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Christopher Preble: Why does U.S. pay for properous allies?

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For some time now, Republican hawks like Sen. John McCain and Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon have been saying that our military budget is inadequate for the threats we face. They like to gripe that President Barack Obama is orchestrating the decline of American power.

Some of this is pure partisanship. Republicans criticize Democrats just as Democrats criticized President George W. Bush. The hawks, though, have a special devotion to the military budget. In their view, some military spending is good; more is even better. But if overspending on the military and promoting the United States as global policeman are benchmarks of

approval, they should have little to complain about with our current president.

Contrary to his rhetoric of change, the president sounded like a neoconservative when he declared during his recent State of the Union address that the United States was, and would remain, the world's "indispensable nation." Obama's proposed Pentagon budget, released last week, affirmed his intention to retain most of the U.S. military's current missions, even when they aren't needed to safeguard the United States' vital security interests.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon's latest strategy document was carefully designed to convince allies and adversaries alike that the United States can continue to prosecute multiple armed conflicts in far-flung corners of the globe. Taken together, Obama's strategy document, budget and State of the Union remarks articulate a coherent philosophy on military spending and global engagement that ought to hold a lot of appeal for the neoconservatives in the GOP.

But partisan politics aside, what our foreign policy leaders have consistently ignored is an argument that should have strong sway at a time of economic uncertainty: This country's tax dollars can be better spent than on defending wealthy allies who are more than capable of protecting themselves.

The administration plans to withdraw some U.S. troops from Europe, but as many as 70,000 are likely to remain. Meanwhile, the number of troops in Asia will be increased. These troops serve to reassure our allies of our commitment to defend them. It is working as designed: Other countries do not spend enough to satisfy their defense needs.

The end result is that Americans pay more. The Obama administration's budget will cost every American nearly \$2,000 next year. The figure rises by hundreds of dollars when one accounts for homeland security, payments to veterans, and the few billion dollars tucked away in the Department of Energy for the nation's bloated nuclear arsenal. All told, every American will likely shell out more than \$2,700 on spending classified as national defense. That is at least 2½ times what the British spend, five times more than what the Germans spend, and six times what the Japanese spend.

It is hard to see how that is good news for Americans struggling to make ends meet. Obama's magnanimity is especially ironic given his emphasis on "fairness" and "shared sacrifice." His rhetoric apparently does not apply to people living outside the United States. American troops will continue to be tasked with policing the world, and American taxpayers will be on the hook to pay for it.

The administration has proposed to restrain the growth of military spending. But total U.S. military spending will remain well above pre-9/11 levels. The Obama administration is requesting \$525 billion for the Pentagon's

base budget in 2013, plus another \$88.4 billion to pay for the war in Afghanistan. To put this in perspective, that is more than the annual average during Ronald Reagan's time in office (about \$526 billion in today's dollars). One seldom hears GOP hawks speak of Reagan as a misguided dove who left the country vulnerable to attack.

Focusing only on budget numbers, however, misses the big picture. Instead, we must focus on what we will spend and why. The answer is clear: Our military budget is large by historical standards because Washington is unwilling to revisit the premise that Americans are responsible for everything that happens in the world, even things that have no connection to American security or prosperity.

Our fiscal crisis has created an opportunity to revisit our commitments abroad. We should focus American power on our core interests, and call on other countries to take responsibility for their own defense.

Intuitively, that exercise should satisfy both liberal demands that "everyone pay their fair share" and conservative demands that our government "live within its means." But given the rhetoric we have heard so far, it is doubtful that this election cycle will produce a leader who will seriously contemplate how we can most prudently provide for our common defense.

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