



Military Spending Is Not the Same as Defense Spending

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The world is a mess, and conservative politicians talk about increasing “defense spending.” This has obvious appeal. After all, who can be against defending the country?

The problem is that most of America’s military outlays have nothing to do with defense.

From 1789 to 1947, the US had a Department of War. So when Washington seized half of Mexico’s land and grabbed both Cuba and the Philippines from Spain – which required years more of combat to suppress local opposition – there was no implicit claim that these conflicts had anything to do with defending Americans.

Washington constantly intervened in Latin America, often for corporate interests. The famed Monroe Doctrine sought to exclude the Europeans, but not for the benefit of people in neighboring states. Rather, the purpose was to leave the region free for American military intervention.

Foolish, even moronic, was Washington’s intervention in World War I. That was an idiotic clash among imperial powers with nothing at stake for America. Woodrow Wilson’s formal justification for war, that Americans had an absolute right to travel on armed reserve naval cruisers carrying munitions through a war zone, such as the famed Lusitania, was beyond nonsensical, a perverse excuse for his hubristic determination to reorder the entire globe at the cost of some 117,000 American dead.

The conflict certainly was not a humanitarian cause.

The allies were no moral exemplars. Belgium was the world’s most brutal colonial overseer. Great Britain had the most extensive colonial empire. France was consumed by revanchist ambitions. Imperial Russia sought dominance of the Balkans. Italy was a rapacious jackal, promised territorial plunder in exchange for belligerence. Serbia was an aggressive, ethno-terrorist state.

The Central Powers were blameworthy but not uniquely villainous. Austria-Hungary feared its chances of surviving rising Balkan nationalism. Wilhelmine Germany worried about “encirclement” and felt compelled to support Vienna. The Ottoman Empire recognized that it was prey for the Entente powers.

At least World War II was defensive, even though the US was attacked by Japan *after* imposing a punitive oil embargo that was widely recognized as posing a direct challenge to Tokyo. And America was the target of a German declaration of war *after* the Roosevelt administration initiated an undeclared naval war in the Atlantic. Still, with the potential for either Nazi Germany or Communist U.S.S.R. dominating Eurasia, this conflict, an unfortunate outgrowth of Washington’s misbegotten intervention in World War I, posed a significant security threat to the US

World War II offered the backdrop for renaming the Department of War to the Department of Defense. Ironically, however, the first major conflict to follow, the Korean War, had no direct impact on America. Rather, inconsistent US policy – dividing the peninsula and then failing to arm the new nation that resulted – offered the best argument for US involvement, supplemented by fears about the impact of South Korea’s fall on other non-communist Asian states as the Cold War dawned.

Vietnam offered no serious security argument for taking over France’s failed colonial responsibilities. Washington also was involved in a variety of other third world conflicts, sometimes directly, other times backing local thugocracies, both dictatorships and insurgencies. The Cold War offered a thin patina to justify often grotesquely immoral US foreign interventions.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the new argument for war-making became “What we say goes.” We are good, we are powerful, we are America, so send in the Marines! Three decades later, however, this approach has lost any luster that it once had.

In the Balkans, Washington consciously ignored ethnic cleansing of large ethnic-Serbian populations from Croatia and Kosovo. The West’s determination to force antagonistic groups to live together in countries such as Bosnia failed to generate love, respect, and cooperation among them. Switching from relief work to catching warlords yielded “Black Hawk Down” in Somalia.

Two months ago, America’s two-decades long nation-building mission in Afghanistan, which supplanted the quickly fulfilled (and effectively defensive) mission of smashing al-Qaeda and ousting the Taliban, collapsed disastrously. Nothing done over the last 19 years could be construed as defensive in any normal sense of the word. Yet after the Kabul regime’s fall, Washington solons proposed reviving a civil war that already has lasted more than four decades.

In Syria, a country of far greater interest to Iran and Russia than America, Washington assisted jihadists who wanted to oust a sectarian dictator backed by religious minorities who had seen the same movie in Iraq and hated the ending. When forced to choose between a secular autocrat and murderous jihadists, many Syrians understandably preferred the former. Today the US is using

sanctions to starve Syrians in the name of trying, yet again, to force Assad from power to the benefit of still threatening Islamic radicals.

Washington helped blow up Libya, which posed no threat to America, leading to a civil war that went on for a decade and opened the country to the Islamic State. In Yemen, yet another nation irrelevant to US security, successive presidents aided the Saudi royals in slaughtering civilians and creating a humanitarian catastrophe. The Trump administration's chief objective was not defense, but increased arms sales for the ever-profitable merchants of death.

However, the mother of all (recent) disasters was Iraq, another decidedly non-defensive war. Rather, it was an aggressive conflict launched on a lie – that Iraq's Saddam Hussein held vast arsenals of weapons of mass destruction, which, like his previous chemical stocks produced with US aid, were ready for use against his neighbors. Moreover, Washington's invasion had catastrophic consequences: thousands of dead Americans, tens of thousands of wounded Americans, hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqis, and millions of displaced Iraqis. As well as sectarian war and the destruction of the Christian community and other religious minorities, not to mention the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq and then ISIS. Increased influence of Iran. And a thoroughly ravaged society.

Today none of the prospective wars currently talked about, including Russia (over Ukraine), Iran (over its nuclear activities), and China (over Taiwan) would be defensive. All these controversies are serious, but none directly threaten America. Worse, they involve two nuclear powers and one potential nuclear state. The costs of such conflicts could be catastrophic.

Equally powerful evidence of the Department of Defense's lack of defensive intent is America's global base presence. With roughly 750 installations in 80 countries, Washington is positioning itself to attack other states, not defend the U.S. Few bases protectively ring America. Instead, Washington is targeting Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and other nations. Unsurprisingly, they fear the ubiquitous US military presence and respond accordingly.

Defense is a necessary and honorable task. The Constitution explicitly makes that a responsibility of the national government. However, when the Framers authorized Congress to "provide for the common defense," they meant the United States, not the rest of the world.

Washington's policy making elite need to be reminded that the United States is their first priority. That would be helped by imposing truth in advertising on the Defense Department by returning its name to the Department of War. Today, unfortunately, Washington makes war far more often than it defends the American people.

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