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Yes, America Should Cut Defense Spending

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January 11, 2023

The brief stand-off between the House Republican leadership and scores of party rebels was widely seen as embarrassing dysfunction. However, the true ignominy is incoming Speaker Kevin McCarthy, a shameless Trump toady. The GOP holdouts pushed a number of sensible reforms, including cuts in military outlays.

The possibility of a partial roll-back in the bloated \$858 billion Pentagon spending bill approved last month, though still a long shot, is good news for beleaguered taxpayers, despite the wailing and gnashing of teeth by representatives of the military-industrial complex, and their political factotums—hawks ever-ready to subordinate all other U.S. interests to the military. Long ago the Washington foreign policy establishment was captured by the desire to dominate the world rather than defend the American people.

Defense Statements

Hysteria about the possibility of slowing the increase in Defense Department outlays is building from right to left on Capitol Hill. Former GOP Rep. Liz Cheney, whose father got out of Vietnam service, then turned uber-hawk and helped destroy Iraq, declared: “Ronald Reagan taught us that weakness is provocative. China and Russia are watching.” Centrist Democrat Rep. Abigail Spanberger went apocalyptic: “As the Chinese Communist Party is increasing its military spending, Ukraine is under siege, and Iran and North Korea are watching, cutting our nation’s defense spending is shortsighted and dangerous.” Tom Malinowski, a progressive Democrat defeated last November, was acerbic: “You can say all day to these people that if we gut defense spending and withdraw from global leadership, Putin and Xi Jinping will win, but they honestly don’t care.”

Even though Congress had greatly exceeded the administration’s request, the White House also denounced the measure. Presidential spokesman Andrew Bates complained that the new rules would make the U.S. “less capable of keeping the American people safe and advancing our national security interests.” Bates added: “This push to defund our military in the name of politics is senseless and out of line with our national security needs.”

U.S. Threats Beyond Our Borders

The fearmongers cited a cavalcade of deadly threats against which America, apparently helpless despite possessing the world's largest military, must further arm itself. Washington's enemies? Russia, which might launch its army across the Bering Strait once it finishes off Ukraine. China, set for a maritime invasion of the West Coast after conquering Taiwan. North Korea, ready to launch a nuclear first strike after conquering the South. And Iran, poised to confront America once it annihilates Israel, Saudi Arabia, and its other enemies. Then there are omnipresent terrorists, ready to infiltrate the U.S. and seize control of cities and states. Heck, maybe Americans should double or treble military outlays.

America began as a commercial republic, warned by President Thomas Jefferson to avoid "entangling alliances." President George Washington made much the same point in his famous Farewell Address: "nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded; and that, in place of them, just and amicable feelings towards all should be cultivated."

This advice helped the new nation navigate the seemingly endless wars of the European powers. However, by the end of the 19th century America's rising power, inflamed by such imperialist warmongers as Albert J. Beveridge and Theodore Roosevelt, led the U.S. into dubious foreign wars in both Asia and Europe. Personal ambition, not national interest, animated such misadventures.

Indeed, President Woodrow Wilson's maladroitness intervention in World War I, in which Americans had no recognizable interest at stake, set the stage for World War II. A vainglorious, arrogant fool, Wilson sacrificed tens of thousands of U.S. lives for his egotistical desire to remake the world, only to fail catastrophically, leading to an even worse conflict into which America was later dragged. Unfortunately, World War II greatly empowered the Soviet Union, forcing Washington's outsized role during the Cold War to contain communist expansion.

Post Cold War

The USSR's collapse freed the U.S., or at least should have, from its role as global guardian. The Soviet Union, Warsaw Pact, and Maoist China were gone. America's allies and friends had long recovered from previous wars. It was time to treat U.S. defense dependents as adults and shift military responsibilities to them. Instead, NATO acted as predicted by Public Choice economics, proposing ever more ridiculous duties, such as promoting student exchanges and battling illicit drugs, to stay in business, before deciding on out-of-area activities and expanding eastward, in violation of promises made to both Soviet and Russian officials. Allied hubris and dishonesty thus contributed to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

Washington spent the succeeding three decades with an inflated sense of power and destiny—believing the endless cant about America being the unipower, essential nation, indispensable power, and more. Yet contrary to former secretary of state Madeleine Albright's self-serving claim that she and fellow members of the Washington Blob "see further ... into the future," they intervened foolishly yet promiscuously. They ravaged multiple nations, caused the deaths of thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands, or even more, of others, wasted money prodigiously, about \$8 trillion, on "the global war on terrorism" alone, and left destruction and poverty in their wake.

Yet the bipartisan Washington War Party continues to engage in perpetual fear-mongering, claiming that the world is more dangerous than ever for America, as if the nation had not suffered through the Vietnam War, Cuban Missile Crisis, Cold War, Korean War, and World War II. In fact, the U.S. is the most secure great power ever, utterly dominating its own region and enjoying the protection of vast oceans east and west, and weak, pacific neighbors north and south.

