its alliances in the coming years." The United States, Wilson argued, should avoid "unnecessary division [that] plays into the hands of Washington's geopolitical competitors."

Rather than putting economic or other diplomatic issues before the strength of its network of friends, the United States, Wilson maintained, should "put our alliances at the core, not the periphery, of our strategy."

Written testimony and video of the hearing are available here.

What to Look for in the FY 2020 Defense Budget Request

On January 31, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a bipartisan, nonprofit policy research organization, held a panel discussion previewing the release of the Trump administration's Fiscal Year 2020 defense budget request. CSIS experts provided their expectations for the FY 2020 request and addressed the budget's implications on defense strategy, acquisition, and U.S. military forces.

Note well: The Pentagon won't be able to release its FY 2020 budget on Feb. 4 as previously planned because of the 35-day government shutdown. The budget release could be delayed at least one month.

Defense analysts expect President Donald Trump's FY 2020 national security budget will request about $750 billion, a funding level they consider barely enough to sustain the Pentagon's current operations. But the dollar amount isn't as significant as how the money is spent and the types of tradeoffs the Pentagon makes to balance paying for current programs and aligning spending with the National Defense Strategy (NDS), said Kathleen Hicks, the Henry A. Kissinger chair and director of the International Security Program at CSIS.

Hicks explained that this budget presents some challenges for the Pentagon's planners. The FY 2018 budget was designed to improve readiness, and the FY 2019 budget focused on joint capabilities. CSIS released a FY 2020 budget request analysis at the event.

The FY 2020 request was called a "masterpiece" by acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan, Hicks said, "meaning the 2020 budget was going to be the first time the (National Defense) Strategy was fully threaded through the budget."

Generally, an annual budget increase of about 3 percent would sustain the Pentagon's current level of operations. A $750 billion request is about a 4-percent bump from last year's request. However, if the Pentagon is serious about aligning its spending with the NDS, then some long-standing priorities have to be rethought, Todd Harrison, the director of defense budget analysis at CSIS, said.

"Fully implementing the National Defense Strategy means you'll need tradeoffs," Harrison said. "Things have to go. The 355-ship Navy is out the window if you want to implement the plan." Specifically, when studying the NDS, Harrison said aircraft carriers and amphibious ships do not align with the strategy. However, not funding carrier and amphibious ship purchases, Harrison added, is "politically impossible," he said.

The frigate program, though, is one Harrison said could be easier to cancel. Again, it's not clear how the frigates fit into the NDS. A contract award is expected in FY 2020, so this program could be cut to fund other priorities considered vital to the NDS. The FFG(X) is now estimated to cost about $800 million per hull, for a 20-ship program.

Other services would likely see cuts as well. The Air Force could have to scale back its plans to expand the number of squadrons. The Army might have to curtail spending on some armored vehicles.

It's also important to remember the spending plan ultimately appropriated can be very different from what the president requests. Congress can adjust funding for programs it considers a priority. Also, Congress has to contend with spending caps put in place by the Budget Control Act of 2011, Harrison said.

There's support on Capitol Hill for abolishing the caps, but Harrison said the deadline for taking action is nearly a year away, while FY 2020 starts on October 1. If the spending caps aren't dealt with before the fiscal year begins, Harrison said to expect a temporary funding bill – a continuing resolution (CR) – to pass, holding the Pentagon to FY 2019 spending levels and prohibiting new programs from starting.

"A CR is very likely," Harrison said, because the deadline is so far off. "I would love to be proven wrong on that."

CSIS' 8-page FY 2020 budget request analysis is available here.

Another 3,500 troops heading to the US-Mexico border, House Armed Services chairman says

(Courtesy of Stars and Stripes) Another 3,500 active-duty troops will deploy to the U.S.-Mexico border, House Armed Services Chairman Adam Smith revealed Thursday in a news release blasting Pentagon officials' unwillingness to discuss openly in Congress the military's involvement along the southern border.

Defense officials were called to a House Armed Services Committee hearing Tuesday to discuss the military's border mission and failed to disclose that additional troops would be sent to the border, Smith wrote Wednesday in a letter to acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan admonishing them for withholding information.

