



The American Military: It is not too small. Rather, its responsibilities are too many.

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Republicans typically argue that government is too big. But not when it comes to the military.

Many in the GOP seem to believe that the armed services can never be large enough. So they constantly beat the drums for a military build-up. In fact, one of the few issues today which unite President Donald Trump and Sen. John McCain is increasing military spending.

Unfortunately, when Washington debates the military, it usually is in budget terms. But it makes no sense to vote more or less money for the armed services without considering what it is expected to do. In effect, the Pentagon budget is the price of American foreign policy.

U.S. military outlays and foreign policy are out of balance today. Military hawks argue that America devotes too little to the armed services. But they are wrong to believe that Washington must continue doing everything it has been doing around the world — indeed, that it must do more, ever more.

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America remains the unipower, defending rich industrialized nations, rebuilding failed Third World states, and doing most everything in between. These are largely duties of choice rather than necessity. They are also choices the U.S. no longer can afford.

Coming out of World War II, Washington was forced to act as guardian of the free world, if not quite the universe. Western Europe and Japan had been ravaged by war; the Soviet Union had turned into an aggressive superpower with an Eastern European empire; a radical Communist revolution had transformed China. In response, America established a globe-spanning presence involving alliances, bases, and deployments.

But that world disappeared long ago. Both sides of the equation changed.

America's allies recovered in both Asia and Europe. Real Communism evaporated: the Soviet Union dissolved along with the Soviet Empire, and the "People's Republic" of China joined the capitalist world. Today, Europe possesses a larger economy and population than America and vastly larger than Russia. South Korea has about 40 times the GDP and twice the population of North Korea. After China's rise, Japan still enjoys the third largest economy on Earth.

Rather than permanently treat allied states as helpless dependents, the U.S. should shift responsibility for their defense to them. This is not burden-sharing, the unproductive argument over whether, for instance, European military outlays are hitting some arbitrary percentage of GDP. Instead, it is burden-shedding. Populous and prosperous states should take over their own defense. Rolling back defense commitments in Asia and Europe would allow the U.S. to downsize its force structure.

The U.S. also should drop its propensity for nation-building and regime change. Of America's recent interventions — Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan — only the latter advanced America's security interests, and only the initial overthrow of the Taliban. Nearly 16 years of nation-building have consumed American lives and wealth for no good purpose. The other wars did far more to spread chaos, weapons, and terrorism than encourage peace and stability. Washington should set a far higher bar for miscellaneous meddling, which would allow reliance on a smaller military more narrowly focused on the few essential tasks which only the U.S. can perform.

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An ancillary benefit of military restraint would be making fewer enemies and creating fewer terrorists. The causes of terrorism are complex, but it usually acts as war by other means. The more the U.S. bombs, invades, and occupies other nations, the more it encourages attacks on Americans and the American homeland. Washington must continue to kill or incapacitate those who mean America ill. But the U.S. also should act to create fewer enemies. Doing so would further reduce the need for military force structure and outlays.

Military retrenchment is not popular in the Republican Party. But America's coming financial infirmity may allow no other course. Absent a new sense of fiscal responsibility on Capitol Hill — don't laugh, miracles do happen! — annual federal deficits will hit a trillion dollars in just six years. The accumulated deficit over the coming decade will be \$9.4 trillion.

And that's the good news. The red ink becomes a tsunami in the following years. Federal debt as a percentage of GDP currently runs about 77 percent, the highest since the early post- World War II years. But the CBO warns that this percentage will double by 2047, higher than the levels in Greece before the latter's fiscal crisis.

The U.S. no longer can do it all overseas. It's time for Washington to shift to a foreign policy of restraint. Doing so would allow America to field a smaller military and spend less on the armed forces.

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