

Armed, overbearing and dangerous

US military spending is far too excessive for legitimate defense needs

By: Ted Galen Carpenter – May 3, 2013

Officials in both the Bush and Obama administrations have argued that China's military budget is excessive for the country's legitimate defense needs. But US military spending is vastly greater than that of China or any other country. Indeed, Washington's military budget for this year, including funding for the war in Afghanistan, is about six times Beijing's official defense budget. Given that China is located in a region with multiple security concerns while the US neighborhood is extremely stable and peaceful, it would seem that it is US military spending that is excessive for legitimate defense needs.

Such an overcommitment of resources to the military is unhealthy both for the US domestic economic health and for minimizing international conflicts. It places an undue burden on US taxpayers while making other countries uneasy and suspicious.

A new infographic from the Cato Institute shows just how wildly out of proportion Washington's military spending is to that of other countries. Perhaps the most striking statistic is that the US now accounts for 44 percent of all global military spending. Put another way, the US spends nearly as much on the military as the rest of the world combined. The outsized nature of such outlays is evident in other ways. Twenty percent of the US federal budget is devoted to military spending, while the average for US' NATO allies is a mere 3.6 percent. Five percent of US annual GDP is allocated to the military, but for the NATO countries, Japan and China, it is well below 2 percent.

Washington's exorbitant spending encourages allied countries to free ride on US security exertions and keep their own defense budgets lower than they might be otherwise, thereby freeing up financial resources for domestic priorities. Such a de facto subsidy understandably appeals to both the political leaders and the populations of those allies. However, that subsidy also encourages allied countries, especially the members of the European Union, to neglect security problems in their own region, expecting Washington to take care of them instead. And for nations that have an ambivalent or complicated relationship with the US, the effect of its bloated military spending is even more negative.

Big countries such as China, Russia and India have reason to wonder why US leaders give such high priority to increasing US military power when Washington already has a huge advantage in that area. For example, some journalists and foreign policy experts in the US express alarm about China's deployment of its first aircraft carrier. But the US has 11 carriers in its fleet - and an array of additional combat and support ships that make up the various carrier strike forces and battle groups. Not only does the US have far more carriers than any other country, most countries (most notably Britain and France) that deploy even a small number of such vessels are Washington's close allies.

Given its geo-strategic position and its daunting military capabilities, the US is probably the most secure great power in history. Its location is extraordinarily fortunate, with two large oceanic approaches guarding the country's eastern and western flanks and neighbors on its northern and southern borders that are both weak and friendly. Indeed, there is no serious military competitor anywhere in the western hemisphere. The notion of a large-scale conventional attack on the US from any source within the region or beyond is the material of paranoid fantasies. And if the great edge in US conventional forces was not sufficient to discourage an attacker, the US has a large, sophisticated nuclear arsenal and delivery system to act as the ultimate deterrent against any would-be aggressor.

Not only does the US reside in an extremely safe neighborhood, but the avowed adversaries it faces in other regions are unimpressive. They are either relatively weak countries such as Iran and Democratic People's Republic of Korea or motley non-state actors, primarily terrorist groups. Although such enemies often generate fear among the US people, they do not pose even a serious threat, much less an existential threat, to the US.

Given all its advantages, it is difficult for the US to justify keeping military spending at such elevated levels and building even more potent forces. Big countries that are not US allies could well suspect that Washington's underlying motive for continuing its vast military outlays is an attempt to intimidate potential competitors. Even the nature of most US combat units suggests that the primary purpose is projecting power across long distances, not defending the US homeland. Such a force structure can be justified as necessary for national defense only if one applies the broadest possible definition of that concept.

Smaller countries that are already on bad terms with the US have even greater cause to worry about Washington's motives. They harbor an ever present concern that they may become targets of forcible regime change, and since Washington adopted that strategy with respect to such nations as Iraq and Libya, it is not an irrational fear. US adversaries face a very unpleasant situation, since there is no way that they can defend themselves successfully against a concerted campaign by the US military juggernaut.

For them, the choice appears to be a stark one between capitulation to Washington's demands or acquiring a nuclear deterrent. The actions of the DPRK and Iran indicate that at least some countries may opt for the latter. In a classic case of unintended consequences, Washington's massive conventional military superiority, combined with a belligerent foreign policy, appears to have created perverse incentives for nuclear weapons proliferation, the last thing in the world that US leaders wanted.

Far greater restraint in US military spending would benefit both the US people and prospects for less confrontational relations between the US and others. Today the amount Washington spends on the military each year is \$2,300 (1,760 euros) a person in the US. The comparable obligation for the average NATO country is \$503 a person. For China it is less than \$200 a person.

That disparity imposes an enormous, needless financial burden on the US people. If US leaders did not insist on trying to micromanage the world's security affairs, meddling in every manner of local or regional quarrel, and attempting to prevent other powers from playing more substantial roles, US military spending could shrink dramatically - quite

possibly to less than half of current levels. And it could do so without endangering US core security and economic interests. A more modest defense budget might dilute Washington's influence in certain regions of the world, but that is a price worth paying.

Especially when the US government faces chronic, massive budget deficits and a growing debt problem, it is past time for US leaders to establish more prudent foreign policy priorities and prune unwise or unnecessary commitments and objectives. A shrewder security strategy would provide the basis for much lower levels of military spending. The US ought to adopt a new, reduced military budget that is appropriate for the country's legitimate defense needs instead of grandiose global ambitions.