



Stop Squandering “Defense” Dollars on Rich Allies and Failed States

By Doug Bandow

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America accounts for nearly 40 percent of the globe’s military outlays, but Washington hawks believe that the federal government never spends enough on the Pentagon. The U.S. should scale back its international responsibilities and cut Pentagon outlays accordingly.

Military expenditures are the price of Washington’s foreign policy. And the cost is high—about \$627 billion budgeted this year, before counting extra expenditures for the latest Mideast war.

The war lobby minimizes the magnitude of America’s military spending through statistical legerdemain. For instance, *National Review*’s editors argued that inflation-adjusted outlays are down 12 percent since 2010. *Washington Post* columnist Robert Samuelson noted that expenditures constitute just 3.4 percent of GDP, compared to 5.5 percent during the Cold War.

But the U.S. leads the world in military spending and is allied with every major industrialized state save China and Russia. America and its allies collectively account for two-thirds of the globe’s military expenditures.

While Washington’s inflation-adjusted outlays have fallen since 2011, they previously rose significantly—almost 165 percent between 1998 and 2011. It is only natural for expenditures to fall as Washington wound down two wars. In the future, expenditures are expected to stabilize above the level in 2007, hardly a time of American weakness.

Moreover, the percentage of GDP is irrelevant. Military spending should be based on the threat environment, not statistical ratios.

America’s GDP this year is almost seven times that in 1952, at the height of the Korean War. Today’s GDP is roughly 3.5 times that in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War and almost twice that in 1989, the peak of Ronald Reagan’s Cold War military build-up. Washington today spends more in real resources on the military than in any of those years.

Early in the Cold War Washington had good reason to bear much of the burden of defending the “free world.” But what President Ronald Reagan called an “Evil Empire” is long gone and nothing has replaced it. The fact that the world is dangerous does not mean it is particularly dangerous for Americans.

Terrorism remains the most pressing security threat, but does not pose an existential danger. Washington must spend better, not more, in response.

The People’s Republic of China is becoming more powerful, but is no replacement for the Soviet Union. Beijing is seeking regional, not global, influence and has no offensive designs on the U.S. homeland or even Washington’s Pacific territories.

Moreover, the PRC remains a relatively poor nation beset with economic and political challenges. It has but one ally, North Korea, while America is friends with most of Beijing’s neighbors. The U.S. remains well ahead of the PRC militarily.

Russia has reverted to a pre-1914 Great Power which is most concerned about border security and national respect. Moscow’s potential military ambitions are limited to its former republics. Europe alone has eight times the GDP and three times the population of Russia.

Beyond these two large powers there is no there there, as Gertrude Stein said of Oakland. North Korea should be contained by the Republic of Korea, which has roughly 40 times the North’s GDP. No one wants Iran to have nuclear weapons, but there is no evidence that it is suicidal and would strike America.

Syria’s implosion is of only minor relevance to U.S. security. The Islamic State eschewed terrorism in hopes of becoming a traditional government and has no ability to harm Washington other than killing Americans who fall into its hands.

Challenges in these and other nations may warrant some form of U.S. involvement, but not primarily military action. Too often Washington has squandered lives and resources in attempting to create stable, liberal democratic orders where none previously existed.

Mitt Romney declared that “our military is tasked with many more missions than those of other nations.” Actually, no one “tasks” America with such jobs. Rather, Washington takes on these roles voluntarily—indeed, shoves aside other nations while insisting that only the U.S. can save the planet. Yet why shouldn’t wealthy allies promote regional stability and protect trade routes?

Reducing Washington’s security objectives and armed forces does not mean becoming a pushover. The U.S. should maintain the world’s most powerful and innovative military on earth, and doing so won’t be cheap. But Washington could protect America while spending far less.

Washington’s policy of promiscuous foreign intervention would be foolish even if it was not costly. But it is both.

The U.S. should scale back its international objectives and adjust its force structure accordingly. Returning to a foreign policy of a republic would be both safer and cheaper.

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