

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Embracing Threatlessness

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January 31, 2012

It is often said, even by many of his admirers, that at any one time Newt Gingrich will have one hundred ideas, of which five are pretty good. Falling into the latter category was his [remark](#) last week that defense budgets “should be directly related to the amount of threat we have.”

Although Gingrich, on his 95 percent side, imagines many [dire dangers](#), it seems to me that the United States lives in an environment that is substantially free from threats that require a great deal of military preparedness. (A more extended discussion is [here](#).)

To begin with, as Christopher Fettweis [has impressively argued](#), it really seems time to consider the consequences of the fact that, although there is no physical reason why a conflict like World War II cannot recur, developed countries, reversing the course of several millennia, no longer envision war as a sensible method for resolving their disputes. Prestige now comes not from prowess in armed conflict but from economic progress and from putting on a good Olympics. Spending a lot of money preparing for an eventuality—or fantasy—of ever-receding likelihood is a highly questionable undertaking.

Some envision threat in China’s rapidly increasing prosperity on the grounds that it will necessarily come to invest considerably in military hardware and then use it to carry out undesirable military adventures. Essentially, this argument holds that it would be better if the country were to wallow in poverty. But, although its oft-stated desire to incorporate (or reincorporate) Taiwan into its territory should be watched, China is increasingly becoming what Richard Rosecrance [has called](#) a “trading state.” Armed conflict would be extremely—even overwhelmingly—costly to the country and, in particular, to the regime in

charge. Chinese leaders, already rattled by internal difficulties, seem to realize this. The best bet is that this condition will hold.

There is also alarm over such rogue states, or devils du jour, as Iran and North Korea. It might make some sense to maintain a containment and deterrent capacity to be carried out in formal or informal coalitions with concerned neighboring countries. However, neither country is militarily impressive, and the military requirements for effective containment and deterrence are limited. And it should be remembered that the ultimate contemporary rogue adventure, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, was rare to the point of being unique in the post-1945 world, that a large effort was scarcely needed to rout its pathetic army and that, in the unlikely event of another such episode, there would be plenty of time to build forces up should other measures fail to deal with the problem.

There may be allies out there to protect, but the most important ones, those in Europe, not only seem to face few threats of a military nature but also are likely capable of dealing with just about any that should emerge. And whatever the conditions of American military spending, it would be foolish for either Israel or Taiwan to assume that the United States will ride to the rescue should they come under severe military pressure. The Taiwan/China issue remains a fairly remote concern for the reasons already suggested. Israel's primary problems derive from the actions of substate groups, and it already has a sufficient nuclear capacity to deter anything but an absolutely suicidal Iran.

The terrorism "threat" has dominated the last decade, but judging from information obtained from Osama bin Laden's lair, al-Qaeda consists of a tiny band primarily occupied by dodging drone-missile attacks, complaining about the lack of funds and watching a lot of pornography. To the degree that terrorism requires a response, it does not call for large military operations but for policing and intelligence work and perhaps for occasional focused strikes conducted by small units.

It also seems unlikely that the United States needs substantial military forces-in-being to be prepared to police destructive civil wars or to depose regimes that, either out of incompetence or viciousness, are harming their own people. There is a low tolerance for casualties in such ventures, an increasing aversion to the costs and difficulties of nation building and little or no political gain from success.

In the unlikely event that the piracy problem becomes severe, it does not require large forces and could be dealt with by newly formulated ones designed for the purpose. Nor is military force particularly relevant for such lurking concerns as oil dependence, global warming, the perpetual Palestine/Israel dispute, economic travail and imbalance, or the much-feared invasion by cybergeeks.

It may be prudent to maintain some rapid-response forces and a small number of nuclear weapons. And it also seems sensible to create something of a capacity to rebuild quickly should a sizable threat eventually actually begin to materialize. However, given the essential threatlessness of the current world condition to the United States, to spend half a trillion dollars yearly to cover unlikely fantasies borders—indeed, considerably oversteps—the profligacy line.

Like the approaches of [Christopher Preble](#) and [Benjamin Friedman](#), my perspective does not arise from pacifism, nor is it isolationist. It simply applies Gingrich's wise and sensible test to military spending. Large military forces-in-being, it seems, fail to be required in the current and likely threat environment but not necessarily in all possible ones. And there is no suggestion that the United States should withdraw from being a major and constructive world citizen. There would, of course, be risk in very substantially reducing the military, but there is risk as well in maintaining forces-in-being that can be impelled into action with little notice and in an under-reflective manner. After all, if the country had no military in 1965, it could not have wandered into Vietnam, and the lives of fifty-five thousand Americans would have been spared. If it had no military in 2003, it would never have ventured into the Iraq fiasco and several thousand Americans (and a hundred thousand Iraqis) would still be alive. And had the country needed more time to mobilize (and therefore think) in the wake of 9/11, it might possibly have employed reactive measures more likely to have been [effective at lower cost](#).