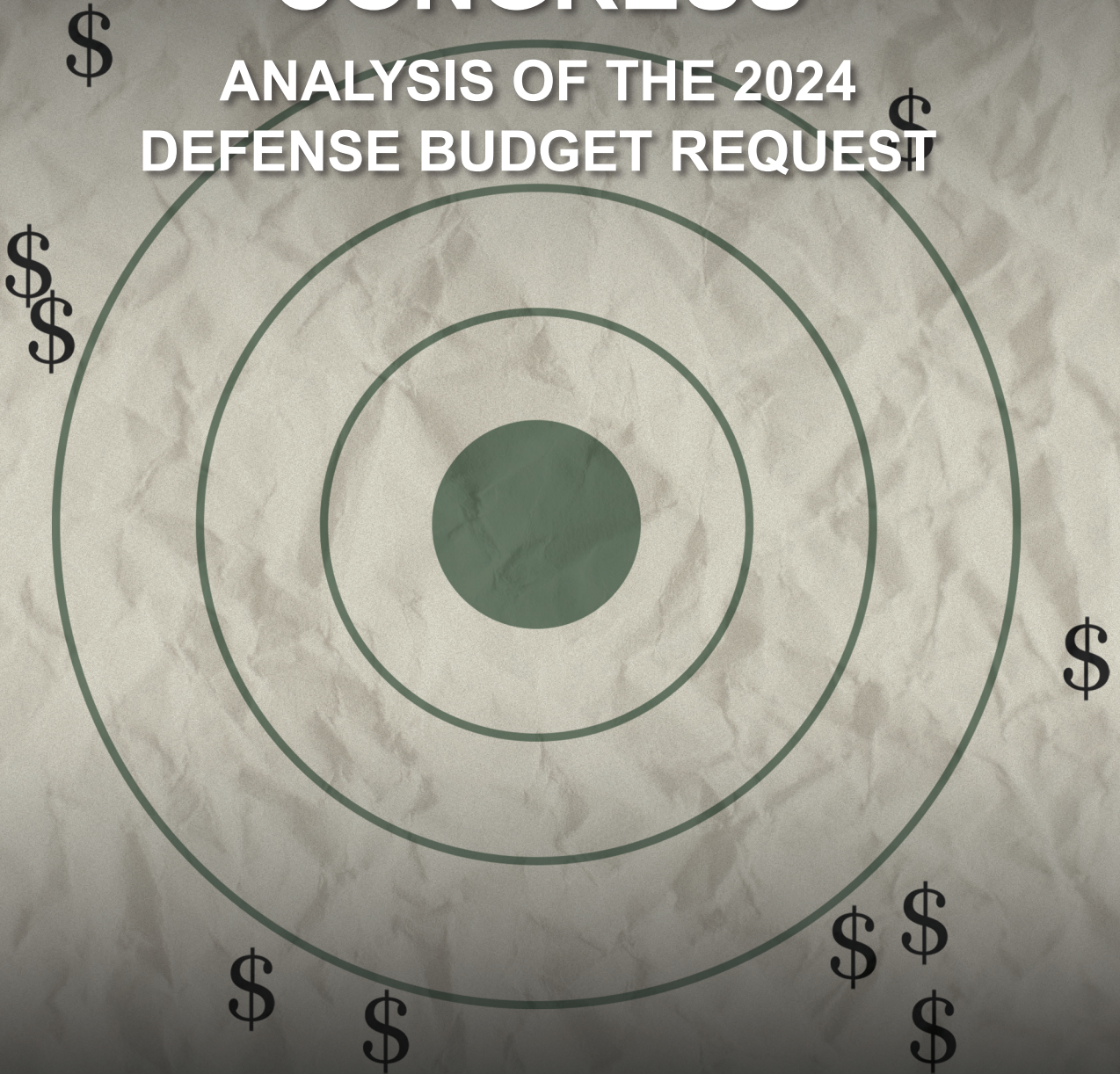


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INCONSISTENT CONGRESS

ANALYSIS OF THE 2024
DEFENSE BUDGET REQUEST



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2023

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Executive Summary

After increasing the Department of Defense (DoD) budget in real terms during seven of the past eight fiscal years, Congress has now pivoted toward restraining spending by passing the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023. Approved in early June as part of the debt ceiling deal, the law imposes a liberating limit on defense. It unshackles defense spending from parity with nondefense spending but still caps military budgets at or near current spending levels for the next two fiscal years while brandishing the threat of a lowered defense cap and potential sequestration if Congress delays in passing full-year appropriations for any budget account. The law's ultimate effect on defense spending will depend on future congressional actions, particularly how the Hill handles full-year appropriations and supplementals for fiscal year (FY) 2024 and FY 2025. Despite these uncertainties, the shift from steady spending growth to sudden budgetary restraint indicates an inconsistent Congress struggling to balance competing priorities and factions.

The Fiscal Responsibility Act presents two challenging scenarios for defense planners who cherish steady spending growth outpacing inflation and abhor sizable changes enacted with minimal preparation. The first scenario, "frozen topline," involves Congress failing to pass full-year appropriations for both fiscal year (FY) 2024 and FY 2025, triggering two years of sequestration. In that case, base defense spending would remain roughly flat in nominal terms for three fiscal years, depriving DoD of any inflationary relief and resulting in a -5.4 percent reduction in real terms from the administration's planned spending levels for FY 2024 and FY 2025. The second scenario, "abrupt cut," involves Congress passing full-year appropriations matching the law's cap for FY 2024 but failing to do so for FY 2025, triggering one year of sequestration. In that case, the law's lowered defense cap would take effect and defense spending would drop by \$36.5 billion, a -6.1 percent cut in real terms, from FY 2024 to FY 2025.

The size of the spending reductions in both scenarios would exceed the savings that could be generated by slashing programs often identified as cuttable by legislators. As a result, DoD would have to find the savings by downsizing the U.S. military's size, training, operations, and/or investments. Although neither scenario is the most likely outcome at this juncture,

their probability has increased recently as Congress has struggled to advance a funding provision to cover the beginning of FY 2024.

The Hill's scattershot approach to the defense budget topline, with years of steady support for sizable increases suddenly giving way to an intensive focus on spending limits, also characterizes its treatment of specific defense expenditures.

Based on an analysis of congressional adjustments to the president's defense budget requests from FY 2016 to FY 2023, Congress continues to demonstrate a programmatic orientation toward defense spending characterized by adding more funds for procurement than for other purposes and steering those extra procurement funds to favored (and often legacy) weapons systems. These resourcing trends reveal Capitol Hill's haphazard support for important DoD initiatives since 2016. They also raise major questions about whether Congress can muster the attention to details besides weapons systems and the willingness to disrupt the status quo that would instill confidence that Capitol Hill can shape U.S. military forces to prevail in simultaneous long-term strategic competitions against China and Russia.

If history is any guide, the best chances for improvement will come from both DoD and Congress. The Pentagon should find new ways to persuade Congress to support essential capabilities but also recognize that planners must develop concepts to fight and win with what DoD already has. Meanwhile, Congress needs a stronger pipeline of defense policy entrepreneurs capable of leading their colleagues to better outcomes more of the time, specifically by harnessing their procedural power to elicit more impactful information from DoD. Without actions like these, the prospects appear dim that Congress will improve the coherence of U.S. defense policy in the years ahead.

CHAPTER 1

Return of the Cap: The FY 2024 Request and Two Challenging Cut Scenarios

After increasing DoD's budget in real terms during seven of the past eight fiscal years, Congress has now tacked toward restraining spending by passing the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 (FRA-23). Approved in early June as part of the debt ceiling deal, the law imposes a liberating limit on defense. It unshackles defense spending from parity with nondefense spending but still caps military budgets at or near current spending levels for the next two fiscal years while brandishing the threat of a lowered defense cap and potential sequestration if Congress delays in passing full-year appropriations for any budget account. The defense budget may continue drifting upward, as it has since FY 2016, if Congress uses supplemental funding to circumvent the law's defense spending limits. Despite these uncertainties, the shift from steady spending growth to sudden budgetary restraint – in a period lacking major overseas U.S. combat operations, which typically drive such changes – indicates an inconsistent Congress struggling to balance competing priorities and factions.

FRA-23 presents two challenging scenarios for defense planners who cherish steady spending growth outpacing inflation and despise sizable changes enacted with minimal preparation. In the first scenario, "frozen topline," sequestration would occur twice (FY 2024 and FY 2025). In the second scenario, "abrupt cut," sequestration would occur once (FY 2025). The size of the spending reductions in both scenarios would exceed the savings that could be generated by slashing programs often identified as cuttable by legislators, thereby forcing DoD to find the savings by downsizing the U.S. military's size, training, operations, and/or investments. Although neither scenario is the most likely outcome at this juncture, their probability has increased recently as Congress has struggled to advance a funding provision to cover the beginning of FY 2024.

FY24 Request Continues Two Trends

TABLE 1: DISCRETIONARY BUDGET AUTHORITY IN THE PRESIDENT'S BUDGET REQUEST (CURRENT DOLLAR BILLIONS), FY23 TO FY28

Totals may not add due to rounding	FY23 enacted	FY24 requested	FY25 projected	FY26 projected	FY27 projected	FY28 projected
DoD funding (excl supplemental)	816.0	842.0	859.7	877.7	896.2	915.0
DoD base budget request	773.0	842.0	859.7	877.7	896.2	915.0
Congressional additions to base budget	43.0	-	-	-	-	-
DoD funding (incl supplemental)	851.8	855.1	859.7	877.7	896.2	915.0
Supplemental funding for Ukraine	35.8	13.1	-	-	-	-
National defense funding (excl supplemental)	858.6	886.3	905.3	924.3	943.7	963.5
DoD base budget (incl Congressional additions)	816.0	842.0	859.7	877.7	896.2	915.0
Atomic energy defense activities	31.6	32.8	34.0	34.7	35.5	36.1
Defense-related activities	11.0	11.5	11.6	11.9	12.0	12.4
National defense funding (incl supplemental)	894.4	899.4	905.3	924.3	943.7	963.5
Supplemental funding for Ukraine	35.8	13.1	-	-	-	-
Nominal growth DoD funding (excl supp)	9.9%	3.2%	2.1%	2.1%	2.1%	2.1%
Nominal growth DoD funding (incl supp)	8.7%	0.4%	2.1%	2.1%	2.1%	2.1%
Real growth DoD funding (excl supp) (FY24 GDP price index)	2.4%	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Real growth DoD funding (incl supp) (FY24 GDP price index)	3.6%	-1.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Sources: Department of Defense (DoD) and Office of Management and Budget (OMB).¹

Notes: In billions nominal \$.

The FY 2024 DoD budget request continues two trends that have lasted throughout the Biden administration. The first involves modest real growth in DoD’s topline request. Excluding supplementals, the \$842 billion FY 2024 request provides 0.8 percent real growth relative to the enacted \$816 billion FY 2023 base budget (Table 1).² This 0.8 percent growth request follows requests of 1.9 percent for FY 2023 and -0.2 percent for FY 2022,

1 Department of Defense (DoD), *Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request* (Washington, DC: DoD, March 2023), pp. 2, 4, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2024/FY2024_Budget_Request.pdf; DoD, *FY 2024 Defense Budget Overview* (Washington, DC: March 2023), p. A-7, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2024/FY2024_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf; DoD, *FY 2023 Defense Budget Overview* (Washington, DC: April 2022), p. 1-3, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2023/FY2023_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf; Michael J. McCord and Sara A. Joyner, remarks at Pentagon press briefing, March 13, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3327901/comptroller-michael-j-mccord-and-vice-adm-sara-a-joyner-hold-a-press-briefing-o/>; Office of Management and Budget (OMB), *FY 2024 Analytical Perspectives* (Washington, DC: OMB, March 2023), Table 24-1, p. 1, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/24-1_fy2024.pdf; OMB, “Letter Regarding Critical Funding Needs for FY 2024,” August 10, 2023, pp. 1–23, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Final-Supplemental-Funding-Request-Letter-and-Technical-Materials.pdf>; and OMB, *FY 2024 Historical Tables* (Washington, DC: OMB, March 2023), Table 10.1, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/hist10z1_fy2024.xlsx.

2 McCord and Joyner, remarks at Pentagon press briefing.

the administration's first budget year.³ These figures suggest that the Biden administration views real growth requests of around 1 percent as its best play on the two-level gameboard of international security and domestic politics.⁴

The second trend involves continuing to emphasize spending for research, development, test, and evaluation (RDT&E). Excluding supplementals, the \$145 billion RDT&E FY 2024 request represents 1.6 percent real growth over the enacted FY 2023 base budget level.⁵ This 1.6 percent RDT&E growth slightly exceeds the requested growth rates for military personnel (1.5 percent), operation and maintenance (O&M) (0.7 percent), and procurement (1.5 percent) in the FY 2024 request.⁶ Since FY 2013, the first budget year after the 2012 *Defense Strategic Guidance* declared that DoD would prioritize balancing against China, RDT&E spending's average annual real growth rate of 3.9 percent has exceeded other major accounts (military personnel: -0.5 percent; O&M: -1.0 percent; procurement: 0.9 percent).⁷ By continuing to favor RDT&E funding in relative growth terms, albeit not as dramatically as in some recent years, the FY 2024 request broadly aligns with the 2022 *National Defense Strategy's* commitment to maintaining the U.S. military's technological edge.⁸ However, determining RDT&E spending's return on investment, as measured by fielded warfighting capability, remains exceedingly difficult because little consensus exists among experts about the best metrics to study.⁹

Fiscal Responsibility Act Imposes Liberating Limit on Defense

In early June, Congress passed FRA-23, capping national defense discretionary spending in FY 2024 and FY 2025. For supporters of continued investment in key military capabilities,

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- 3 Travis Sharp, *How I Learned to Start Worrying and Hate Real Growth: Analysis of the 2023 Defense Budget Request* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments [CSBA], 2022), p. 4, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/how-i-learned-to-start-worrying-and-hate-real-growth-analysis-of-the-2023-defense-budget-request>; and Travis Sharp, *Slow and Steady: Analysis of the 2022 Budget Request* (Washington, DC: CSBA, 2021), p. 2, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/slow-and-steady-analysis-of-the-2022-defense-budget-request>.
- 4 Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3, Summer 1988, pp. 427–460.
- 5 DoD, *Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request*, p. 28, adjusted for inflation with OMB GDP deflator.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 The reported figures cover FY13 through the FY24 request and reflect FY24\$ discretionary and mandatory budget authority including FY13-FY23 supplementals but excluding FY24-FY25 supplementals. DoD, *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2024* (Washington, DC: DoD, May 2023), Table 6-8, pp. 143–145, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2024/FY24_Green_Book.pdf; and DoD, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: DoD, January 2012), p. 2, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/282223-defense-strategic-guidance>.
- 8 DoD, *2022 National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: DoD, October 2022), p. 19, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.
- 9 Wayne Harman and Robin Staton, *Science and Technology Metrics and Other Thoughts* (Dahlgren, VA: Naval Surface Warfare Center, July 2006), p. 12, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a471711.pdf>; and Carolyn Kahn and Sheila McGourty, *Performance Management at R&D Organizations: Practices and Metrics from Case Examples* (McLean, VA: The MITRE Corporation, April 2009), pp. 19–21, https://www.mitre.org/sites/default/files/pdf/09_2188.pdf.

