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Trump's Military Industrial Complex

By Binoy Kampmark
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“This budget will be a public safety and national security budget.”

-President Donald J. Trump, Feb 27, 2017

Humming along the road of American empire to its state of noisy exception, US President Donald J. Trump has promised more money and fuel for a military industrial complex he considers starved and depleted. (As it is, the entire complex remains unbecomingly bloated and far from accountable.) Before the National Governor's Association on Monday, he suggested that US military spending increase by some 10 per cent, amounting to some \$54 billion.

The themes of the promised budget are old and tried: when in doubt, scare the American people into apoplexy; when feeling that patriotism is waning before sagacious voices, encourage more dramatic assessments of threats. White House press secretary Sean Spicer has suggested that Trump will persuade Congress to focus on the theme of “renewal of the American spirit.”

Much of this reeks of Ronald Reagan administration's efforts to use money and obesely inflated budgets as a cudgel to advance agendas. The difference then was that the threat seemed, at least superficially, more tangible: the apparent satanic evil of the Soviet imperium, getting away under the protective umbrella of Détente. “We were right,” said an oft misguided Vice President Dan Quayle, “to increase our defence budget.”²

“This budget,” claimed Trump, “follows through on my promise to keep Americans safe. It will include an historic increase in defence spending to rebuild the depleted military of the United States.” Display, power, project, all words deemed necessary in Making America Great Again.

There is, unsurprisingly, nothing refined in this. The object is winning, and engaging in wars that the US can win. In recent times, the US military machine has been specialising in the atrophy of counter-insurgency, open-ended conflicts where exit strategies are rebranded draw-downs, where defeat is simply rebranded as continued engagement of another sort. When a war enterprise has failed, use air strikes and send in advisors. The circle continues being re-invented.

“We have to start winning wars again – when I was young, in high school and college, people used to say we never lost a war,” intoned President. “We need to win or don’t fight it at all. It’s a mess like you have never seen before.”

Few would disagree that the Middle Eastern conflagration, characterised by botched interventions and failed visions, has been a calamity of immeasurable proportion, though this, it would seem, would require a clipping of the US military establishment. Trump, as he only knows how, wants to reward it.

This obsession is going to be funded, at least in part, by cuts to the State Department, possibly by up to 30 per cent (a war on experts, perhaps?) of their budget, and the Environmental Protection Agency, ever the enemy of Trumpland. The pointy-heads, it would seem, are being given the heave-ho in favour of the boys and girls with murderous toys. As are those in favour of the softer side of US brutishness: the humanitarian aid budget.

The central feature of such spending is a darkly humorous fiction: to prevent war, it is best to prepare for it with all the resources you have – and more besides. “We must ensure that our courageous servicemen and women have the tools they need to deter war and when called upon to fight in our name, only do one thing: win.”

The merry schizophrenic show continues to cause despair and consternation in the corridors of power. The true enemy of Trumpism remains collective alliances and arrangements that supposedly weigh down on the muscular assertion of US power. The wise counsel of friends is being mocked in favour of the belligerent counsel of the inner circle. Some European states are making a hurried dash to the party, promising an increased military budget in turn.

While Trump has amused and shocked hawks with suggestions that NATO is obsolete, passing into rickety oblivion, while also insisting that allies need to beef up their part of the security bargain, he is happy to keep the empire on its own track, resolutely distant from the fray. Where this fits in the alliance system is the befuddling feature of the enterprise.

The other aspect of the Trump military increase will also foster another delusion: that government can be “lean and accountable to the people,” while doing “much more with the money we spend” even as it seeks to aggrandise and expand the focus of the US defence complex. Many a pig has attempted to fly on this point, and failed (vide the Cold War).

The times are riddled with perverse reflections. President George W. Bush, a president hardly known for his sophisticated awareness of liberties and the US constitution, has hitched his colours to the mast of press freedom.

Hawks are becoming confusingly dovish – or at the very least hypocritically so. The aggressive shake-up from Trump continues, and will re-enact the follies of old: embracing the values of the military at the expense of the Republic.