



Cut The Defense Budget....And Get Others To Do More

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American taxpayers, and especially American troops, have borne the burdens of policing the planet for decades. As the Super Committee contemplates possible reductions in military spending as part a deficit reduction deal, it should ask whether this pattern should continue. Washington, DC has become the de facto capital of the world's government, responsible not just for American security, but for the security of the globe. It is time to expect, and force, other countries to defend themselves.

Most Americans agree even if many in Washington do not. The debt crisis is likely to force a reckoning between these two diametrically opposed positions. How it is resolved remains an open question.

Cutting military spending without changing our foreign policies will put additional burdens on a force strained by a decade of war. Sticking with the status quo will translate into heavier burdens on U.S. taxpayers. If the powers-that-be inside the Beltway decide that we should continue to discourage wealthy allies from defending themselves, then they should explain that to the American people.

So far, they have been unwilling to do that. Politicians claim that U.S. security requires us to act as the lynchpin of the international order, that U.S. global economic interests require the U.S. military to be deployed to the four corners of the globe. Some believe that Americans are obligated to spread the blessings of liberty to others denied basic human rights.

These are ambitious goals. Achieving them costs a lot of money. The average American spends two and a half times more than the British or the French on national security, five times more than Germans, and seven and a half times as much as the average Japanese.

In the context of our current national debate over debt, deficits and out-of-control government spending, it shouldn't surprise if many Americans ask why they should accept cuts in domestic spending, and be saddled with more military spending, so that our allies can continue to spend on their domestic priorities, and, in many cases, cut defense spending.

The defenders of the status quo claim that there is no alternative. According to Hillary Clinton, these global commitments need to be “[embedded in the DNA](#).” But most Americans are fed up with building other people’s countries and fighting other people’s wars. Americans want security, but they doubt that we have to pay for everyone else’s to achieve our own.

Those who simply assume that others would not do more to defend themselves and their interests often ignore the extent to which U.S. actions have discouraged them from doing so. Just as some welfare recipients are often disinclined to look for work, foreign countries on the generous American security dole do not see a need to obtain military power. Our great power, and our willingness to use it, even when our own interests are not at stake, has allowed others to ignore possible threats, always confident that the United States will be there to rescue them.

The Obama administration’s rhetoric merely reinforces this message. The National Security Strategy, published in May 2010, declares “There should be no doubt: the United States of America will continue to underwrite global security.” Taking their cue, U.S. allies have proved understandably disinterested in military spending.

If we are serious about sharing the burdens of global security with other countries, we must change course. Washington should be more reticent to send our troops into harm’s way when our own vital interests are not at stake. And we should shape our military to reflect the fact that we expect to be less involved militarily over the next two decades than we have been in the last two. A leaner, more focused U.S. military can no longer be in the business of defending other countries that can and should defend themselves.

For too long, policymakers in Washington have been unwilling to go down that road. Many still are. Howard P. “Buck” McKeon, the chairman of the House Armed Service Committee, told a Washington audience a few weeks ago that he [would opt for tax increases over military spending cuts if forced to choose](#). McKeon assumes — or expects his constituents to — that our obligations to defend others are etched in stone.

They aren’t. McKeon and others should be looking for ways to reduce the burdens on our troops without imposing new burdens on American taxpayers. That begins with expecting other countries to do more.

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