FRA-23 represents a liberating limit. On the one hand, it liberates defense by capping it at a significantly higher level than nondefense spending, departing from the parity principle that often prevailed when amending the Budget Control Act in effect from FY 2012 to FY 2021.¹⁰ On the other hand, FRA-23 limits defense by capping it at (FY 2024) or below (FY 2025) the amounts requested and projected, respectively, in the FY 2024 request, as well as imposing a lowered defense cap and potential across-the-board automatic cuts, known as a sequester, if Congress fails to pass full-year appropriations.

FRA-23 contains higher caps for defense spending than for nondefense spending. It limits national defense to \$886.3 billion for FY 2024, equaling the FY 2024 president's budget request, and \$895.2 billion for FY 2025, falling \$10.1 billion below the FY 2024 request's projection for FY 2025 (\$905.3 billion).¹¹ Supplemental funding for Ukraine and other purposes remains exempt from the caps (see next section). Meanwhile, the law caps nondefense spending at \$703.7 billion for FY 2024 and \$710.7 billion for FY 2025. If Congress passes appropriations exceeding the caps, then FRA-23 would implement a sequester to reduce spending to the capped level in the applicable category.

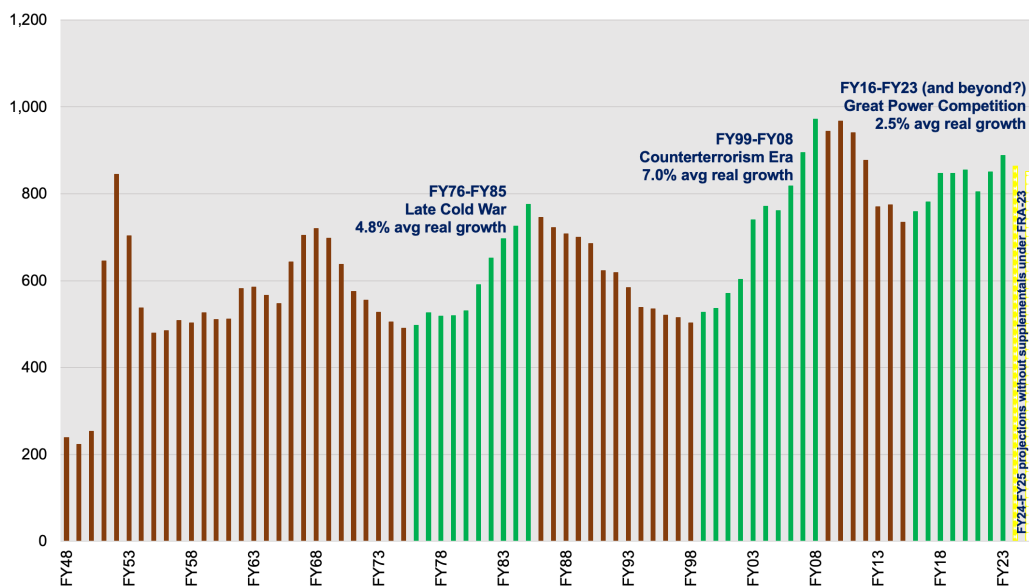
FRA-23 penalizes defense spending if Congress delays passing regular appropriations. If a temporary continuing resolution (CR) remains in effect on January 1 of calendar year 2024 or 2025 because Congress has not enacted full-year appropriations, then the law would automatically lower the national defense cap to \$849.8 billion for that fiscal year while simultaneously raising the nondefense cap to \$736.4 billion.¹² If Congress passed full-year appropriations after January 1 but before April 30, then the spending caps would revert to the original higher capped level. If a CR were still in effect on April 30 of calendar year 2024 or 2025, then a sequester order would be issued to adjust spending automatically to the revised levels (\$849.8 billion for defense, \$736.4 billion for nondefense). Under sequestration, the spending reductions would be applied as a uniform percentage across all DoD accounts, although the president could exempt or limit the reductions to military personnel accounts to protect service members' pay and benefits.¹³

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- 10 Grant A. Driessen, *Budgetary Effects of the BCA as Amended: The "Parity Principle"* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service [CRS], February 23, 2018), https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2018-02-23_IF10657_eae36d381b35726d2908f4ba21ef329091fda838.pdf; and Megan S. Lynch and Grant A. Driessen, *Expiration of the Discretionary Spending Limits: Frequently Asked Questions* (Washington, DC: CRS, November 18, 2022), p. 8, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46752>.
- 11 Grant A. Driessen and Megan S. Lynch, *Discretionary Spending Caps in the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023* (Washington, DC: CRS, June 28, 2023), p. 1, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN12168>.
- 12 Drew C. Aherne and Megan S. Lynch, *The FRA's Discretionary Spending Caps Under a CR: FAQs* (Washington, DC: CRS, June 23, 2023), p. 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN12183>.
- 13 Seamus P. Daniels, "What the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 Means for Defense Spending" (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], June 15, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-fiscal-responsibility-act-2023-means-defense-spending>; and Seamus P. Daniels, *How Would Sequestration Impact DoD in FY 2020?* (Washington, DC: CSIS, May 2019), p. 2, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/190515_Daniels_DBA_layout_FINAL_v2.pdf.

These provisions effectively hold the defense budget hostage to incentivize Congress to complete its appropriations work on time.¹⁴ They also create a perverse incentive for stalwarts of nondefense spending whereby delaying appropriations to trigger the lowered defense cap (and then potential sequestration) would increase funding for their prized nondefense programs at the expense of defense funding.

Defense Spending May Continue Drifting Upward Due to Supplementals

FIGURE 1: DOD TOPLINE (CONSTANT FY24\$ BILLIONS), FY48 TO FY25, INCL SUPPLEMENTALS



Sources: DoD and Congressional Budget Office (CBO).¹⁵

Notes: In billions FY24\$ discretionary and mandatory budget authority including supplementals. FY24 and FY25 figures exclude any future supplementals that Congress may approve for those fiscal years, including the \$13.1b Ukraine supplemental requested by the administration on August 10, 2023. FY24 figure equals the administration's request of \$863.4b (\$842b discretionary + \$21.4b mandatory). FY25 figure of \$851.1b derived as follows: \$895.2b (FRA-23 national defense spending limit for FY25) x .95 (DoD topline's portion of national defense in FY25 according to FY24 request) = \$850.4b + \$21.1b (DoD mandatory spending in FY25 according to FY24 request) = \$871.6b / 1.0241 (DoD "Total" budget authority deflator for FY25 according to FY24 request) = \$851.1b.

DoD's budget has increased in real terms during seven of the past eight fiscal years, averaging 2.5 percent annual real growth from FY 2016 to FY 2023 when including supplementals (Figure 1). In its multi-year consistency, though not its budgetary magnitude, the ongoing upward drift in defense spending evokes the sustained budgetary buildups of the late Cold War and the counterterrorism era.

14 Roger Zakheim, "The Debt Deal's Defense Threat," *Wall Street Journal*, June 4, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-debt-deals-defense-threat-military-sequester-dod-funding-continuing-resolution-37b51fa8>.

15 DoD, *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2024*, Table 1-1, p. 6, Table 6-8, pp. 138-145; and Congressional Budget Office (CBO), *CBO's Estimate of the Budgetary Effects of H.R. 3746* (Washington, DC: CBO, May 2023), PDF p. 12, https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2023-05/hr3746_Letter_McCarthy.pdf.

Future congressional action on supplementals may very well determine whether defense spending continues drifting upward under FRA-23. Congress can use supplementals to push total defense spending above the law's spending caps.¹⁶ On August 10, the administration requested \$13.1 billion in FY 2024 supplemental funding for DoD's Ukraine-related activities.¹⁷ Experts have suggested that these funds represent merely an interim request meant to sustain DoD during the first few months of FY 2024 while Congress crafts its approach to full-year appropriations.¹⁸ Experts expect the administration to request additional FY 2024 supplemental funds for DoD's Ukraine-related activities sometime in November.

Public comments indicate that many key legislators, though not all, support providing additional Ukraine supplemental funding in the months ahead.¹⁹ Legislators also have publicly discussed expanding future supplementals by adding funds only indirectly related to Ukraine — and possibly completely unrelated to Ukraine.²⁰

If supplemental funding for DoD exceeds \$25 billion in FY 2024 and \$35 billion in FY 2025, then the Pentagon would notch additional years of real growth relative to prior year enacted levels. That outcome would continue the rise in military spending since FY 2016 and help defuse FRA-23's suppressive effect on the defense budget.

Two Challenging Scenarios: Frozen Topline and Abrupt Cut

Although supplemental funding can skirt FRA-23's spending limits, Congress still must pass full-year appropriations two years in a row during the intensifying heat of a presidential campaign to stave off the lowered defense cap and potential sequestration. This looming threat presents two challenging scenarios for defense planners (Figure 2).

16 Burgess Everett, "Senate Leaders Reach Agreement to Quickly Vote on Debt Deal," *Politico*, June 1, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/06/01/senate-leaders-reach-agreement-to-quickly-vote-on-debt-deal-00099820>.

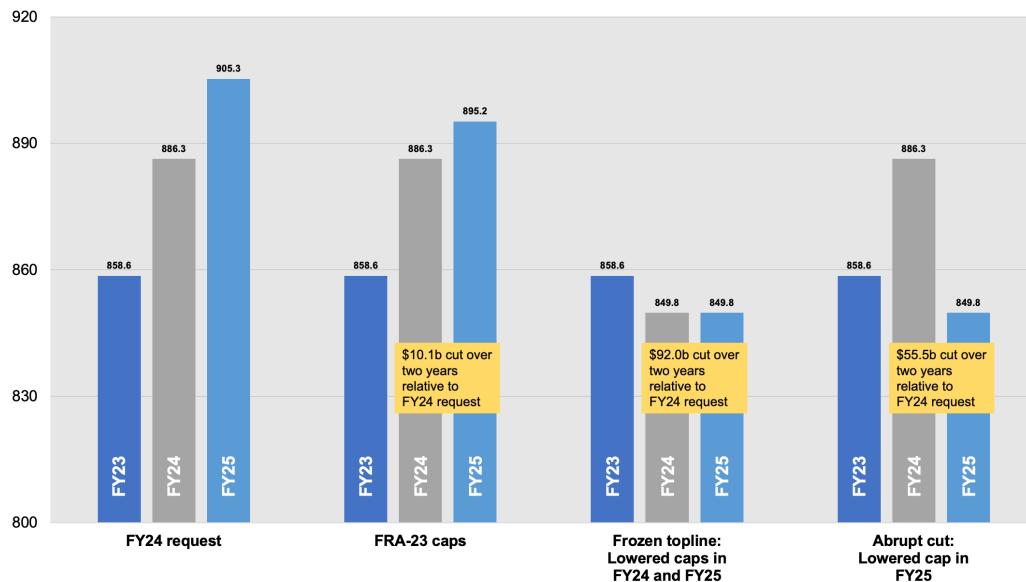
17 OMB, "Letter Regarding Critical Funding Needs for FY 2024," pp. 1–23.

18 Mark F. Cancian, "Aid to Ukraine: The Administration Requests More Money and Faces Political Battles Ahead" (Washington, DC: CSIS, August 15, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/aid-ukraine-administration-requests-more-money-and-faces-political-battles-ahead>.

19 Anthony Adragna et al., "McCarthy and McConnell Show Signs of a Split on Defense Spending," *Politico Pro*, June 6, 2023, <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2023/06/mccarthy-senate-gop-defense-budget-ukraine-00100425>; and Paul McLeary, Anthony Adragna, and Joe Gould, "The End of Ukraine Aid Is Rapidly Approaching. Reupping It Won't Be Easy," *Politico*, May 15, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/05/15/ukraine-aid-is-drying-up-and-the-white-house-is-under-pressure-to-send-more-00096767>.

20 Caroline Coudriet, "Senators Eye Ukraine Aid Bills as Avenue to Increase DOD Budget," *Roll Call*, June 1, 2023, <https://rollcall.com/2023/06/01/senators-eye-ukraine-aid-bills-as-avenue-to-increase-dod-budget/>.

FIGURE 2: DISCRETIONARY BUDGET AUTHORITY IN TWO CHALLENGING CUT SCENARIOS UNDER FRA-23 (CURRENT DOLLAR BILLIONS), FY23 TO FY25, EXCL SUPPLEMENTALS



Sources: Table 1 and Congressional Research Service (CRS).²¹

Notes: In billions nominal \$ for national defense (function 050).

In the frozen topline scenario, Congress would fail to pass full-year appropriations for both FY 2024 and FY 2025, meaning FRA-23's lowered defense cap of \$849.8 billion would go into effect both years and defense spending would be frozen near the current FY 2023 level of \$858.6 billion. Relative to the Biden administration's FY 2024 request, which included an FY 2025 projection, a frozen topline would reduce defense spending by \$36.5 billion in FY 2024 (from \$886.3 billion to \$849.8 billion) and by \$55.5 billion in FY 2025 (from \$905.3 billion to \$849.8 billion). The two-year total reduction of \$92 billion in nominal terms would amount to a -5.4 percent cut in real terms from currently planned spending levels for FY 2024 and FY 2025.