America's Largest Threats

Only two powers, China and Russia, currently possess the means to reach around the world and target America's homeland, which would result in devastating retaliation. Washington is allied with every other major industrialized power. The main "threats" supposedly facing the U.S. today—China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, and assorted terrorists—mostly result from America being "over there."

Washington is not satisfied with its sphere of influence in the western hemisphere. Instead, U.S. policymakers insist on America's right to push its European alliance up to Russia's border and dominate Asian lands and waters bordering China. Imagine if either Moscow or Beijing attempted to do the same to the U.S.

Pyongyang threatens America only to the extent that Washington garrisons South Korea and rings the North with military bases and forces. Similarly, Tehran is an issue in Washington because the latter has circled it with bases, bombers, and ships on behalf of Iran's enemies, some of which, most notably Saudi Arabia, are both more oppressive and aggressive than Tehran.

As for terrorists, Washington's war-making has metastasized to 85 different countries. Why do so many people in so many places not only hate the U.S., but seek to harm its citizens? Most seek to retaliate for endless U.S. interventions abroad—backing dictatorial regimes, overthrowing democratic ones, supporting foreign occupations, droning and bombing various lands, and waging war against other peoples. Terrorism is a poor man's weapon, usually shootings and bombings in response to ground invasions and air attacks. It is so abhorrent because it targets noncombatants, but then, some terrorists make the same claim about Washington's efforts. Why wouldn't the families and friends of victims of American atrocities, such as the infamous Kabul drone strike—even if more careless than calculated—hate the U.S. and seek to punish its people?

Change Washington's behavior and most of its enemies would shrink if not disappear. Even before Russia's disastrous invasion of Ukraine, Moscow posed no threat to the U.S. Russia and America had no clash of vital interests: to the contrary, Vladimir Putin once had adopted a friendly stance toward Washington, being the first foreign leader to call President George W. Bush after 9/11. In any case, Moscow lacked a truly globe-spanning military and had no means to attack the U.S. other with than nuclear weapons, which would result in its own destruction.

Europe, with a much larger economy and population than Russia, long was capable of deterring whatever threat Moscow might pose. The Europeans just couldn't be bothered, since they could rely on defense welfare from America. Today, after a Russian attack on Ukraine which everyone assumed would take a couple weeks but is approaching a year of vicious combat, with no end in sight, fevered predictions of the revived Red Army overrunning the continent look not just overwrought but silly. Moscow might still defeat Kyiv, though that appears unlikely, but even

then any occupation would be a disaster. Certainly, the Russian military has proved that it is no juggernaut, capable of overrunning Europe and establishing a new empire. Now is the moment for the U.S. to get tough and insist that the Europeans take over responsibility for their own security. That requires America to start doing less.

Which leaves China. It does not directly threaten the U.S. Beijing doesn't plan a nuclear strike. It isn't going to stage an amphibious invasion or burrow through the earth to launch a surprise attack. If there is going to be war with China, it will be over Washington's determination to treat the Asia-Pacific as a U.S. sphere of interest. The American people should debate whether they believe imposing their will on that region is worth war and are willing to accept the high costs and risks of doing so, potentially forever.

In any case, the primary responsibility for defending the region should be borne by the nations located there. Japan is finally committed to substantially increasing military outlays, though it still has much more to do. Taiwan, the most likely target of Chinese military action, has the most to do, since it has been perhaps the most irresponsible of America's defense dependents, simply presuming Americans would fight and die to prevent foreign conquest. Worse, Taipei has spent its limited funds badly, on prestige weapons rather than defensive arms that could defeat a Chinese attack.

America Could Recalibrate Grand Strategy

However, it is not America's responsibility to tell friendly governments how they should behave. Rather, the U.S. should tell them what it is prepared to do on their behalf, limiting Washington's military liability. The rest would be up to them.

Such a concept obviously is a foreign to Washington hawks. One of the silliest responses to the rules changes came from Rep. Tony Gonzales (R-Tex.): "When you have aggressive Russia and Ukraine, you've got a growing threat of China in the Pacific—you know, I'm going to visit Taiwan here in a couple of weeks—how am I going to look at our allies in the eye and say, I need you to increase your defense budget, but yet America is going to decrease ours?"

Gonzales gets everything wrong. First, the U.S. already puts in *a much greater effort*, as measured by military outlays as a share of GDP, than *all of its allies* except Greece, which is arming against Turkey, not Russia. Second, the only way they will do more is if America does less—what conservative would constantly increase domestic welfare payments in order to convince recipients to work more? Third, other countries should spend more because *they, not we*, need them to do so. Europe, not America, fears a Russian attack. Taiwan, not the U.S., is threatened by China. Why shouldn't the nations most at risk do the most for their own defense?

It is not Washington's responsibility to garrison the world. Washington certainly shouldn't sacrifice U.S. security to subsidize endless defense dependents, especially those able to take over their own security. At least a few Republicans in the House apparently understand that Uncle Sam shouldn't double as Santa Claus. It is well past time to begin shifting, not sharing, allied defense burdens. The GOP rules debate is a small but important step in the right direction.

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