

Is USA Defense Spending Closer to 1,400 Billion Dollars?

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Most estimates of US military spending mention a figure of 886 billion dollars or so. This is higher than the combined military spending of the next ten biggest spenders, most of whom are allies of the USA. This is 3 times the military spending of China.

However a recent review of US defense spending by defense analyst Winslow Wheeler has mentioned a figure of 1447 billion dollars after making some important corrections and also including related defense expenditures which are generally left out in commonly quoted official figures of 886 billion dollars.

Winslow Wheeler has written,

“The big spenders, especially, like to distort the size of our spending—and to mis-measure it—with gimmicks and yardsticks that have almost nothing to do with dollars spent.”

The revised estimate by Wheeler seeks to correct some figures and to include some left-out figures relating to nuclear weapons, homeland security from terrorists and criminals, and international security.

Wheeler's complete calculations were reported in a review by Andrew Cockburn published in 'Responsible Statecraft' (May 7, 2023).

The Wall Street Journal noted in a recent analysis that spending on defense and veterans' care is likely to pass 1000 billion dollars next year.

Recently a lot of concern has been expressed by various prominent persons over efforts that keep getting made for further increases even after big military budgets have been

sanctioned. One of these efforts relates to the presentation of a list of 'unfunded priorities' to the Congress by military sources. It has been seen over the years that this practice results in the further addition of billions of dollars more to the defense budget.

Concern is also being expressed over the very high profit margins of the biggest weapon companies and military contractors. The big profit margins merely on the supply of spare parts by some companies which effectively act as monopoly suppliers has come as a shock to many people.

Serious concern is also being expressed regarding the increases in military spending that can take place even later in the year in the context of funding that is designated as "an emergency requirement or for overseas contingency operation". As the Congressional Budget Office has stated, funding for this "would not be constrained."

In the past this was often increased arbitrarily in the context of the conflict in Iraq to include all sorts of military expenditure. Now it is likely to be increased in the coming days in the context of the military assistance being provided to Ukraine.

The high levels of military spending much beyond real defense needs have become part of a vicious cycle. A small and concentrated number of military contractors get huge and inflated orders from the government. They then use a part of their high profits to appoint high profile lobbyists who can ensure huge levels of military funding.

However Pentagon and defense department have repeatedly not been able to pass in audits and failed to account for a lot of spending.

This has understandably raised concerns relating to corruption. The other major area of domestic concern relates to the defense budget eating up so much of resources that adequate funds are difficult to find for many unmet needs of the weaker sections of US society, or for some other priority areas.

However another concern that should receive more attention relates to the impact of ever-increasing military budgets of the most powerful and aggressive country on the safety of people in many other countries, particularly in the context of the forever wars and proxy wars of the USA.

Hence campaigns to reduce the military budget of the USA should be an important concern of the peace movement.

At the same time it needs to be stated that the military budgets of several other countries also tend to present lower than actual figures, and this tendency is by no means confined only to the USA. Hence at world level also the military budget is likely to be significantly higher, compared to the estimates frequently cited.

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