A frozen topline is akin to a strict long-term diet. The central challenge for DoD would be deciding how to forgo investments and cut activities to remain within budget, given that the costs of aircraft, ships, and other defense programs historically grow faster than the rate of inflation.²² Without budgetary growth to offset inflation, DoD generally cannot maintain its status quo forces, operations, and investments. A topline frozen in nominal terms will force the Pentagon to cut the U.S. military's size, training, operations, and/or investments to remain within budget.

21 Driessen and Lynch, *Discretionary Spending Caps in the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023*, pp. 1–2.

22 Edward G. Keating and Mark V. Arena, "Defense Inflation: What Has Happened, Why Has It Happened, and What Can Be Done About It?" *Defense and Peace Economics* 27, no. 2, 2016, p. 177.

In the abrupt cut scenario, Congress would pass full-year appropriations matching FRA-23's cap for FY 2024 but fail to do so for FY 2025 during the leadup and aftermath of the 2024 presidential election. In that case, FRA-23's lowered defense cap would take effect and defense spending would drop by \$36.5 billion, a -6.1 percent cut in real terms, from FY 2024 to FY 2025.

An abrupt cut is like rapid weight loss. The central challenge for DoD would be deciding how to downsize its budget quickly and minimize disruptions to key activities, although it would have limited flexibility to make these decisions if across-the-board sequestration cuts took effect after April 30.

If Congress appeared to be headed toward failing to enact full-year appropriations for FY 2025, DoD would face a tough dilemma. On the one hand, DoD leaders might hesitate to prepare fulsome plans to comply with the lowered defense cap and sequestration, should it take effect, because doing so might suggest that DoD considered it manageable – the exact opposite of DoD's presumed messaging to Congress in that scenario. On the other hand, hesitating to prepare detailed plans might leave DoD with relatively little time to implement an abrupt cut, increasing the risk of suboptimal decision-making.

The size of the spending reductions in the two scenarios would exceed the savings that could be generated by slashing programs often identified as cuttable by legislators. House Republicans have put what they call “woke” activities and climate change adaptation atop their defense cut list. Leaving aside these programs' desirability, eliminating them would save little. In FY 2023, the Pentagon requested \$87 million for diversity, equity, and inclusion and \$3 billion for climate adaptation.²³ Zeroing these out would save about 8 percent of a \$36.5 billion reduction, aligning with the abrupt cut scenario. On a cross-country road trip from Washington to Los Angeles, that much progress would put us just outside Roanoke, Virginia - still a long, long way to go.

Some legislators have proposed saving money by eliminating outdated weapons systems and excess infrastructure to save on O&M costs.²⁴ Virtually every defense expert supports this idea. The problem is that Congress itself continually thwarts these divestments. Last year, Congress limited DoD's ability to retire F-22 and EA-18G aircraft and the much-derided Littoral Combat Ship.²⁵ Even if legislators miraculously approved all eliminations recommended by the Pentagon, the savings still would not be enough. DoD has

23 DoD, *FY 2023 Defense Budget Overview*, p. 4-34; and DoD, *Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request* (Washington, DC: DoD, March 2022), p. 21, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2023/FY2023_Budget_Request.pdf.

24 Brad Dress, “Eyeing Defense Spending Cuts, House GOP Targets Military ‘Wokeness,’” *The Hill*, February 2, 2023, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/3840112-eyeing-defense-spending-cuts-house-gop-targets-military-wokeness/>.

25 U.S. Congress, *James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, December 2022), pp. 59–60, 46–47, 374–375, <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/hr7776/BILLS-117hr7776enr.pdf>.

identified annual savings of around \$3 billion through weapons divestments and \$2 billion through new base closures.²⁶ Adding these savings to the amount above gets us to about 22 percent (~\$8 billion) of a \$36.5 billion cut. Our road trip still would not have reached Nashville, Tennessee.

Reducing defense by the amounts featured in the two scenarios would likely require downsizing the U.S. military's size, training, operations, and investments. In December 2022, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) published illustrative options for reducing defense by over \$1 trillion in ten years, with the first year featuring a \$64 billion cut – roughly double the amount featured in the abrupt cut scenario.²⁷ CBO's options all shrank active-duty forces over a decade, with heavy cuts hitting Army brigade combat teams, Navy submarines, and Air Force fighter aircraft. Although the cuts under a \$36.5 billion cut target would be only about half as severe as what CBO illustrated, the impact would still prove significant. As a nonpartisan governmental organization renowned for rigorous analysis, CBO did not analyze these reductions to make an ideological point or scare Congress into avoiding cuts by exaggerating the consequences. It merely portrayed the hard tradeoffs required to cut defense sharply.

U.S. defense cuts under the two scenarios likely would not inspire allied spending sprees, and certainly not ones large enough to compensate for American capability losses.²⁸ Historically, countries have tended to barely change defense spending when their allies make big budget adjustments.²⁹ That is because the threat of war, not allied expenditure, drives military spending. If U.S. allies adopt higher future defense budgets, as some have recently pledged to do, they will do so primarily because they fear China and Russia, not because Washington pinched pennies. The main international effect of American defense cuts would be to reduce the aggregate strength of U.S. alliances to counter Chinese and Russian challenges.

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- 26 The \$3b figure reflects the rounded-up (and thus optimistic) average calculated from DoD projections for divestments/re-prioritizations plus acquisition reform savings in FY21, FY22, and FY23. DoD, *FY 2021 Operation and Maintenance Overview* (Washington, DC: DoD, February 2020), p. 172, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2021/fy2021_OM_Overview.pdf; DoD, *FY 2022 Operation and Maintenance Overview* (Washington, DC: DoD, August 2021), p. 173, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022_OM_Overview.pdf; and DoD, *FY 2023 Operation and Maintenance Overview* (Washington, DC: DoD, May 2022), p. 170, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2023/FY2023_OM_Overview.pdf. The \$2b figure for base closure savings comes from DoD, *FY 2018 Defense Budget Overview* (Washington, DC: DoD, May 2017), p. 12, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2018/fy2018_Budget_Request.pdf.
- 27 CBO, *Options for Reducing the Deficit, 2023 to 2032, Volume I: Larger Reductions* (Washington, DC: CBO, December 2022), pp. 60–67, <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2022-12/58164-budget-options-large-effects.pdf>.
- 28 Kevin D. Roberts, “Getting Serious About Responsible Defense Spending,” *The American Conservative*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/getting-serious-about-responsible-defense-spending/>.
- 29 William Nordhaus, John R. Oneal, and Bruce Russett, “The Effects of the International Security Environment on National Military Expenditures: A Multicountry Study,” *International Organization* 66, no. 3, July 2012, pp. 502–505.

Despite its growth since FY 2016, the U.S. defense budget offers surprisingly few quick cuts of significant size. Limited to choppable programs identified by legislators so far, a defense cut target of around \$10 billion per year seems doable based on the estimates above. That amount neatly aligns with FRA-23's spending limit for FY 2025 (i.e., the initial defense cap, not the lowered cap). Reaching that target would require only slightly slowing the military budget's growth rate above inflation. Significantly larger cuts, like those necessitated by the scenarios described here, would lead to major capability losses. Congress should not agree to such losses without first determining how U.S. military aims worldwide would be downsized to align with reduced resources – and how that downsizing would affect U.S. national interests. The vigilance demanded by today's threats requires that Washington not stumble into sizable and swift military cuts.

Conclusion

By restraining defense spending, however imperfectly, Congress has departed sharply from its recent habit of boosting the base defense budget significantly above the administration's requests. The Hill's scattershot approach to the defense budget topline, with years of steady support for sizable increases suddenly giving way to an intensive focus on spending limits, also characterizes its treatment of specific defense expenditures. As detailed in Chapter 2, Congress's adjustments to defense spending requests since FY 2016 reveal the continuation of several long-running deficiencies in congressional defense budgeting.

CHAPTER 2

Hardwired for Hardware: Congressional Adjustments to the Administration's Defense Budget Requests, FY 2016 to FY 2023

This chapter analyzes congressional adjustments to the president's defense budget requests from FY 2016 to FY 2023 to identify patterns in budgetary outcomes. The chapter finds that Congress has demonstrated a programmatic orientation toward defense spending characterized by adding more funds for procurement than for other purposes and steering those extra procurement funds to favored (and often legacy) weapons systems. Congress's fixation on "hardware" creates the risk that it will neglect the "software" underpinning U.S. military power, including people, readiness, doctrine, and enabling capabilities.³⁰ Overall, the chapter demonstrates the scattershot nature of congressional support for important DoD initiatives since 2016.

Congress's preference for existing hardware is not exactly surprising. Lawmakers possess compelling strategic and parochial reasons to address defense spending programmatically.³¹ As Charles Hitch, creator of DoD's Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS), once observed, "These [weapons systems] choices have become...the key decisions

30 This distinction between hardware and software is borrowed from Aaron Friedberg, lecture notes from "International Security Studies" course, March 4, 2014. His latest book is Aaron L. Friedberg, *Getting China Wrong* (New York: Polity, 2022).

31 On the strategic (international) and structural (domestic) modes of defense policymaking, see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Common Defense: Strategic Programs in National Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 3–7.

around which much else of the defense program revolves.”³² Other studies have determined that Congress’s obsession with big-ticket weapons programs remains alive and well.³³ Still, the chapter’s reconfirmation of this enduring pattern should serve as a wake-up call to defense strategists.

The United States is currently navigating two simultaneous long-term military competitions against China and Russia.³⁴ Few strategists believe that the United States will prevail in those competitions if it continues business as usual.³⁵ Yet, the resourcing trends documented in this chapter raise major questions about whether Congress can muster the attention to details besides weapons systems and the willingness to disrupt the status quo that would instill confidence that it can shape U.S. military forces to prevail in long-term strategic competition.

If history is any guide, the best chances for improvement will come from both DoD and Congress. The Pentagon should find new ways to persuade Congress to support essential capabilities but also recognize that planners must develop concepts to fight and win with what DoD already has. Meanwhile, Congress needs a stronger pipeline of defense policy entrepreneurs capable of leading their colleagues to better outcomes more of the time, specifically by harnessing their procedural power to elicit more impactful information from DoD. Without actions like these, the prospects appear dim that Congress will improve the coherence of U.S. defense policy in the years ahead.

32 Quoted in Arnold Kanter, “Congress and the Defense Budget: 1960-1970,” *American Political Science Review* 66, no. 1, March 1972, p. 135.

33 Seamus P. Daniels and Todd Harrison, “Assessing the Role of Congress in Defense Acquisition Program Instability,” paper prepared for the 18th Annual Acquisition Research Symposium, May 2021, <https://dair.nps.edu/handle/123456789/4350>; and Travis Sharp and Tyler Hacker, *Evaluate Like We Operate: Why the Department of Defense Should Evaluate Weapons Systems as Networked Force Packages, Not Individual Platforms* (Washington, DC: CSBA, August 2023), <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/evaluate-like-we-operate-why-dod-should-evaluate-weapons-systems-as-networked-force-packages-not-individual-platforms>.

34 DoD, *2022 National Defense Strategy*, pp. 4-5.

35 National Defense Strategy Commission, *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, November 2018, p. v, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/providing-for-the-common-defense.pdf>.

Three Hypotheses on Congressional Spending Adjustments: Negligible, Fiscal, and Programmatic

Over the past 60 years, scholars have developed three primary hypotheses about how Congress addresses the administration's defense spending requests.³⁶ The negligible hypothesis holds that Congress does not exert a significant effect on either the overall level of defense spending or the allocation of spending across programs. Proponents of this view imagine a Congress that essentially tinkers at the margins and functions as “a pushover for the Pentagon,” as Senator William Proxmire (D-Wisconsin) once put it.³⁷ If the negligible hypothesis holds true, then congressional spending adjustments should appear small and inconsequential, generally adhering to the administration's plans.

The fiscal hypothesis maintains that Congress concerns itself with the defense spending topline and pays limited attention to the particulars. Advocates of this model envision a Congress that modifies DoD funding requests primarily to achieve government-wide budgetary goals. If the fiscal hypothesis holds true, then congressional spending adjustments should concentrate on the largest portions of the defense budget – the O&M and personnel accounts – and exhibit an “across-the-board” or balanced character, in dollar or percentage terms, consistent with a general indifference toward specific programs.

The programmatic hypothesis holds that, as Larry Korb described it, “Congress addresses the defense budget in policy terms and uses its power of the purse as a tool to influence the shape of defense programs.”³⁸ Lawmakers may demonstrate a programmatic orientation for strategic reasons, such as when they feel that specific military activities underpin America's place in the world. They may also focus on programs for parochial reasons, such as when their constituents depend on funding associated with certain activities. In practice, these strategic and parochial motivations often overlap and may conflict, making them difficult

36 Variations of these three models appear in, among others, Raymond H. Dawson, “Congressional Innovation and Intervention in Defense Policy: Legislative Authorization of Weapons Systems,” *American Political Science Review* 56, no. 1, March 1962, p. 43; Edward J. Laurance, “The Congressional Role in Defense Policy Making: The Evolution of the Literature,” *Armed Forces and Society* 6, no. 3, Spring 1980, pp. 436–438; Barry M. Blechman, *The Politics of National Security: Congress and U.S. Defense Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 23–29; James M. Lindsay, “Congressional Oversight of the Department of Defense: Reconsidering the Conventional Wisdom,” *Armed Forces and Society* 17, no. 1, Fall 1990, p. 10; and Jamie M. Morin, “Squaring the Pentagon: The Politics of Post-Cold War Defense Retrenchment,” Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, May 2003, pp. 306–307.

37 Quoted in Kanter, “Congress and the Defense Budget,” p. 129.

38 Lawrence J. Korb, “Congressional Impact on Defense Spending, 1962-1973: The Programmatic and Fiscal Hypotheses,” *Naval War College Review* 26, no. 3, November-December 1973, p. 50.

to disentangle.³⁹ If the programmatic hypothesis proves true, then congressional spending adjustments should exhibit discernible patterns across time and category whereby funds flow toward favored activities and away from disfavored activities.

