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Is Obama Endangering the Military?

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President Obama has requested \$720 billion in spending for the military in 2011. Overall, defense spending has risen some 40 percent since 2001. But that apparently isn't enough to satisfy Obama's conservative critics. In an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal*, Arthur C. Brooks, Edwin J. Feulner and William Kristol [weigh in](#) ^[3] to declare that while entitlements need to be cut, defense spending should remain sacrosanct.

According to the authors,

We have not done enough to help our military preserve the peace and deter (and if necessary, defeat) our enemies. Americans have fought superbly in Iraq and Afghanistan, and have prevented any further terrorist attacks on the scale of 9/11. But faced with a nuclear Iran, or a Chinese People's Liberation Army that can deny access to U.S. ships or aircraft in the Asian-Pacific region, there are many missions ahead.

Obviously, America is not going to abandon its outposts overseas, no matter what the CATO Institute may urge on this website and elsewhere. For better or for worse, America appears to be permanently locked into the mindset of maintaining a vast array of overseas bases. Unless (or when) terminal decline sets in, the American empire is here to stay. There can be no doubting that American military power helps keep both Asia and Europe stable, thereby helping to ensure economic stability and prosperity.



But what "missions" in Asia do Brooks, Feulner and Kristol really foresee that would require even higher defense outlays--a land war with China, which is already subsidizing American budget deficits by buying up Treasury bills? This sounds closer to Neocon 101 than to a realistic assessment of the threats that America may face over coming decades, the most vexing one being the threat of terrorism. As for Iran, the American military could blow the country into smithereens. It isn't a question of sheer military power but the ability of Iran to shut down the Persian Gulf by sabotage that, among other things, has prompted Washington to proceed warily, whether it's the Bush or Obama administrations.

Finally, it's curious that self-described conservatives would be such prominent advocates of what amounts to military Keynesianism. The truth is that Washington will have to reduce both military spending and entitlements if the deficit is to be curbed. It's all well and good for Brooks, Feulner and Kristol to call for reductions in Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, but those are precisely the areas that many Republicans are declaring should remain untouchable. The idea that Congress "can make a difference here by insisting that the Obama administration endorse responsible defense budgets instead of throwing our money down the well of entitlement expansion" is risible. When was the last time that Congress ever showed any appetite for curbing entitlements--back in the era of the Hoover administration?

The unreality that hovers over the deficit debate is only increased by claims that Obama and, I guess, Defense Secretary Gates, who is trying to reduce a bloated Pentagon budget by, among other things, cracking down on outside contractors, are jeopardizing defense. It's reminiscent of the accusations that even modest trims to entitlement programs is a plot to gut them entirely. There's no reason the defense budget should be immune when it comes to reducing the deficit. Quite the contrary. The task of conservatives is to conserve. So far, they aren't doing a very good job when it comes to defense spending.

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