



Save Money by Ending Costly Alliances

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by Ivan Eland

Continued U.S. economic sluggishness, induced by a massive national debt in excess of \$15 trillion, should be causing soul-searching in the American foreign policy community about which unnecessary alliance commitments can be shed to save money. Yet, predictably, interest groups supporting empire continue to tout “American leadership” in “strategic” regions of the world.

For example, at a recent forum titled “America: New Energy Superpower?” at the [Center for the National Interest](#)—a somewhat restrained source of foreign policy analysis, by U.S. standards—one presenter declared that the United States should continue to defend Persian Gulf oil because no other country had the ability to do it. I noted that if the United States continues to provide other nations’ security, they have no incentive to provide their own. After all, if someone offered to pay your mortgage, why would you pay it? Furthermore, even in the absence of military power to protect Persian Gulf oil, petroleum supplies are unlikely to be permanently reduced or cut off even if a war occurs in the region.

Oil is a lucrative business, and higher prices provide a great incentive for Persian Gulf and other oil producers to find a way to get their oil to market. Finally, modern developed economies have shown their resilience when faced with high oil prices, and classical economists of the 18th and 19th centuries showed that empire was not cost-effective—that is, it is cheaper to simply pay episodically higher prices for things such as oil than to build even more expensive military forces to secure something that doesn’t need securing. But empire is more “patriotic” and “glamorous” than common sense. Even if some armed might is needed in the Gulf, the wealthy Gulf nations can afford to provide more of it than they do. They provide so little now because the United States is willing to cover the bill.

Similarly, a recent report on the much-touted air war to oust Libya’s leader Moammar Gadhafi showed that our NATO allies remain deficient in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, logistical assets such as refueling tankers, and precision guided weapons. The allies have again pledged to correct some of these longstanding failures, but even if they fulfill their promises this time—which is problematic given that the health of most of their economies is worse than that of the U.S.—it will take years. They are in no hurry because the United States has provided such assets whenever the alliance goes to war: again, why pay when someone else is paying? This episode illustrates that the United States continues to subsidize reasonably wealthy allies around the world who face poorer adversaries.

That is certainly the case with U.S. policy toward Korea. South Korea now has more than 40 times the GDP of the North. And destitute, Communist North Korea’s long history of engaging in unpredictable, belligerent saber-rattling to gain more food aid and cash from the West has been repeated so many times that the United States should have learned by now. Of course, hawks say that taking a harder line against the North would produce better results. For example, the United Nations Security Council just imposed more sanctions after North Korea attempted to launch a long-range rocket, thereby allegedly violating an agreement to suspend its nuclear and missile programs in exchange for more Western food aid.

Yet the North Koreans are developing long-range missiles principally to threaten the United States because it militarily supports, with troops on the ground, their South Korean nemesis long after South Korea could afford to defend itself. If the United States left South Korea to provide for its own security, faraway North Korea would have little reason to target the U.S. with whatever weapons and delivery means it developed. Thus, why should the United State continue to beat its head against a wall trying to bribe North Korea to be nicer? That is South Korea’s problem, and if the militarily incompetent North could ever successfully marry a nuclear weapon to a long-range missile, it likely would be deterred from any attack on the United States by the most powerful nuclear arsenal in the world.

Even in tranquil Europe, more than two decades after the Cold War ended, the U.S. still has 40,000 troops. That total will drop to about 30,000 by 2015, but the United States just can't bring itself, no matter how low the threat, to completely withdraw its imperial military presence from anywhere.

Finally, Israel is richer than its foes and has 200 to 400 nuclear weapons, so why should the U.S. continue to give that wealthy nation \$3 billion a year in military assistance?

In all of these areas—the Persian Gulf and the Middle East, East Asia, and Europe—the financially strapped American Empire can no longer afford to provide unnecessary and camouflaged welfare to rich allies.

***Ivan Eland** is Senior Fellow and Director of the **Center on Peace & Liberty** at **The Independent Institute**. Dr. Eland is a graduate of Iowa State University and received an M.B.A. in applied economics and Ph.D. in national security policy from George Washington University. He has been Director of Defense Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, and he spent 15 years working for Congress on national security issues, including stints as an investigator for the House Foreign Affairs Committee and Principal Defense Analyst at the Congressional Budget Office. He is author of the books **Partitioning for Peace: An Exit Strategy for Iraq**, and **Recarving Rushmore**.*