SASC Chairman Inhofe: '$750 billion is where we need to be' for 2020

WASHINGTON – The Senate Armed Services Committee chairman is less concerned about whether overseas contingency operations (OCO) funds are increased to get the right top line for defense funding as long as the total is $750 billion.

"We've got to have adequate funding," Sen. James Inhofe said Feb. 12, when asked about reports that the Trump administration would propose a major increase in OCO funds to get the defense top line to over $700 billion without breaching the spending limit set by the 2011 Budget Control Act, which goes back into effect next year unless Congress suspends it again.

"I don't know how much it's going to be, but I think it's going to be an exaggerated figure to get up to what we need to defend America," Inhofe told a Defense Writers Group breakfast Feb. 12 on Capitol Hill.

Inhofe referred repeatedly to last year's report from the National Defense Strategy Commission's warning that the U.S. military was falling behind Russia and China and needed to have steady funding increases of 3 to 5 percent above inflation to regain its lead. That means $750 billion in the fiscal 2020 defense funding, he said.

Both Congress and the administration have argued in the past that money for the on-going conflicts and other global crises should be moved into the base budget to help the armed services better plan for the future. OCO spending is not counted against the BCA funding caps and has been used in the past to add weapons already being bought in the base budget.

“I’ve been guilty of that myself,” Inhofe said.

But, he said, “$750 billion, I think that’s where we need to be. How we you get there? Are you going to be using some amount of OCO? … You need the money, $750 billion.”

In response to a later question about the administration’s newly released demand for an accelerated drive on artificial intelligence (AI), Inhofe said, “to me, there are other things we need to do first.”

While conceding that “China is ahead of us” on AI, “I’d like to look at the other areas where Russia and China are ahead of us.” He emphasized artillery, which has long been a major priority to him, partly because the joint artillery center of excellence is at Fort Sill, in his home state of Oklahoma. He also cited the high percentage of vintage F/A-18s that are considered undeployable because of mechanical problems.

“These are things that need to be done. Our peer competitors – China and Russia – they have a lot of things that are better than ours. To me, that’s the priority. Behind that, things like AI.”

Inhofe also supported a rapid increase in F-35 production, even those the Lockheed Martin fighter is not expected to complete the comprehensive operational testing to prove it is fully combat ready until next year.

Noting the number of allied nations that are buying F-35s, in addition to the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force, he said, “what we really need now, what our allies need, is the F-35.”

Inhofe said his committee plans to have the new National Defense Authorization Act on the Senate floor by June, despite not receiving the detailed defense budget until late March. He also urged the appropriations committees to get busier so the defense funding bill can be enacted before the Oct. 1 start of

the new fiscal year.

Asked about President Donald Trump’s threat to transfer money from other accounts if Congress does not provide the $5.7 billion he wants for the Mexican border “wall,” Inhofe said, if it becomes necessary, I believe he will do the emergency … If it has to be that way, leave MilCom (military construction) alone.”