"I am deeply troubled that the witnesses did not disclose the upcoming increase in [National Guard], reserve, and active-duty personnel, even though we asked them multiple times during a two-and-a-half-hour hearing what would happen next on the border," Smith, D-Wash., said in a statement about the letter. "They never mentioned it, despite the fact that the secretary of defense was revealing an increase in personnel that same day. This was at best an error in judgment, and at worst flat-out dishonesty."

Minutes before defense officials testified Tuesday to the House committee, Shanahan held a news briefing with Pentagon reporters where he revealed a few thousand more troops would be deployed to the southern border.

"The members of the committee would have been extremely interested in discussing what the 3,500 troops going to the border in response to [the Department of Homeland Security's] latest request will be doing there," Smith said. "This is a violation of the executive branch's obligation to be transparent with Congress, which oversees, authorizes, and funds its operations. It also raises questions about whether the Department thinks the policy of sending additional troops to the border is so unjustified that they cannot defend an increase in public."

On Thursday, a defense official who spoke on the condition of anonymity did not dispute that an additional 3,500 active-duty troops will deploy to the southern U.S. border. He said they could be there by mid-February.

With the 2,300 active-duty troops already deployed in Texas, California and Arizona, the military will have 5,800 troops along the border within weeks. There are also 2,270 National Guard members deployed to those states as well as New Mexico. All the troops are expected to remain along the border through fiscal year 2019, which ends Sept. 30.

Troops are providing various duties in support of Customs and Border Protection agents on the border. Military engineers at the border have already laid 70 miles of concertina wire along the ports of entry, but are now being asked to place an additional 150 miles on existing barriers between ports of entry in Arizona and California by March 31. Military police have and will continue to serve with Border Patrols agents and protect them should it become necessary. Medical and aviation assets also have deployed in support of Border Patrol.

At the height of troop deployments in early November, about 5,900 active-duty servicemembers were stationed along the border. Troops levels reached its current status at about Christmas, Navy Vice Adm. Michael Gilday, director of operations for the Pentagon's Joint Staff, said Tuesday during the House hearing. John Rood, undersecretary of defense for policy, also gave testimony.

Smith also said Thursday that he and Shanahan had a phone conversation and the congressman received more details about the upcoming border deployments.

"But a phone call is not a substitute for transparency before Congress and public candor," Smith said. "Does their refusal to publicly discuss what they are doing indicate that this is a policy they believe they cannot defend in an open public hearing before the full Armed Services Committee, where all 57 members have the opportunity to ask questions?"

Staff Activities

- This week, staff continued planning for the upcoming Washington Conference that will take place February 25 – 28.
- This week, staff continued planning for the National Commander's upcoming Europe travel tentatively scheduled for May 25-June 11.
- Tuesday, National Security Policy Advisor Jeff Steele attended a Senate Armed Services hearing on China and Russia. See Items of Interest above for more.
- Wednesday, National Security Policy Advisor Jeff Steele met with the Director of the Japan U.S. Military Program (JUMP), Chris Rodeman, to discuss possible collaborative opportunities. JUMP is a collaborative effort between Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, the Embassy of Japan in the United States, and the National Association of Japan-America Societies.
- Wednesday, National Security Acting Director Freddie Gessner, Policy Advisor Jeff Steele, attended a meeting hosted by DC Executive Director Louis Celli with leadership from Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) to discuss collaborative opportunities. TAPS is a non-profit organization that provides care and support to families and friends grieving the loss of a member of the armed forces. Resolution No. 14: Establish Gold Star Families Program, passed at the 2018 National Convention, calls on the Legion to establish a program that will provide a network of support for Gold Star Families by assisting with connecting them to other families and providing benefits awareness.

POW/MIA Update

This week, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency made 2 new announcements. Click on the links to read more:

01/31/19: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Hryniewicz, F.)
01/31/19: Pilot Accounted For From World War II (Lurcott, H.)

Freddie Gessner, Acting Director, National Security Division
Rhonda Powell, Director, National Security Division