Data on Congressional Defense Spending Adjustments, FY16 to FY23

To assess these hypotheses, CSBA collected data on congressional defense spending adjustments from FY 2016 to FY 2023. The dataset contains adjustments as reported in Congress’s annual enacted basic DoD appropriations bill, meaning it excludes military construction, family housing, nuclear weapons activities in the Department of Energy, and supplementals. As noted below, the dataset only includes line-item level data for five appropriation subtitles favored by Congress since FY 2016: Army aircraft procurement, Army RDT&E, Navy aircraft procurement, Navy shipbuilding and conversion, and Air Force aircraft procurement. Since the dataset covers only enacted appropriations, it excludes both authorizing legislative activity and House and Senate interim decisions preceding final enactment.⁴⁰ The dataset started with FY 2016 because that was the first year of the ongoing upward drift in defense spending chronicled in Chapter 1. The dataset ended with FY 2023 because that was the last year data were available.

Altogether, the dataset consists of nearly 10,000 observations, a figure that excludes the arithmetical manipulations and inflation adjustments required to generate the results. Appendix A provides the data and sourcing. Although the dataset does not include every line item contained in the DoD appropriations bill, it provides a sufficient body of evidence for the chapter’s analysis.⁴¹

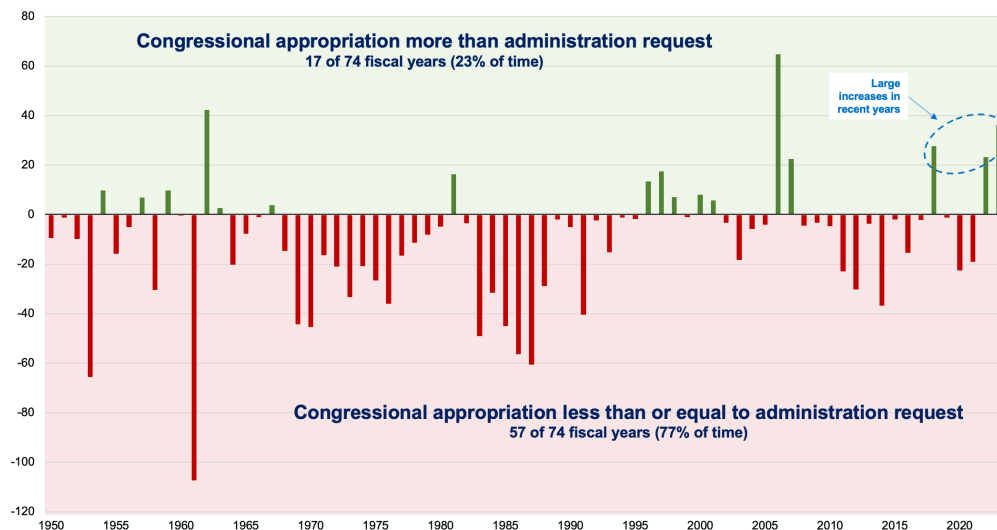
39 Scholars have found less evidence for parochialism than conventional wisdom might expect, although they continue to bring new evidence and new empirical techniques to study these questions. See James M. Lindsay, “Parochialism, Policy, and Constituency Constraints: Congressional Voting on Strategic Weapons Systems,” *American Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 4, November 1990, pp. 936–960; James M. Lindsay, *Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 172–175; Thane C. Clare, “Perilous Waters: The Political Economy of International Warship Exports,” Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, August 2013; and Rebecca U. Thorpe, *The American Warfare State: The Domestic Politics of Military Spending* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

40 In the area of authorizing activity, previous analyses have emphasized outcomes such as reporting requirements and the length of authorization bills. Research on these topics fueled a debate in the late 1980s and 1990s about whether Congress was micromanaging DoD. See Robert J. Art, “The Pentagon: The Case for Biennial Budgeting,” *Political Science Quarterly* 104, no. 2, Summer 1989, pp. 193–214; Mackubin T. Owens, “Micromanaging the Defense Budget,” *The Public Interest* 100, Summer 1990, pp. 131–146; and Paul Stockton, “Beyond Micromanagement: Congressional Budgeting for a Post-Cold War Military,” *Political Science Quarterly* 110, no. 2, Summer 1995, pp. 233–259.

41 Readers more interested in understanding the military capabilities purchased by defense spending, as opposed to merely the spending itself, should consult CSBA’s forthcoming study on that topic surveying many of the same years as this chapter. See Travis Sharp, *Modest and Balanced: The Trump-Era Defense Budget Buildup in Retrospect* (Washington, DC: CSBA, forthcoming).

Topping Off the Topline: Congressional Adjustments to Requested DoD Appropriations, FY50 to FY23

FIGURE 3: CONGRESSIONAL ADJUSTMENT TO PRESIDENT'S BUDGET REQUEST AS REPORTED IN ENACTED DOD APPROPRIATIONS BILL, TOTAL AMOUNT BY YEAR (CONSTANT FY23\$ BILLIONS), FY50 TO FY23, EXCL SUPPLEMENTALS



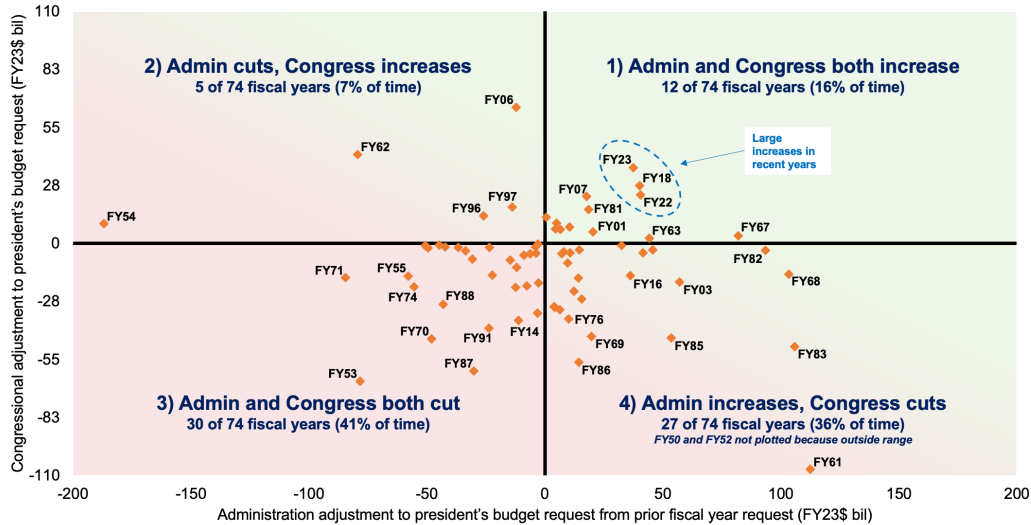
Sources: DoD, CRS, and CSBA analysis of enacted DoD appropriations bills.⁴² Appendix A provides data with sourcing.

Notes: In billions FY23\$ discretionary budget authority. Data reflect only the basic DoD appropriations bill and exclude military construction (including family housing), the military assistance program, and supplementals.⁴³

42 See Appendix A. FY50 to FY04 figures drawn from Linwood B. Carter and Thomas Coipuram Jr., *Defense Authorization and Appropriations Bills: FY1970-FY2006* (Washington, DC: CRS, November 8, 2005), pp. 29–30, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA478498.pdf>. FY10 to FY15 figures drawn from Barbara Salazar Torreon and Sofia Plagakis, *Defense Authorization and Appropriations Bills: FY1961-FY2021* (Washington, DC: CRS, July 12, 2021), p. 39, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/98-756>. FY05 to FY09 and FY16 to FY23 figures drawn from CSBA analysis of enacted DoD appropriations bills. FY50 to FY69 figures first converted to FY99\$ and then to FY24\$. Inflation adjustments made using DoD “Total” budget authority deflators contained in DoD, *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 1999* (Washington, DC: DoD, March 1998), Table 5-6, p. 46, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/Docs/fy1999_greenbook.pdf; and DoD, *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2023* (Washington, DC: DoD, July 2022), Table 5-6, pp. 62–63, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2023/FY23_Green_Book.pdf. FY16 to FY19 figures collected from enacted bills match the figures reported by CRS. FY20 and FY21 figures collected from enacted bills vary slightly from the figures reported by CRS because CSBA adjusted to account for irregular reporting practices used in the final years of the Budget Control Act. Specifically, the FY20 and FY21 request figures used here include some funds categorized by DoD as supporting Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO). FY20 figure includes \$97.3b in the base budget request which DoD originally categorized under OCO, derived as follows: \$164.6b (OCO total) - \$66.7b (OCO requirements) - \$0.6b (MILCON in OCO) = \$97.3b. See DoD, *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2020* (Washington, DC: DoD, May 2019), Table 3-1, pp. 38, 44, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2020/FY20_Green_Book.pdf. FY21 figure includes \$15.6b in the base budget request which DoD originally categorized under OCO, derived as follows: \$69.0b (OCO total) - \$20.5b (direct war requirements) - \$32.5b (enduring operations requirements) - \$0.4 (MILCON in OCO) = \$15.6b. See DoD, *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2021* (Washington, DC: DoD, April 2020), Table 3-1, pp. 40, 46, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2021/FY21_Green_Book.pdf.

43 FY99 figure excludes the supplemental funds included for that year by CRS.

FIGURE 4: ADMINISTRATION CHANGE IN PRESIDENT’S BUDGET REQUEST FROM PRIOR FISCAL YEAR REQUEST VS. CONGRESSIONAL ADJUSTMENT TO PRESIDENT’S BUDGET REQUEST AS REPORTED IN ENACTED DOD APPROPRIATIONS BILL, TOTAL AMOUNT BY YEAR (CONSTANT FY23\$ BILLIONS), FY50 TO FY23, EXCL SUPPLEMENTALS



Sources: DoD, CRS, and CSBA analysis of enacted DoD appropriations bills. Appendix A provides data with sourcing. See Figure 3’s footnotes for an explanation of the data collection process.

Notes: In billions FY23\$ discretionary budget authority. Data reflect only the basic DoD appropriations bill and exclude military construction (including family housing), the military assistance program, and supplementals. The results do not change appreciably if the plotted values are percentages vice dollars.

Congressional adjustments to requested DoD appropriation levels from FY 1950 to FY 2023, excluding supplementals, demonstrate that Congress has not reflexively given the administration whatever it asked for, undercutting the negligible hypothesis (Figure 3). Over the past 75 years, Congress has appropriated less than the administration requested three times more often than it has appropriated more than the administration requested. Understanding this historical thriftiness illuminates the unusualness of recent budget cycles, when Congress has approved significantly larger base defense budgets than DoD requested. Congress has overridden DoD with such generosity only twice before. Once was during President Kennedy’s first year controlling the budget (FY 1962) as the young president maneuvered to fulfill his campaign pledge to eliminate a “missile gap” with the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ The second was during the most perilous years of the war in Iraq (FY 2006 and FY 2007).

44 On defense spending during this period, see Travis Sharp, “Wars, Presidents, and Punctuated Equilibriums in U.S. Defense Spending,” *Policy Sciences* 52, no. 3, September 2019, pp. 367–396.

Congress's budget boosting in recent years demonstrates that it has acted atypically to shore up U.S. military power. This fact merits recognition even as the chapter critiques how Congress has distributed the extra funds given to DoD.

Since the size of congressional spending adjustments depends on the size of the underlying requests, we need to understand how adjustments and requests both vary. Figure 4 plots outcomes from FY 1950 to FY 2023 according to those two variables, with the request adjustment value determined by comparing each year's request to the previous year's request. In effect, Figure 4 visualizes whether Congress and the administration have pushed defense spending in the same direction (quadrants 1 and 3) or in opposite directions (quadrants 2 and 4). Three noteworthy findings flow from this figure.

- First, administration changes to requests have generally been larger in dollar terms than congressional adjustments, indicating that the administration more often drives significant changes in the defense budget's trajectory.⁴⁵ During the period of study, the administration changed its request by +/- \$10 billion (inclusive) 18 times, whereas Congress adjusted the request within the same range 35 times. In relative terms, then, the administration has proven less likely than Congress to tinker at the margins.
- Second, Congress's budget boosting in recent years has occurred as the administration simultaneously increased its requests, meaning the outcomes depended on a combined Congress-administration "ratchet effect" rather than Congress acting alone.⁴⁶ Administrations place significant upward pressure on defense spending relatively often, but Congresses do not (Figure 4), so although recent outcomes depended on both actors, Congress's generosity was more atypical.⁴⁷
- Third, the administration and Congress have pushed defense spending in the same direction (42 times) more often than in the opposite direction (32 times), suggesting that Congress does not reflexively oppose whatever the administration wants.⁴⁸

45 A similar finding appears in *ibid.*

46 In the existing literature, the term "ratchet effect" usually refers to the institutional reasons why a nation's defense spending remains elevated after wars end. The chapter thus uses the term in a different sense. For a recent study employing the typical usage, see Rosella Cappella Zielinski, Benjamin O. Fordham, and Kaija E. Schilde, "What Goes Up, Must Come Down? The Asymmetric Effects of Economic Growth and International Threat on Military Spending," *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 6, November 2017, p. 794.

