

Forbes

Republican Party Hawks Demand More Military Spending Than During The Cold War; Washington Should Stop Squandering "Defense" Dollars To Protect Other Nations

By Doug Bandow
October 20, 2014

America accounts for nearly 40 percent of globe's military outlays, but Republican Party hawks believe that the federal government never spends enough on the Pentagon. The war lobby's mantra always is more, much more.

Yet the U.S. already devotes far more than it should to "defense," which today largely means protecting wealthy allies who prefer to spend their money on domestic goals. Washington should scale back its international responsibilities and cut Pentagon outlays accordingly.

Military expenditures are the price of Washington's foreign policy. And the cost is high—about \$627 billion budgeted this year, though it will end up higher with the latest Mideast war. This at a time when the American government is effectively bankrupt. Despite a falling deficit, Washington faces future unfunded liabilities exceeding \$200 trillion.

The more U.S. officials want to do militarily, the more they must spend on the military. Columnist Robert Samuelson rightly complained that Defense Department outlays today are being driven by budget concerns, "increasingly disconnected from our strategic interests and potential threats." It is foolish to make commitments without providing the manpower and materiel necessary to follow through. Then Americans may die fighting losing wars. Washington should rationalize its strategic objectives first.

But military expenditures should be cut. The war lobby minimizes the magnitude of America's military spending through statistical legerdemain. For instance, *National Review's* editors argued that inflation-adjusted outlays are down 12 percent since 2010. *Washington Post* columnist Robert Samuelson noted that expenditures constitute just 3.4 percent of GDP, compared to 5.5 percent during the Cold War, and the percentage is headed downward.

But Washington does not spend in isolation. It is allied with every major industrialized state save China and Russia, including Europe, Japan, and South Korea. Other allies include Australia, Israel and the Gulf States. Friendly powers include Singapore and Taiwan. The U.S. leads the world in military spending. Of the next fourteen nations, ten are allies, two are independent (Brazil, India), and two are potential antagonists (China, Russia). America and its allies collectively account for two-thirds of the globe's military expenditures.

While Washington's inflation-adjusted outlays have fallen since 2011, they previously rose significantly—almost 165 percent between 1998 and 2011. It is only natural for expenditures to fall as Washington wound down two wars. Even today the U.S. spends more on the military in constant dollars than in 2008. In the future outlays are expected to stabilize above the level in 2007, hardly a time of American weakness.

Moreover, the percentage of GDP tells us little about real resources without taking into account the size of the economy. Samuelson warned that by 2019 the outlays per GDP ratio would fall below that in 1940. However, military spending should be based on the threat environment, not statistical ratios. The GDP today is 13 times the GDP in 1940; spending even an equal percentage would yield 13 times the real resources.

America's GDP this year is more than seven times that in 1944, at the height of World War II and nearly seven times that in 1952, at the height of the Korean War. Today's GDP is roughly 3.5 times that in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War and almost twice that in 1989, the peak of Ronald Reagan's Cold War military build-up. Washington today spends more in real resources on the military than in any of those years except 1944. Real outlays today are about two-thirds the level even then, during America's greatest war.

American military expenditures have been outsize since U.S. entry into World War II. Early in the Cold War Washington had good reason to bear much of the burden of defending the "free world." America possessed the world's largest economy; the U.S. homeland had been largely untouched by conflict; most allied states had been ravaged by the worst war in history. Washington "contained" the Soviet Union, providing a shield behind which friendly states sheltered as they recovered economically.

But what President Ronald Reagan called an "Evil Empire" is long gone and nothing has replaced it. Former presidential nominee Mitt Romney recently denounced as "ludicrous" the idea the world was less dangerous than before, citing "Ukraine, Afghanistan, Libya, Egypt, Gaza, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria and Iraq." But which of these tragedies actually threatens Americans? Neoconservatives and other interventionist hawks act as if America is weak, endangered, and embattled at every turn, threatened by pipsqueak powers and decrepit dictatorships. However, as Secretary of War Henry L. Simson declared, Americans "must act in the world as it is," not as the uber-hawks imagine it to be. Contra the hyperbolic assumptions of the war lobby, the fact that the world is dangerous does not mean it is particularly dangerous for Americans. In fact, threat environment against the U.S. actually is relatively benign.

Terrorism remains the most pressing security threat, but does not pose an existential danger. Hostile individuals and groups still might threaten to kill in the tens, hundreds, or

possibly thousands, but America was far more vulnerable to attack throughout much of its history, including most recently during some very hot conflicts and the Cold War. Washington must spend better, not more, in response to terrorism.

The People's Republic of China is becoming more powerful, but is no replacement for the Soviet Union. The PRC is seeking preeminence in its own region, rather like the U.S. has in North America; Beijing is not seeking global hegemony and waging a hostile ideological campaign against America. China has no offensive designs on the U.S. homeland or even Washington's Pacific territories. The U.S. remains well ahead of the PRC militarily. Beijing's principal objective is to prevent Washington from coercing China along its border and in its neighborhood. America's oversize influence is advantageous, but not essential for American security.

Moreover, the PRC remains a relatively poor nation beset with economic and political challenges. It has but one ally, North Korea, and is surrounded by countries with which it has been at war: Russia, Japan, India, South Korea, and Vietnam. In contrast, America is allied with several of Beijing's neighbors, and many other regional states increasingly fear China and hope to constrain it.

