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How Many Enemies, How Much Military Spending?

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Given a list of 18 potential enemies of the U.S., a majority of the American population rated only North Korea and Iran as adversaries. Other nations, ranging from Venezuela to China, came in far behind.

If the American people are right, what explains today's military budget?

The U.S. traditionally pursued a foreign policy and maintained a force structure appropriate for a republic. Not until World War I did Washington create the expeditionary military of a great power. And only during the latter half of the 20th Century did the American government deploy such a force during formal peacetime.

The justification for doing the latter was the threat of hegemonic communism: the Soviet Union, which kept the Red Army poised along the famed Iron Curtain; the Warsaw Pact, which corralled Eastern and Central European states on behalf of Soviet objectives; Maoist China, which posed an unpredictable threat to the war-weakened nations of East Asia; and a gaggle of Third World countries, which allied themselves with the U.S.S.R.

In the aftermath of the world's most destructive conflict, American military deployments around the globe were seen as necessary to contain the advance of communism. Even many advocates of limited government saw little alternative to maintaining outsized armed forces, a network of foreign bases, and numerous, often undemocratic client states.

Two decades ago this justification for America's anomalous, quasi-imperial system disappeared. The Soviet Union dissolved, the Warsaw Pact disbanded, China adopted the market, and Third World states jettisoned collectivism. Colin Powell famously observed that he was running out of enemies, being left with only North Korea's Kim Il-sung and Cuba's Fidel Castro--nasty characters, but pitiful replacements for Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong.

Yet the U.S. essentially has maintained its Cold War military. Defense spending dipped in the early 1990s, but real outlays merely dropped from the Reagan build-up back to the Cold War average. Since then military expenditures (the baseline budget excluding costs of Afghanistan and Iraq) have climbed to a peacetime record. America accounts for nearly half of the world's military outlays.

That is, Washington is spending more today on its military now than it did when the U.S. was confronting the Soviet Union, Warsaw Pact, Maoist China, and assorted Third World autocracies.

Whatever could justify such outlays?

It certainly isn't the power of America's enemies. The American people rightly rank North Korea and Iran as adversaries of the U.S. But neither state poses even a minor threat to America.

The so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea is an economic wreck; a half million or more people starved to death a decade ago. The regime is

largely friendless and faces a destabilizing leadership transition. Pyongyang's large military is antiquated; though the North is developing both missile and nuclear technologies, it has no present ability to attack the U.S. and, in any case, would be wiped out by any retaliatory strike.

Moreover, the DPRK is constrained by its neighbors. South Korea enjoys 40 times the economic strength, twice the population, and a vast technological advantage. By some measures, the South's military budget is as large as North Korea's entire GDP. With its more modern, efficient military, Seoul alone could defeat the North.

Iran is a military midget, at least compared to America. Tehran's estimated military outlays run about \$8 billion annually--less than two percent of America's level. Iran's military has been untested for two decades, and much of the Iranian security apparatus is directed at domestic repression. U.S. intelligence doesn't believe Iran has an active nuclear weapons program underway, though the regime's nuclear energy efforts might be aimed at creating a "turnkey" weapons capability. In any case, one American carrier group could do far more damage to Iran than the entire Iranian military could do to the U.S.

Moreover, Iran is constrained by its neighbors, including hostile Arab states. Even more significant is Israel, the dominant Middle Eastern military power, with as many as 200 nuclear warheads.

Obviously neither North Korea nor Iran justifies America's military outlays today. Even a better-armed North Korea and Iran would not justify America's military outlays today.

Who else, then? A gaggle of modestly hostile states--Cuba, Laos, Syria, Venezuela, and whoever else--are military nullities. The only real potential adversaries with meaningful military capabilities are Russia and China.

But the former is a declining power, whose geopolitical ambitions vastly exceed its capabilities. Moreover the European Union alone has ten times Russia's economic strength, three times Russia's population, and twice Russia's military budget. China's strength is on the rise, but it remains a relatively poor nation whose military remains far behind that of America. It will take years, even decades, for Beijing to fulfill its potential. One statistic alone captures America's dominance: the U.S. possesses 11 carrier groups, compared to one between China and Russia.

Washington spends as much as it does on the military to enable it to attack other nations, not defend itself. Most of America's outlays on "defense" have nothing to do with defense. The Pentagon really has become the Department of Offense.

The U.S. faces a much more benign security environment than during the Cold War. The world remains dangerous, but not particularly so for the U.S. Terrorism is evil, but does not pose an existential threat. Nuclear terrorism would be far more dangerous, but the production or acquisition of such weapons by non-state actors remains thankfully unlikely.

Moreover, this risk actually is exacerbated by a more imperious and interventionist foreign policy. Far more effective in combating terrorism is improved intelligence, international cooperation, use of special forces, and such non-military tactics as drying up terrorist funding.

The changed international security environment should lead to a change in U.S. force structure and military outlays. America's business should be defense, not offense. Especially at a time of economic crisis and budget stringency, the U.S. should bring its military establishment into alignment with its defense needs.

The American people recognize what Colin Powell told us a few years ago: the U.S. is running out of (serious) enemies. It is time to cut the military budget accordingly.

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