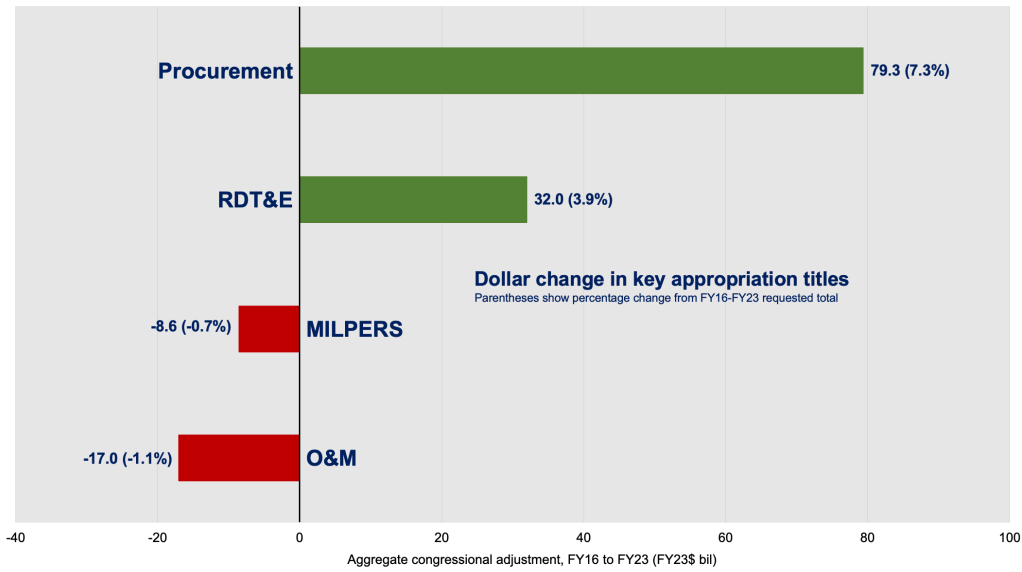
47 Some readers might worry that changes in the administration's requests for FY22 and FY23 appear artificially inflated due to the incorporation of Overseas Contingency Operations funds into DoD's base budget following the expiration of the Budget Control Act in FY21. CSBA made certain technical adjustments to the data to address this concern but, broadly speaking, the administration chose to continue requesting funds for those purposes through the base budget and that choice deserves to be credited in the results, for better or worse.

48 This result calls into question the existing literature's finding that congressional spending adjustments vary inversely with the defense budget's growth rate, although deeper analysis is needed to sustain that argument. Numerous fiscal years appearing in Figure 4's quadrants 1 and 3 occurred after the existing studies were published, meaning that real-world "swimming in the same direction" outcomes may have overturned or complicated the literature's finding. See Morin, "Squaring the Pentagon," pp. 362–364; and Kevin N. Lewis, *National Security Spending and Budget Trends Since World War II* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1990), p. 65.

Administrations and Congresses may disagree about which specific activities to fund each year, but they agree regularly about the broad direction of military funding. This finding should hearten defense planners. Although planners will never escape having to knife fight over the details, they can reasonably expect that the administration and Congress will concur frequently about the defense budget’s trajectory.

Preoccupied with Procurement: Congressional Adjustments to Appropriations Titles and Subtitles, FY16 to FY23

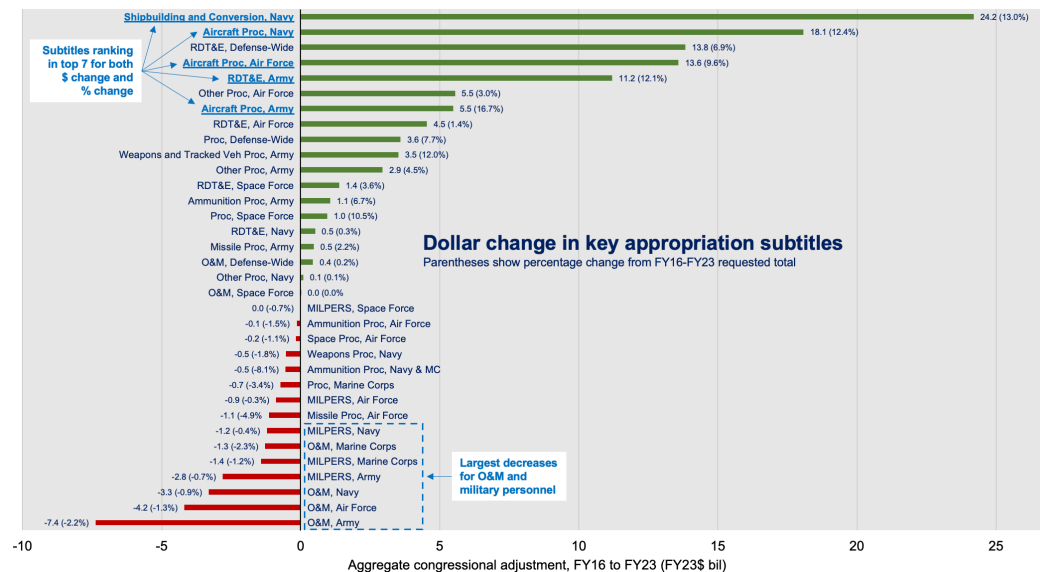
FIGURE 5: CONGRESSIONAL ADJUSTMENT TO PRESIDENT’S BUDGET REQUEST AS REPORTED IN ENACTED DOD APPROPRIATIONS BILL, AGGREGATE AMOUNT BY APPROPRIATION TITLE (CONSTANT FY23\$ BILLIONS), FY16 TO FY23, EXCL SUPPLEMENTALS



Sources: CSBA analysis of enacted DoD appropriations bills. Appendix A provides data with sourcing. See Figure 3’s footnotes for an explanation of the data collection process.

Notes: In billions FY23\$ discretionary budget authority. Data reflect only the basic DoD appropriations bill and exclude military construction (including family housing), the military assistance program, and supplementals. FY20 request and enacted values for O&M omitted to account for irregular reporting practices used for O&M that year to comply with the Budget Control Act. Similarly, FY20 request value for procurement adjusted upward by \$12.1b because the request omitted funds for missile procurement (Army), ammunition procurement (Army), weapons procurement (Navy), ammunition procurement (Navy and Marine Corps), and ammunition procurement (Air Force). The request categorized funds for these subtitles under “OCO for Base.” CSBA set the request value for these subtitles equal to the total enacted amount of \$12.1b to avoid artificially inflating the calculated aggregate congressional adjustment. Skipping this correction or performing it differently would not change the central finding that Congress has favored procurement when adjusting defense spending.

FIGURE 6: CONGRESSIONAL ADJUSTMENT TO PRESIDENT'S BUDGET REQUEST AS REPORTED IN ENACTED DOD APPROPRIATIONS BILL, AGGREGATE AMOUNT BY APPROPRIATION SUBTITLE (CONSTANT FY23\$ BILLIONS), FY16 TO FY23, EXCL SUPPLEMENTALS



Sources: CSBA analysis of enacted DoD appropriations bills. Appendix A provides data with sourcing. See Figure 3's footnotes for an explanation of the data collection process.

Notes: In billions FY23\$ discretionary budget authority. Data reflect only the basic DoD appropriations bill and exclude military construction (including family housing), the military assistance program, and supplementals. FY20 request and enacted values for O&M accounts, missile procurement (Army), ammunition procurement (Army), weapons procurement (Navy), ammunition procurement (Navy and Marine Corps), and ammunition procurement (Air Force) omitted to account for irregular reporting practices used for those subtitles that year to comply with the Budget Control Act.

Congressional adjustments to requested DoD appropriation titles from FY 2016 to FY 2023 show that Congress has not concentrated its changes on the largest defense budget accounts, O&M and military personnel. Instead, it has emphasized adjusting the procurement and RDT&E accounts (Figure 5). This result refutes the fiscal hypothesis. Since FY 2016, Congress has added nearly \$80 billion in aggregate for procurement above the administration's requests. That \$80 billion figure is approximately 1.4 times greater than the absolute values of the three other major accounts combined. Previous studies have reported a similar preoccupation with procurement, so Figure 5 reaffirms a long-running pattern in congressional defense budgeting.⁴⁹ Like it or not, Congress primarily shapes the U.S. defense budget by adjusting procurement and, to a lesser extent, RDT&E.

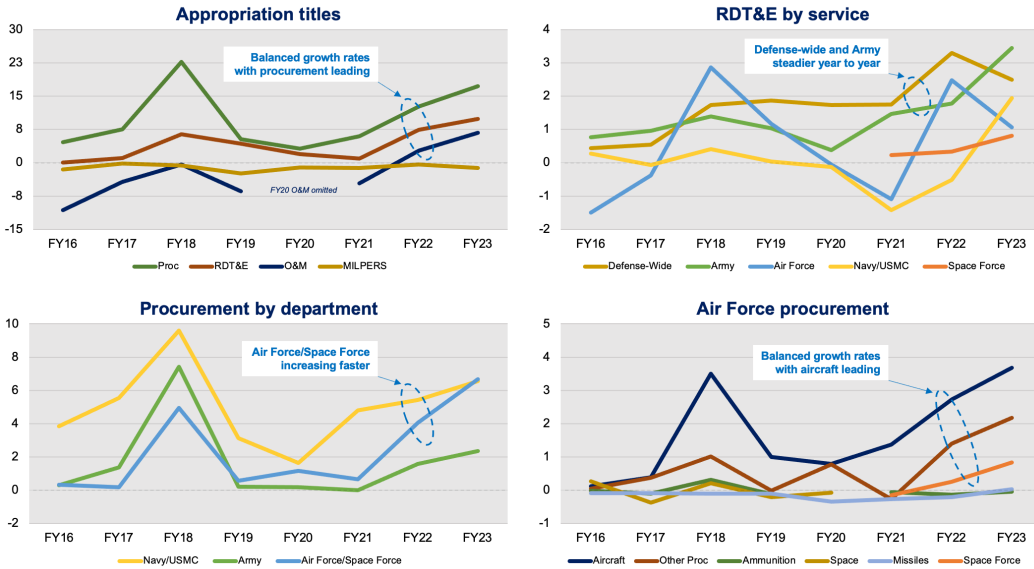
Drilling down from appropriation titles to subtitles, Congress has concentrated its spending adjustments in favored investment areas, precisely as the programmatic hypothesis predicts (Figure 6). From FY 2016 to FY 2023, five subtitles have emerged as clear congressional favorites. They each ranked among the largest congressional adjustments in both dollar and percentage terms. The five favorites are Army aircraft procurement, Army RDT&E, Navy

49 Kanter, "Congress and the Defense Budget," pp. 131–132; Korb, "Congressional Impact on Defense Spending," pp. 54–55; and Daniels and Harrison, "Assessing the Role of Congress," pp. 8–9.

aircraft procurement, Navy shipbuilding and conversion, and Air Force aircraft procurement. CSBA only analyzed line-item level data for these five subtitles to keep the data collection manageable.

In terms of disfavored investment areas, Figure 6 indicates that Congress shares responsibility for the disappointing state of the U.S. munitions industrial base revealed by ongoing American support for Ukraine.⁵⁰ Congress has funded numerous missile and ammunition procurement accounts below DoD’s aggregate requests. For example, it cut the Air Force’s missile procurement requests by an average of 5 percent (~\$140 million) per year, in real terms, from FY 2016 to FY 2023. Without steadier congressional support for munitions, the U.S. military will face serious problems in any future war against a peer adversary.

FIGURE 7: CONGRESSIONAL ADJUSTMENT TO PRESIDENT’S BUDGET REQUEST AS REPORTED IN ENACTED DOD APPROPRIATIONS BILL, ANNUAL AMOUNT BY APPROPRIATION TITLE AND SUBTITLE (CONSTANT FY23\$ BILLIONS), FY16 TO FY23, EXCL SUPPLEMENTALS



Sources: CSBA analysis of enacted DoD appropriations bills. Appendix A provides data with sourcing. See Figure 3’s footnotes for an explanation of the data collection process.

Notes: In billions FY23\$ discretionary budget authority. Data reflect only the basic DoD appropriations bill and exclude military construction (including family housing), the military assistance program, and supplementals. Per notes for Figures 4 and 5, Figure 6 adjusts FY20 request value

50 Stacie Pettyjohn and Hannah Dennis, *Precision and Posture: Defense Spending Trends and the FY23 Budget Request* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security [CNAS], November 2022), https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/Budget2022_Final.pdf?mtime=20221116160642&focal=none; Stacie Pettyjohn and Hannah Dennis, “*Production Is Deterrence*”: Investing in Precision-Guided Weapons to Meet Peer Challenges (Washington, DC: CNAS, June 2023), https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/Budget2024_Final.pdf?mtime=20230629105026&focal=none; Tyler Hacker, “Money Isn’t Enough: Getting Serious About Precision Munitions,” *War on the Rocks*, April 24, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/04/money-isnt-enough-getting-serious-about-precision-munitions/>; and Tyler Hacker, *Beyond Precision: Maintaining America’s Strike Advantage in Great Power Conflict* (Washington, DC: CSBA, June 2023), <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/beyond-precision-maintaining-americas-strike-advantage-in-great-power-conflict>.

for procurement upward by \$12.1b and omits FY20 request and enacted values for O&M, missile procurement (Army), ammunition procurement (Army), weapons procurement (Navy), ammunition procurement (Navy and Marine Corps), and ammunition procurement (Air Force) to account for irregular reporting practices used for those subtitles that year to comply with the Budget Control Act.

Surveying congressional adjustments to appropriation titles and selected subtitles over time brings two insights into sharper relief (Figure 7). First, congressional adjustments have not discernibly changed following the release of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, an important document that codified DoD's intention to prevail in great power competition. Congress has reoriented aspects of its legislative agenda after the strategy appeared, to be sure, but that reorientation does not register in the budgetary outcomes analyzed here. In fact, some congressional adjustments seemingly contradict the strategy.

