Thornberry: Take “More Out of the Tail,’ Put ‘More into the Tooth’ of Defense Budget

WASHINGTON – House Armed Services Chairman Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, said he is convinced that the military’s readiness problems are far more serious than many people believe, and he is determined to get the maximum impact from the current defense funding increase to attack that problem.

That includes getting the defense authorization and funding bills enacted on time to avoid the waste and inefficiencies of the past year’s continuing resolutions and finding savings from the Pentagon’s administrative functions to “put more in the hands of the warfighters,” Thornberry said May 15.

Addressing a forum hosted by Bloomberg News, Thornberry said he did not expect any major issues to delay House passage of the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that his committee approved last week.

“My goal is to get it done on time, for a change,” he said.

That means passage before Oct. 1, when the new fiscal year begins.

Thornberry noted that due to the two-year budget agreement that covers the current year and fiscal 2019, “we have had a big turnaround on funding.” But even with the 10 percent increase allowed for ’19, defense is still behind where it was in 2010, before passage of the restrictive Budget Control Act.

“We can’t count on Congress continuing to have 10 percent [growth] in the future. That means we’re going to have to have more savings out of the defense budget. … More out of the tail, more into the tooth,” he said.

One of the ways the NDAA seeks to do that is in the proposal to cut personnel and administrative cost in the so-called Fourth Estate, support functions outside of the armed services. Although Thornberry had tried to enact a mandatory 25 percent cut in the cost of those programs, due to opposition in his committee, he accepted language that gives the Pentagon's new chief management officer the discretion to make whatever cuts he can in those functions.

Opposition to his proposed cuts, the chairman said, "is a key example of where Congress adds to the inefficiencies" in defense.

Perhaps another example of that is the language imposed in the NDAA that blocks the plan by the Maritime Administration and the Maritime Sealift Command (MSC) to buy a number of retired foreign-made commercial cargo ships to replace the badly aged sealift vessels MSC would need to support a major overseas conflict. Those ships could be bought and modified for a fraction of the cost of new U.S.-built ships, which the bill requires.

Thornberry said he is "sympathetic to the idea" of buying a certain number of the commercial ships, "that do not imperil your industrial base." But he said he had to "be realistic about the Buy America sentiment" among his committee members "so we can get something moving.

"I'm convinced the readiness problems that have emerged over the last 10 years are far deeper than most people think," he said.

While conceding that he did not expect to get anything like this year's 10 percent funding increase in the future, he noted that Defense Secretary James Mattis and Joint Chiefs Chairman Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford have testified they would need 3 to 5 percent more a year just to keep from falling further behind. "That's the benchmark" for the future,

Thornberry said.

Thornberry said he is “skeptical” about the chances of getting North Korea to agree to “permanently and verifiably” give up its nuclear weapons. And even if that were achievable, he said, continued U.S. military presence in Asia and continued improvements in U.S. missile defense “are essential.”