Russia has reverted to a pre-1914 Great Power which is most concerned about border security and national respect. While Moscow is attempting to compete diplomatically with Washington in the Middle East and elsewhere, its potential military ambitions are limited to its former republics. Russia's behavior toward Ukraine is atrocious, but the U.S. and Europe erred turning that nation into a field of geopolitical competition. More important, Kiev's status matters much more to the Europeans than to Americans. And Europe alone has eight times the GDP and three times the population of Russia, as well as a larger economy and population than the U.S.

Beyond these two large powers there is no there there, as Gertrude Stein said of Oakland. North Korea threatens America because American troops are on its border. Pyongyang should be contained by the Republic of Korea, which has roughly 40 times the North's GDP. No one wants Iran to have nuclear weapons, but there is no evidence that it is suicidal and would strike America. Syria's implosion matters to the region and is a humanitarian tragedy, but is of only minor relevance to U.S. security. The Islamic State eschewed terrorism in hopes of becoming a traditional government and has no ability to harm Washington other than killing Americans who fall into its hands. Many other nations also concern America, but none pose dire security threats. Such challenges may warrant various forms of U.S. involvement, but not primarily military action.

Most of the Pentagon's recent military missions have done little to advance important let alone vital U.S. interests. The Europeans, South Koreans, and Japanese are well able to defend themselves. Attempting to establish democracy in the tragic nation of Afghanistan is a Quixotic quest. Running an anti-Serb campaign in the Balkans was foolish and did nothing to advance American security. Invading Iraq proved to be disastrously counterproductive: President George W. Bush unintentionally empowered Iran, unleashed sectarian conflict, and created the Islamic State. Military intervention in Somalia, Syria, Haiti, and more has rarely turned out well. The campaign against the Islamic State so far has been a disappointment.

Worst is nation-building. The Foreign Policy Initiative complained that with ongoing spending reductions the armed services “will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations.” Then the U.S. “will no longer be prepared to win the peace afterwards.” Alas, such actions have turned out badly in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo. Washington has squandered lives and resources in attempting to create stable, liberal democratic orders where none previously existed.

The U.S. should distinguish between defense and social engineering. Experience demonstrates that it is virtually impossible to remake failed societies, bring stability to chaotic lands, impose peace on warring parties, and transcend ethnic, religious, ideological, historical, and cultural differences.

But Washington always attempts to do more. Mitt Romney declared that “our military is tasked with many more missions than those of other nations.” Actually, no one “tasks” America with such jobs. Rather, Washington takes on these roles voluntarily—indeed, shoves aside other nations while insisting that the U.S. and only the U.S. is able prevent a new Dark Ages from enveloping the planet. Just as God cares when a sparrow falls to earth, Uncle Sam worries about wars and rumors of war, as well as every election, coup, insurrection, riot, demonstration, and almost every other event everywhere else around the world.

For this reason military big spenders insist that Washington must preserve the international order. For instance, Michele Flournoy and Eric Edelman, of the Center for a New American Security and Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, respectively, argued that U.S. military power “keeps key trade routes open, maintains stability in vital regions, such as the Persian Gulf and sustains alliances that serve U.S. and global interests.”

However, who is seeking to shut key trade routes? And why shouldn’t American allies which rely even more on trade—Germany and Japan, for instance—share this burden? When has the Middle East been stable and when has U.S. intervention, especially military action, promoted stability? In fact, the invasion of Iraq, dismemberment of Yugoslavia/Serbia, promiscuous drone strikes on Pakistan and Yemen, and ouster of Libya’s Moammar Qaddafi all have been highly destabilizing.

Finally, Washington’s alliances are uniformly one-sided: America defends prosperous and populous allies whose primary responsibility is to be defended. Flournoy and Edelman cited a report by the National Defense Panel in arguing that “The U.S. military must be able to deter or stop aggression in multiple theaters, not just one, even when engaged in a large-scale war.” Why shouldn’t wealthy nations with much more at stake in their own futures be expected to deter or stop aggression? The Europeans far outrange Russia; South Korea dramatically outpaces North Korea. Japan can deter China and promote regional stability. Israel is the Middle East’s dominant military power.

During the Cold War almost everything was tied to the larger U.S.-USSR struggle. But today individual conflicts and controversies have far less global impact. Most of what Washington does in the name of “defense” has little to do with protecting America and everything to do with defending/subsidizing/rebuilding other states.

Reducing the ambition of Washington's national security objectives and size of America's armed forces does not mean becoming a pushover. The U.S. should maintain the world's most powerful and innovative military on earth, and doing so won't be cheap. Especially since the Pentagon is not known for spending money well—indeed, for many officials increasing outlays has become a substitute for effective action. The military should use funds more effectively. Flournoy and Edelman suggested targeting compensation and benefits, acquisition costs, excess infrastructure, particularly bases, and expenses for civilians and contractors. Moreover, force structure should be reconfigured to fit a role more akin to defender of last resort rather than meddler of first resort.

America does not spend too little on the military. Rather, Washington attempts to do too much with the amount that it spends on the military. America's policy of promiscuous foreign intervention would be foolish even if it was not costly. But it is both.

The U.S. should scale back its international objectives and adjust its force structure accordingly. Returning to a foreign policy of a republic would be both safer and cheaper.

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