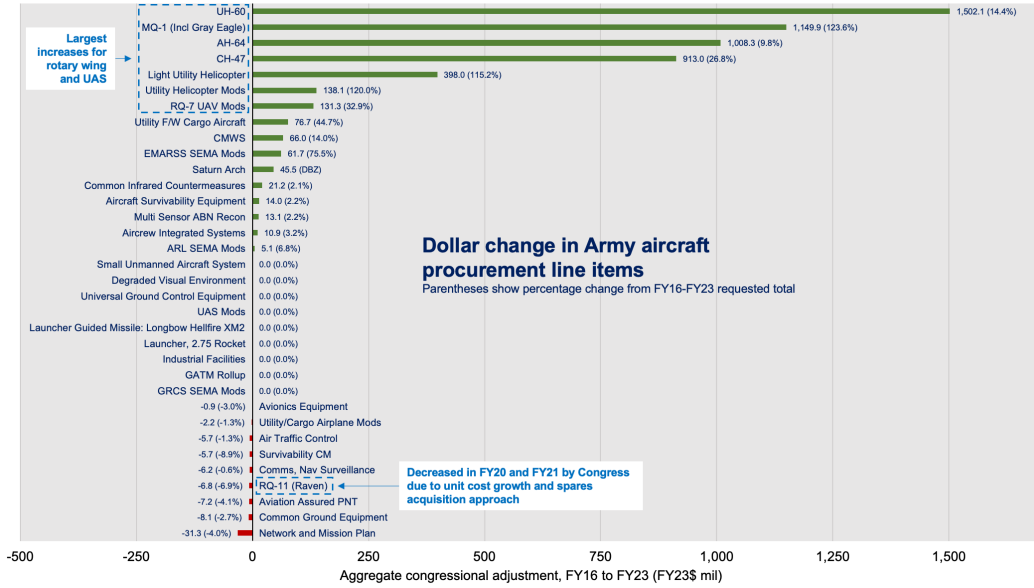
For instance, steady congressional increases for Defense-Wide and Army RDT&E have contrasted with the volatile adjustments for Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps RDT&E. The strategy called for implementing technological advancements across the joint force, of course, but it emphasized fielding forces capable of striking diverse targets inside enemy air and missile defense networks – a capability typically associated with air and naval forces.⁵¹ Although the size of congressional adjustments does not necessarily reflect their quality, Congress has not provided the type of steady RDT&E increases for air and naval forces that one would expect given the strategy.

Second, some congressional adjustments have exhibited the across-the-board or balanced character associated with the fiscal hypothesis. The appropriation titles and Air Force procurement charts in Figure 7, for example, depict balanced growth rates across different spending categories, a sign of Congress doling out proportional increases (while still favoring certain categories in dollar terms). However, the procurement by department chart offers a counterexample of Congress bestowing faster-growing increases on the Air Force than on other departments. Overall, although the balance of evidence supports the programmatic hypothesis, Congress is still prone to making fiscal-style adjustments in certain areas.

51 DoD, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, January 2018, p. 6 <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

Willful toward Weapons: Congressional Adjustments to Selected Line Items, FY16 to FY23

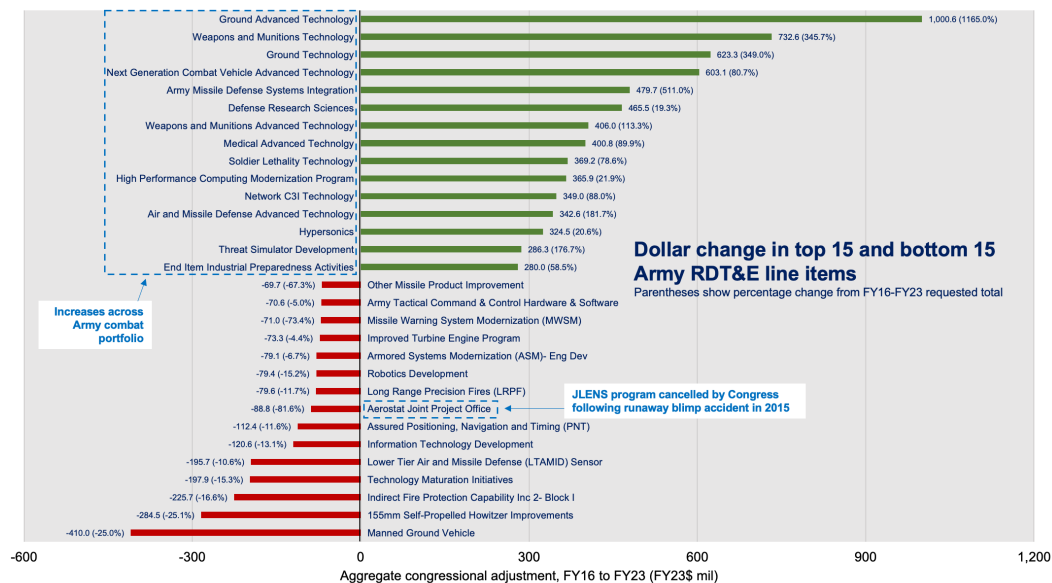
FIGURE 8: CONGRESSIONAL ADJUSTMENT TO PRESIDENT’S BUDGET REQUEST AS REPORTED IN ENACTED DOD APPROPRIATIONS BILL, AGGREGATE AMOUNT BY ARMY AIRCRAFT PROCUREMENT LINE ITEM (CONSTANT FY23\$ MILLIONS), FY16 TO FY23, EXCL SUPPLEMENTALS



Sources: CSBA analysis of enacted DoD appropriations bills. Appendix A provides data with sourcing. See Figure 3’s footnotes for an explanation of the data collection process.

Notes: In millions FY23\$ discretionary budget authority. DBZ (division by zero) indicates no funds requested. In some instances, separate line items related to one platform were consolidated to facilitate data visualization, including separate line items for advanced procurement and multi-year procurement. Data reflect only the basic DoD appropriations bill and exclude military construction (including family housing), the military assistance program, and supplementals.

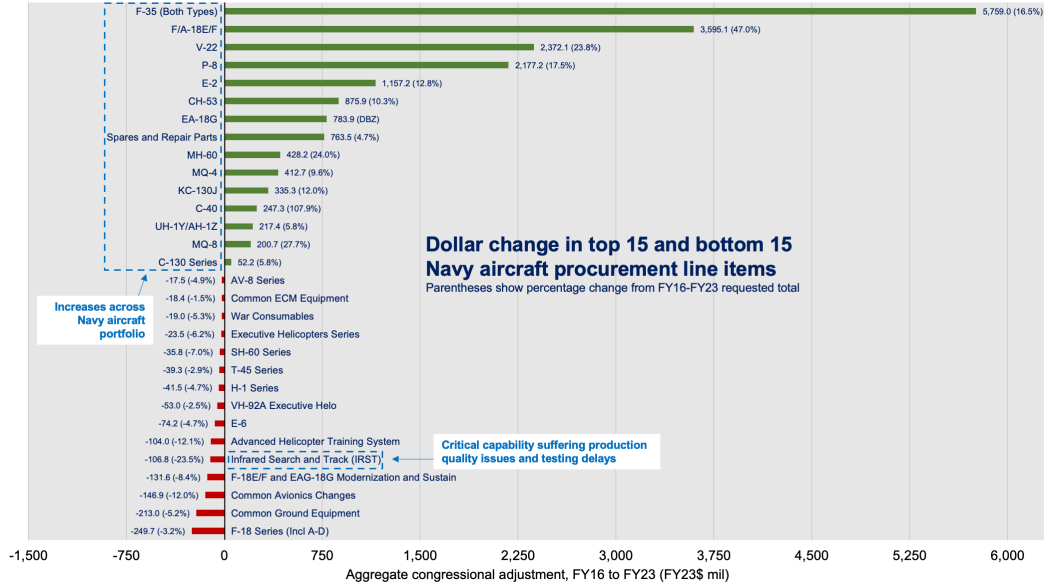
FIGURE 9: CONGRESSIONAL ADJUSTMENT TO PRESIDENT’S BUDGET REQUEST AS REPORTED IN ENACTED DOD APPROPRIATIONS BILL, AGGREGATE AMOUNT BY ARMY RDT&E LINE ITEM (CONSTANT FY23\$ MILLIONS), FY16 TO FY23, EXCL SUPPLEMENTALS



Sources: CSBA analysis of enacted DoD appropriations bills. Appendix A provides data with sourcing. See Figure 3’s footnotes for an explanation of the data collection process. On the JLENS program’s cancellation, see Jen Judson, “Congress Nails Runaway Blimp’s Coffin Shut,” *Defense News*, May 27, 2016, <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2016/05/27/congress-nails-runaway-blimp-s-coffin-shut/>.

Notes: In millions FY23\$ discretionary budget authority. Data reflect only the basic DoD appropriations bill and exclude military construction (including family housing), the military assistance program, and supplementals.

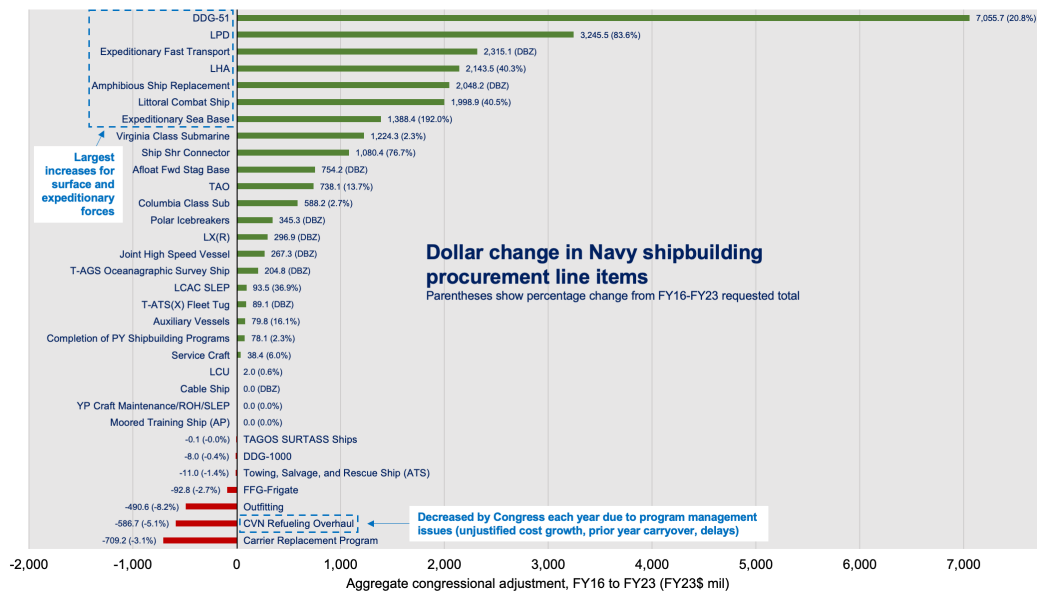
FIGURE 10: CONGRESSIONAL ADJUSTMENT TO PRESIDENT’S BUDGET REQUEST AS REPORTED IN ENACTED DOD APPROPRIATIONS BILL, AGGREGATE AMOUNT BY NAVY AIRCRAFT PROCUREMENT LINE ITEM (CONSTANT FY23\$ MILLIONS), FY16 TO FY23, EXCL SUPPLEMENTALS



Sources: CSBA analysis of enacted DoD appropriations bills. Appendix A provides data with sourcing. See Figure 3’s footnotes for an explanation of the data collection process. On the IRST program’s challenges, see Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Weapon Systems Annual Assessments* (Washington, DC: GAO, June 2023), pp. 145–146, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-106059.pdf>.

Notes: In millions FY23\$ discretionary budget authority. DBZ (division by zero) indicates no funds requested. In some instances, separate line items related to one platform were consolidated to facilitate data visualization, including separate line items for advanced procurement and multi-year procurement. Data reflect only the basic DoD appropriations bill and exclude military construction (including family housing), the military assistance program, and supplementals.

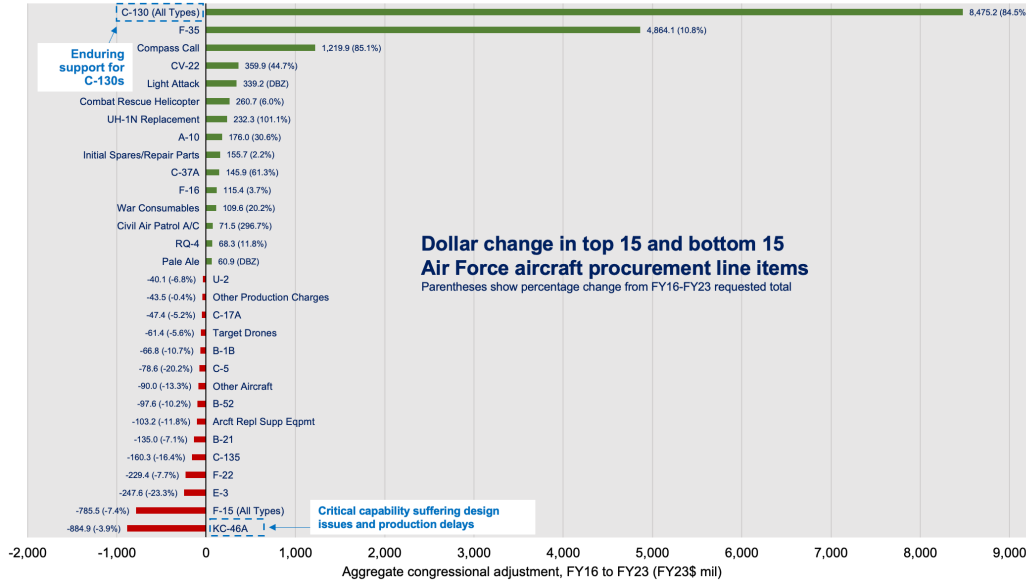
FIGURE 11: CONGRESSIONAL ADJUSTMENT TO PRESIDENT’S BUDGET REQUEST AS REPORTED IN ENACTED DOD APPROPRIATIONS BILL, AGGREGATE AMOUNT BY NAVY SHIPBUILDING PROCUREMENT LINE ITEM (CONSTANT FY23\$ MILLIONS), FY16 TO FY23, EXCL SUPPLEMENTALS



Sources: CSBA analysis of enacted DoD appropriations bills. Appendix A provides data with sourcing. See Figure 3’s footnotes for an explanation of the data collection process.

Notes: In millions FY23\$ discretionary budget authority. DBZ (division by zero) indicates no funds requested. In some instances, separate line items related to one platform were consolidated to facilitate data visualization, including separate line items for advanced procurement and multi-year procurement. Data reflect only the basic DoD appropriations bill and exclude military construction (including family housing), the military assistance program, and supplementals.

FIGURE 12: CONGRESSIONAL ADJUSTMENT TO PRESIDENT’S BUDGET REQUEST AS REPORTED IN ENACTED DOD APPROPRIATIONS BILL, AGGREGATE AMOUNT BY AIR FORCE AIRCRAFT PROCUREMENT LINE ITEM (CONSTANT FY23\$ MILLIONS), FY16 TO FY23, EXCL SUPPLEMENTALS



Sources: CSBA analysis of enacted DoD appropriations bills. Appendix A provides data with sourcing. See Figure 3’s footnotes for an explanation of the data collection process. On the KC-46A program’s challenges, see GAO, *Weapon Systems Annual Assessments*, pp. 85–86.

