

Panelists Argue Current Pentagon Spending Conflicts with Likely Future Needs

WASHINGTON – The Pentagon has a serious problem in that providing what it needs for the forces to be ready for current and likely near-term conflicts can clash with what it requires to prepare for the return of great power competition, a panel of former civilian defense officials and current military officers said.

In a Nov. 2 forum on military readiness at the Brookings Institution, the debate was framed by the questions of “ready for what?” and “ready for when?” These raised the conflict between increasing current readiness for the low-level fights against extremists and modernizing for great power competition with Russia and China.

The two former senior defense officials agreed that what the military is buying with the recent significantly higher budgets is not what it will need to confront Russia and China.

Mara Karlin, whose decades of Pentagon service ended as deputy assistant defense secretary for strategy and force development, criticized the Navy’s drive for a multipurpose 355-ship fleet when it should be focusing on increased undersea capabilities that would give it a competitive advantage against the emerging peer adversaries.

Karlin also questioned how much the Marine Corps is spending on aviation, which is focused on reversing a currently low readiness condition, and called the Air Force’s spending portfolio “totally messed up.” She did like the thrust of the Army’s newly created Futures Command, which appears aimed primarily at acquiring the capabilities it would need to counter peer competitors.

"There are all kinds of ways we're not spending on what we need," Karlin said.

Alan Estevez, whose 36 years in the Pentagon ended as principal deputy undersecretary for acquisition, technology and logistics, said the current enlarged budget "is buying what was in the pipeline, which probably are not the right things."

There is not enough in research and development for things like lasers and hypersonics, he said, and "we have to be prepared to fight with 1s and 0s, cyber. We do not have the tools, the modernization, required for great power conflict."

Karlin and Estevez agreed that the new National Defense Strategy presented by Defense Secretary James Mattis was "spot on" in its declaration that the top mission of the military was preparing for the return of great power competition, naming Russia and China.

Two federal executive fellows at Brookings, Marine Col. Amy Ebitz and Navy Cmdr. Brendan Stickles, focused on their service experiences, particularly noting the negative impacts of the years of constrained budgets under the threat of sequestration and the inefficiencies imposed by the years of continuing resolutions instead of on-time appropriations.

Stickles, an electronic warfare pilot who recently commanded an EF-18G Growler squadron, cited the report several years ago that only one-third of the Navy's FA-18 Super Hornets were combat ready. Although "we've made progress" with just over now ready, "that's not a good statistic."

He also pointed out that early this year there was no aircraft carrier at sea, which required a B-2 bomber to fly from Missouri to drop a bomb in Afghanistan, "a job that should have been performed by a carrier."

Ebitz, whose career has been in law enforcement and force

protection, said that compared to the current enemy, the Marines “absolutely are ready. They’re out there every day doing what is required.” But, she said, the high operational demands and the past budget constraints have hurt the Corps’ ability to prepare for the future.

“It goes to the ‘ready for what?’” she said. “We haven’t always been accurate on that. We not only have to be ready for today, the anti-terrorist fight, but for the future,” she said.

Ebitz said the Marine Corps’ priorities are “increasing our own lethality, building partnerships and ensuring the flow of equipment.” But most important, she said, “was our personnel,” giving them more time between deployments to spend with their families and train for the future fight.