Notes: In millions FY23\$ discretionary budget authority. DBZ (division by zero) indicates no funds requested. In some instances, separate line items related to one platform were consolidated to facilitate data visualization, including separate line items for advanced procurement and multi-year procurement. Data reflect only the basic DoD appropriations bill and exclude military construction (including family housing), the military assistance program, and supplementals.

Congressional adjustments to line items in the five selected appropriation subtitles from FY 2016 to FY 2023 reveal funds flowing toward favored investments in line with a programmatic hypothesis, although some evidence also exists for the fiscal hypothesis (Figures 8 through 12). Congress has thrown additional funds at preferred programs, in particular UAS across the services, Army rotary wing aircraft, Navy surface and expeditionary vessels, and Air Force C-130s. The extra resources absorbed by these programs, measured in both dollar and percentage terms, confirm their status as congressional favorites.⁵² Of course, DoD budgetary gamesmanship may be driving the observed outcomes. The Pentagon may knowingly reduce its requests for certain programs knowing that Congress will add funding during the appropriations process.⁵³ Additionally, any favoritism in Congress’s allocation of classified funds cannot be addressed by this unclassified analysis.

Judging whether the favored programs deserve Congress’s budgetary largesse under the current U.S. defense strategy is another matter entirely. On the one hand, the funding

52 For a similar finding covering the FY10 to FY20 period, see Daniels and Harrison, “Assessing the Role of Congress,” p. 17.

53 Ibid.

increases provided to UAS offer a clear example of Congress embracing newer technologies critical to U.S. strategy, particularly since military service support for several of these systems has proven uneven at best.⁵⁴ On the other hand, Congress's generous funding of legacy helicopters, the Littoral Combat Ship, and C-130s shows that it still clings to established weapons systems. These types of programs often lack the operational relevance that would justify hefty budgetary increases, especially given alternative investment options.

The data indicate a congressional tendency to favor legacy platforms. Since FY 2016, the Air Force C-130 program received \$3.6 billion more in additional funds from Congress than the Air Force F-35. In percentage terms, the C-130 and EC-130 received increases of 84.5 percent and 85.1 percent, respectively, over DoD's aggregate requests. Comparatively, the F-35 received only a 10.8 percent increase. From FY 2018 to FY 2023, Congress provided the Air Force with an additional \$6.3 billion for the procurement of C-130J aircraft – a nearly 1,825 percent increase from DoD's requested amount of \$347 million. This additional funding directed the purchase of 52 C-130Js for the Air National Guard and 10 C-130Js for the Air Force Reserve. In contrast, Congress cut \$135.0 million from the Air Force's newest platform, the B-21 Raider. Congress also cut funds for the legacy B-52 and B-1 bombers, although not by as much as the B-21.

Congressional committee assignments do not fully explain the Hill's preference for legacy programs. The member whose district contains the primary F-35 factory, Representative Kay Granger (R-Texas), has served on the House Appropriations Committee Defense Subcommittee since 2011 and has held a leadership position since 2021.⁵⁵ Conversely, the member whose district features the main C-130 plant, Representative Barry Loudermilk (R-Georgia), has never served on a committee relevant to C-130 acquisition.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, Congress still provided more extra money for the C-130 than the F-35. The location of contractors and supply chains also does not provide an adequate explanation, as both aircraft have subcontractors across the country and are deployed at bases around the United States.

Two patterns in Congress's spending adjustments indicate a more fiscal than programmatic orientation. First, Figures 8 through 12 provide examples of Congress reducing spending on programs viewed as underperforming or overfunded, including the Army's RQ-11 UAS and JLENS blimp, the Navy's Infrared Search and Track (IRST) and carrier refueling and overhaul programs, and the Air Force's KC-46A refueling tanker. In each of these cases, Congress justified its cut by invoking program management factors such as cost growth, acquisition

54 For recent work on using existing UAS in great power competition, see Travis Sharp, Thomas G. Mahnken, and Tim Sadov, *Extending Deterrence by Detection: The Case for Integrating Unmanned Aircraft Systems Into the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness* (Washington, DC: CSBA, July 2023), <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/extending-deterrence-by-detection-the-case-for-integrating-unmanned-aircraft-systems-into-the-indo-pacific-partnership-for-maritime-domain-awareness>.

55 Ballotpedia, "Kay Granger," accessed July 27, 2023, https://ballotpedia.org/Kay_Granger.

56 Ballotpedia, "Barry Loudermilk," accessed July 27, 2023, https://ballotpedia.org/Barry_Loudermilk.

plan adjustments, accidents, production quality shortcomings, and schedule delays. In no cases reviewed by CSBA did Congress justify the reduction by citing a given program’s lack of relevance to U.S. defense strategy.

This first pattern reveals an irony in congressional defense budgeting. Although Congress displays a programmatic orientation driven by strategy or parochialism or both, it generally justifies its decisions in fiscal terms using the language of efficiency and stewardship of taxpayer dollars. As a result, fiscal rationales function as a shield for Congress to make decisions that are presumably rooted in programmatic considerations of one kind or another.

Second, in areas such as Army RDT&E and Navy aircraft procurement, Congress has spread its spending increases across a wide variety of programs, a pattern more consistent with a fiscal hypothesis. Many of these investments have supported worthy programs, but Congress’s failure to make more decisive choices, particularly with Army RDT&E, indicates that it has spread extra money around rather than making informed bets on a handful of key programs.

Opportunities for Improvement: DoD Engagement with Congress and Congressional Policy Entrepreneurs

The Pentagon and Congress both have roles to play in improving the coherence of U.S. defense spending outcomes. DoD should find better ways to persuade Congress to support capabilities that defense planners view as essential to warfighting success. For starters, senior defense officials should communicate clear, tangible, and specific rationales for the minimum investments needed in each spending account. They should express these rationales to Congress in compelling, jargon-free, plain English that makes their force requirements clear, a departure from DoD’s tendency to bury its recommendations in technocratic language and can-do optimism. An example of this tendency occurred in 2022, when former Representative Elaine Luria (D-Virginia) responded to a Navy tweet about an exercise by commenting, “I have no idea what this means and I served in the Navy for 20 years. And you wonder why Americans don’t understand why the Navy is essential to many aspects of their daily life?”⁵⁷

DoD should also recognize that Congress possesses a programmatic orientation and thus will never approve exactly what the Pentagon requests. As a result, defense planners have an obligation to develop operational concepts that enable the U.S. military to fight and win using only what Congress has provided. If senior defense officials judge that they cannot get the job done with the resources provided, then they must let Congress know. However, defense officials should avoid letting the perfect become the enemy of the good by focusing

57 Jeff Schogol, “Congresswoman to Navy: Speak English, Please,” *Task & Purpose*, February 17, 2022, <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/west-22-navy-plain-english-luria/>.

disproportionately on the many things that Congress withholds rather than the many things that it gives.

Despite Congress's many budgetary shortcomings, the fact remains that the U.S. defense resource endowment remains ample and American adversaries also face limitations on their ability to direct spending to optimal purposes. The inconsistency of congressional spending decisions will continue to prove endlessly frustrating, as it always has, but it need not prevent the United States from defending core national interests in the decades to come.⁵⁸

Following the Eagle: Historical Lessons from the F-15 for Air Force Engagement with Congress

By Casey Nicastrò

If the United States wants to succeed in long-term military competition against China and Russia, Congress and the Air Force must work together to sharpen the focus of aircraft procurement. Future conflicts will require advanced stealth capabilities to penetrate enemy air defenses and conduct counter-air and strike operations in highly contested environments.⁵⁹ The B-21, Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD), and Collaborative Combat Aircraft (CCA) programs all seek to provide the Air Force with such capabilities. The consequences of not having enough of these vital aircraft could be dire. As retired Air Force Lieutenant General David Deptula wrote, "If, due to inadequate funding and slower than required modernization, the Air Force must retain older aircraft that lack the degree of survivability that will be needed to defeat modern threats, it should expect to experience high loss rates."⁶⁰

Congress and the Air Force must work together to shape procurement outcomes that ensure the efficient and timely acquisition of essential capabilities. Congress ought to demonstrate more openness to taking risks when procuring new aircraft. The Air Force, for its part, can help increase congressional risk tolerance by limiting excessive costs and emphasizing the importance of advanced programs.

The development of the F-15 Eagle offers an instructive example of how Congress and the Air Force can collaborate constructively. In 1965, Air Force officials saw the need for a dedicated air superiority fighter after two F-105 fighter-bombers were shot down

58 Sharp, *Modest and Balanced*, p. 5.

59 Mark Gunzinger, Carl Rehberg, Jacob Cohn, Timothy A. Walton, and Lukas Autenried, *An Air Force for an Era of Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: CSBA, March 2019), p.54, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/an-air-force-for-an-era-of-great-power-competition/>.

60 Dave Deptula, "Reviving a 'Weak' Department of the Air Force," *Forbes*, October 16, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davedeptula/2021/10/25/reviving-a-weak-department-of-the-air-force/>.

over Vietnam by technologically inferior MiG-17s.⁶¹ Two years later, the Soviet Union's introduction of the MiG-25 exacerbated the Air Force's concerns about countering Soviet fighters.⁶² Building political support for new aircraft procurement posed difficulties at the time due to public and congressional anger about the excessive costs incurred by the C-5A program. In response, the Air Force decided to take a new approach to contracting.⁶³

Unlike with C-5A acquisition, the Air Force's F-15 contract provided greater flexibility to determine performance and cost requirements, established development milestones to mark progress, and required extensive hardware testing before moving to production.⁶⁴ The new approach to contracting saved an estimated \$1 billion and led to the procurement of the first 30 aircraft only eight years after the F-X program began.⁶⁵ In comparison, the F-35 did not achieve initial operating capability until 20 years after the launch of the Joint Strike Fighter program.⁶⁶

Air Force officials also worked to assure Congress of the F-15's ability to counter Soviet fighters.⁶⁷ Some members remained unconvinced at the beginning. In 1981, Senator Gary Hart (D-Colorado) and Representative William Whitehurst (R-Virginia) formed the Military Reform Caucus. The caucus gained inspiration from analysts who advocated for replacing expensive advanced weapons with a greater number of cheaper but older platforms. It sought to block funding for the F-15 and other emerging programs.⁶⁸ Air Force officials responded by publicly contesting the analysts' claims, eventually gaining influential congressional allies such as Senator Barry Goldwater (R-Arizona).⁶⁹ Ultimately, Congress continued funding the F-15 and the aircraft accumulated a combat record of more than 100 kills to zero losses.⁷⁰

61 Mark A. Lorell and Hugh P. Levaux, *The Cutting Edge: A Half Century of U.S. Fighter Aircraft R&D* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1998), p. 104, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR939.html.

62 Ibid, p.105

63 Jacob Neufeld, "The F-15 Eagle: Origins and Development, 1964-1972," *Air Power History* 48, no. 1, Spring 2001, pp. 13-14.

64 John M. Shults, *Case Study: Lockheed and the C-5A* (Maxwell, AL: Air War College, 1976), p. 37, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADBo11275.pdf>.

65 Ibid, p. 16; and DoD, "Annual Defense Department Report, FY 1976 and FY 1977," February 5, 1975, p. 111, https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual_reports/1976-77_DoD_AR.pdf.

66 Janes, "Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II," accessed July 28, 2023, <https://customer.janes.com/display/JAWA1347-JAWA>.

67 Neufeld, "The F-15 Eagle," p. 19.

68 Michael Hankins, *Flying Camelot: The F-15, the F-16, and the Weaponization of Fighter Pilot Nostalgia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), pp. 156-159.

69 Ibid, pp. 167-168.

70 Boeing, "F-15 Eagle Tactical Fighter," accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.boeing.com/history/products/f-15-eagle.page>.

The successful development of the F-15 shows that Congress and the Air Force have worked together to address airpower challenges posed by a great power competitor. By reforming its contracting system, advocating for crucial capabilities, and disputing public critiques, the Air Force successfully reduced legislative risk aversion. Congress, in turn, provided the Air Force with a large quantity of advanced aircraft that directly addressed a threat posed by a great power competitor. Taking a similar approach today will help the Air Force deter—and win—future wars by crafting advanced concepts and transforming them into advanced capabilities.

As an atomistic institution lacking DoD’s hierarchical structure, Congress depends on individual lawmakers to achieve every policy outcome. As a result, any lasting improvements in Congress’s handling of the defense budget will only result from actions taken by individual policy entrepreneurs who tie together politics, problems, and policies in a way that creates meaning for other lawmakers trying to navigate the often-intimidating ambiguity of defense policymaking.⁷¹ A skilled policy entrepreneur must not only act outside their political self-interest with some regularity, but also know more about the policy process than any of their colleagues.⁷²

Since World War II, Congress has been blessed with many renowned defense policy entrepreneurs, including a succession of powerhouse Georgia Democrats (Representative Carl Vinson, Senator Richard Russell, Senator Sam Nunn), arms control specialist Senator Richard Lugar (R-Indiana), Senator John McCain (R-Arizona), and others. Several current lawmakers continue to demonstrate leadership on military affairs, including younger members such as Representatives Mike Gallagher (R-Wisconsin) and Elissa Slotkin (D-Michigan). Yet Congress’s pipeline of defense policy entrepreneurs has shrunk considerably relative to decades past.

Improving the Hill’s handling of defense issues has never been easy, and today’s fractured politics present additional difficulties. Yet opportunities do exist to make progress. In the mid-1970s, Representative Les Aspin (D-Wisconsin), then a newly elected congressman who later became a leading defense policy entrepreneur of his generation, penned a series of insightful articles about Congress’s role in defense policy and budgeting.⁷³ His main advice was that legislative policy entrepreneurs should focus on implementing procedural changes that indirectly shape decision-making processes to produce better outcomes more of the time. Emphasizing procedure plays to Congress’s strengths because, as Aspin observed, “Making decisions on the basis of rational argument requires confronting the issues directly,

71 Nikolaos Zahariadis, *Ambiguity and Choice in Public Policy* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2003), pp. 19–22.

72 *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22, 166.

73 Les Aspin, “Games the Pentagon Plays,” *Foreign Policy* 11, Summer 1973, pp. 80–92; Les Aspin, “Why Doesn’t Congress Do Something?” *Foreign Policy* 15, Summer 1974, pp. 70–82; and Les Aspin, “The Defense Budget and Foreign Policy: The Role of Congress,” *Daedalus* 104, no. 3, Summer 1975, pp. 155–174.

and Congressmen, who are pressured from all sides, who are continually short of time, and who suffer from lack of expertise, are not likely to do that.”⁷⁴ In short, the skillful legislator uses procedure to get what they want through subtlety rather than confrontation.

Procedural expertise and subtlety are virtues in short supply on Capitol Hill these days, but they still offer the best hope of improving congressional defense budgeting. Potential procedural adjustments available to Congress include changing executive branch reporting relationships, mandating the establishment of certain facts before actions can occur, designating who can make decisions, and bringing outside groups or new groups into decision processes.⁷⁵

Of these options, Congress mandating the establishment of facts prior to action appears especially promising. Such mandates, if designed properly, would force senior DoD leaders to present the type of clear, tangible, and specific assessments described above before getting what they wanted from Congress. The goal here would not be to burden DoD with additional pro forma reporting requirements. Rather, it would be to create a categorically different requirement whereby senior DoD leaders must deliver a plain-English justification for advancing a preferred policy in hopes of convincing a critical mass of lawmakers to approve it.

Lawmakers looking for a good place to implement this approach should consider requiring DoD to report publicly and plainly on its progress (or lack thereof) in strengthening U.S. munitions stockpiles as a prerequisite to Congress approving multi-year munitions procurements. Although defense officials have advocated publicly for multi-year procurements in 2023, DoD has a history of not following through on its munitions purchasing forecasts, meaning congressional skepticism on this issue is merited.⁷⁶

Debating contested issues such as munitions procurement should happen when DoD leaders testify before Congress on their annual budget requests. However, that process has devolved into including so many duplicative hearings and so much indecipherable jargon that it delivers questionable value to Congress, DoD, or the American public. Excising a significant portion of these unproductive annual posture testimonies and replacing them with a smaller number of more consequential, more holistic, and more comprehensible sessions dedicated to assessing DoD’s factual progress on important initiatives would generate far more useful information for Congress to make decisions. Such information will not eliminate the challenges created by Congress’s programmatic orientation, but it stands a reasonable chance of helping Congress improve the coherence of U.S. defense policy.

74 Aspin, “The Defense Budget and Foreign Policy,” p. 165.

75 Aspin, “Why Doesn’t Congress Do Something?” pp. 78–80.

76 Pettyjohn and Dennis, *Precision and Posture*, pp. 23–25.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that Congress continues to exhibit a programmatic orientation toward defense spending characterized by steering additional funds into a handful of favored weapons procurement programs. The spending adjustments documented in the chapter illustrate Capitol Hill's haphazard support for important DoD initiatives since 2016. DoD and Congress share some responsibility for these deficiencies in defense budgeting, and both should take steps to improve the handling of American defense policy in the years ahead. If they do not, the U.S. military will find itself less prepared than it could be to prevail in simultaneous long-term military competitions against China and Russia.

APPENDIX A

Congressional Adjustments to the Administration's Budget Request Reported in Enacted DoD Appropriations Bills (Data Used in Chapter 2)

The figures below represent discretionary budget authority reported in billions of current dollars and constant FY 2023 dollars. The totals may not add due to rounding. Inflation adjustments were made using the “Total” budget authority deflators contained in DoD’s *National Defense Budget Estimates* volumes for FY 1999 and FY 2023. The figures reflect only the basic DoD appropriations bill and exclude military construction (including family housing), the military assistance program, and supplementals. The FY 1999 figures exclude the supplemental funds included for that year by CRS. Figure 3’s footnotes provide a detailed explanation of the data collection process. The enacted appropriations bill sources for FY 2016 to FY 2023 provide page numbers for the summary tables, meaning readers should reference the detailed tables in those sources to retrieve figures for the appropriation subtitles and selected line items used in Figures 4 through 12.

Fiscal year	Request current\$	Request FY23\$	Request change (\$) from prior FY request	Request change (%) from prior FY request	Enacted current\$	Enacted FY23\$	Enacted change (\$) to request	Enacted change (%) to request	Source	Source page(s)
1950	13.3	220.8	--	--	12.8	211.6	-9.2	-4.2%	CRS '05	29-30
1951	13.0	170.4	-50.5	-22.9%	13.0	169.3	-1.1	-0.6%	CRS '05	29-30
1952	55.9	755.6	585.3	343.5%	55.2	745.9	-9.7	-1.3%	CRS '05	29-30
1953	49.0	677.4	-78.3	-10.4%	44.3	612.0	-65.4	-9.7%	CRS '05	29-30
1954	33.6	490.4	-187.0	-27.6%	34.3	499.9	9.5	1.9%	CRS '05	29-30
1955	29.8	432.5	-57.9	-11.8%	28.8	416.9	-15.6	-3.6%	CRS '05	29-30
1956	32.2	439.7	7.2	1.7%	31.9	434.9	-4.8	-1.1%	CRS '05	29-30
1957	34.1	446.2	6.5	1.5%	34.7	452.8	6.7	1.5%	CRS '05	29-30
1958	36.2	450.6	4.4	1.0%	33.8	420.3	-30.3	-6.7%	CRS '05	29-30
1959	38.8	455.5	5.0	1.1%	39.6	465.1	9.6	2.1%	CRS '05	29-30
1960	39.2	452.5	-3.0	-0.7%	39.2	452.3	-0.2	-0.1%	CRS '05	29-30
1961	49.4	565.0	112.5	24.9%	40.0	457.8	-107.1	-19.0%	CRS '05	29-30
1962	42.9	485.6	-79.4	-14.1%	46.7	527.6	42.1	8.7%	CRS '05	29-30
1963	47.9	529.8	44.3	9.1%	48.1	532.4	2.5	0.5%	CRS '05	29-30
1964	49.1	522.1	-7.7	-1.5%	47.2	502.1	-20.0	-3.8%	CRS '05	29-30
1965	47.5	491.4	-30.7	-5.9%	46.8	484.0	-7.4	-1.5%	CRS '05	29-30
1966	46.9	446.7	-44.7	-9.1%	46.8	445.9	-0.8	-0.2%	CRS '05	29-30
1967	57.7	528.7	81.9	18.3%	58.1	532.4	3.7	0.7%	CRS '05	29-30
1968	71.6	632.0	103.3	19.5%	69.9	617.5	-14.5	-2.3%	CRS '05	29-30
1969	77.1	651.8	19.8	3.1%	71.9	607.8	-44.0	-6.8%	CRS '05	29-30
1970	75.3	603.7	-48.1	-7.4%	69.6	558.5	-45.2	-7.5%	CRS '05	29-30
1971	68.7	519.2	-84.4	-14.0%	66.6	503.0	-16.2	-3.1%	CRS '05	29-30
1972	73.5	506.9	-12.4	-2.4%	70.5	486.0	-20.9	-4.1%	CRS '05	29-30
1973	79.6	503.8	-3.1	-0.6%	74.4	470.7	-33.1	-6.6%	CRS '05	29-30
1974	77.2	448.3	-55.5	-11.0%	73.7	427.8	-20.5	-4.6%	CRS '05	29-30
1975	87.1	463.8	15.5	3.5%	82.1	437.4	-26.4	-5.7%	CRS '05	29-30
1976	97.9	473.9	10.1	2.2%	90.5	438.1	-35.8	-7.6%	CRS '05	29-30
1977	108.0	488.1	14.2	3.0%	104.3	471.7	-16.4	-3.4%	CRS '05	29-30
1978	113.9	476.1	-12.0	-2.5%	111.2	464.8	-11.3	-2.4%	CRS '05	29-30
1979	119.3	461.3	-14.7	-3.1%	117.3	453.4	-7.9	-1.7%	CRS '05	29-30
1980	132.3	457.5	-3.8	-0.8%	131.0	452.9	-4.6	-1.0%	CRS '05	29-30
1981	154.5	476.0	18.4	4.0%	159.7	492.1	16.2	3.4%	CRS '05	29-30
1982	200.9	569.4	93.4	19.6%	199.7	566.0	-3.4	-0.6%	CRS '05	29-30
1983	249.6	675.2	105.8	18.6%	231.5	626.3	-48.8	-7.2%	CRS '05	29-30
1984	260.8	681.6	6.4	0.9%	248.9	650.3	-31.3	-4.6%	CRS '05	29-30
1985	292.1	735.0	53.5	7.8%	274.3	690.2	-44.8	-6.1%	CRS '05	29-30
1986	303.8	749.5	14.4	2.0%	281.0	693.2	-56.2	-7.5%	CRS '05	29-30

1987	298.9	719.3	-30.1	-4.0%	273.8	659.0	-60.4	-8.4%	CRS '05	29-30
1988	291.2	676.3	-43.0	-6.0%	278.8	647.5	-28.8	-4.3%	CRS '05	29-30
1989	283.2	634.0	-42.3	-6.3%	282.4	632.4	-1.7	-0.3%	CRS '05	29-30
1990	288.2	627.8	-6.2	-1.0%	286.0	623.0	-4.8	-0.8%	CRS '05	29-30
1991	287.3	604.0	-23.8	-3.8%	268.2	563.9	-40.1	-6.6%	CRS '05	29-30
1992	270.9	554.5	-49.5	-8.2%	269.9	552.4	-2.1	-0.4%	CRS '05	29-30
1993	261.1	532.3	-22.2	-4.0%	253.8	517.3	-15.0	-2.8%	CRS '05	29-30
1994	241.1	481.6	-50.7	-9.5%	240.6	480.6	-1.0	-0.2%	CRS '05	29-30
1995	244.5	477.6	-4.0	-0.8%	243.6	476.0	-1.6	-0.3%	CRS '05	29-30
1996	236.3	451.6	-26.1	-5.5%	243.3	464.8	13.2	2.9%	CRS '05	29-30
1997	234.7	437.7	-13.9	-3.1%	243.9	455.0	17.3	3.9%	CRS '05	29-30
1998	243.9	442.1	4.5	1.0%	247.7	449.0	6.9	1.6%	CRS '05	29-30
1999	251.0	442.8	0.6	0.1%	250.5	441.9	-0.9	-0.2%	CRS '05	29-30
2000	263.3	453.1	10.4	2.3%	267.8	460.9	7.8	1.7%	CRS '05	29-30
2001	284.5	473.5	20.4	4.5%	287.8	479.0	5.5	1.2%	CRS '05	29-30
2002	319.5	519.2	45.6	9.6%	317.6	516.0	-3.1	-0.6%	CRS '05	29-30
2003	366.7	576.2	57.0	11.0%	355.1	558.0	-18.2	-3.2%	CRS '05	29-30
2004	372.3	567.3	-8.8	-1.5%	368.7	561.8	-5.5	-1.0%	CRS '05	29-30
2005	392.8	575.4	8.1	1.4%	390.2	571.5	-3.9	-0.7%	Bill	388
2006	397.2	563.1	-12.3	-2.1%	442.8	627.7	64.6	11.5%	Bill	487
2007	420.4	580.8	17.7	3.1%	436.5	603.0	22.3	3.8%	Bill	378
2008	463.5	622.3	41.6	7.2%	460.3	618.0	-4.3	-0.7%	DoD, Bill	22, 487
2009	481.9	637.0	14.6	2.3%	479.5	633.9	-3.1	-0.5%	Bill	Note 1
2010	501.1	647.7	10.7	1.7%	497.7	643.2	-4.4	-0.7%	CRS '21	39
2011	520.3	660.0	12.4	1.9%	502.4	637.3	-22.7	-3.4%	CRS '21	39
2012	531.9	663.8	3.8	0.6%	507.9	633.8	-30.0	-4.5%	CRS '21	39
2013	513.0	630.2	-33.6	-5.1%	510.1	626.6	-3.5	-0.6%	CRS '21	39
2014	510.2	619.0	-11.1	-1.8%	480.1	582.5	-36.5	-5.9%	CRS '21	39
2015	485.3	582.3	-36.8	-5.9%	483.7	580.4	-1.9	-0.3%	CRS '21	39
2016	520.8	618.6	36.3	6.2%	508.0	603.4	-15.2	-2.5%	Bill	592-98
2017	511.2	595.0	-23.6	-3.8%	509.6	593.1	-1.9	-0.3%	Bill	3689-95
2018	558.2	635.2	40.2	6.8%	582.3	662.6	27.4	4.3%	Bill	2416-21
2019	600.3	667.8	32.6	5.1%	599.4	666.7	-1.0	-0.2%	Bill	497-504
2020	623.9	677.4	9.6	1.4%	615.3	668.0	-9.3	-1.4%	Bill	125-33
2021	637.2	674.5	-2.8	-0.4%	619.4	655.7	-18.8	-2.8%	Bill	Note 2
2022	697.1	715.0	40.5	6.0%	719.6	738.1	23.1	3.2%	Bill 2, 1	174-83
2023	752.4	752.4	37.4	5.2%	788.5	788.5	36.0	4.8%	Bill	8266-75

1. To generate the FY09 figures, download the zip file from the source webpage, open the “Part 4” document, and sum the appropriation title totals listed on pages 112, 153, 212, 317, 419, 423, and 445.

2. To generate the FY21 figures, sum the appropriation title totals listed on source document pages 398 and 751-758 and consult Figure 3’s footnotes about how the FY20 and FY21 figures were adjusted to account for irregular reporting practices used in the final years of the Budget Control Act.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

CBO	Congressional Budget Office
CR	Continuing Resolution
CRS	Congressional Research Service
CSBA	Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments
DBZ	Division by zero
DoD	Department of Defense
FY	Fiscal Year
GAO	Government Accountability Office
JLENS	Joint Land Attack Cruise Missile Defense Elevated Netted Sensor System
O&M	Operations and Maintenance
OCO	Overseas contingency operations
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
RDT&E	Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation
UAS	unmanned aerial systems



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