

Military spending — for what?

By DOUG BANDOW

WASHINGTON — The United States dominates the globe militarily. The threats facing America pale compared to its capabilities. Why, then, is Washington spending so much on the military?

In 2010 the U.S. will spend roughly \$700 billion on the military. This is an increase of 2 percent (after inflation) from the Obama administration's original nonwar defense budget of \$534 billion.

Despite initial plans for zero growth in defense spending in coming years, there are rumors that the Department of Defense will receive a 2 percent increase in real outlays through 2015. Still, some conservatives want to enshrine a military buildup in a law mandating fixed outlays at 4, 5 or even 6 percent of gross domestic product. Hawks focus on the percentage of GDP going to the military — currently about 4.4 percent — since that figure has fallen over the years.

America spends more inflation-adjusted dollars on the military today than at any time since the end of World War II. Figured in 2000 dollars, the U.S. devoted \$774.6 billion to the military in 1945, the final year of World War II. In 1953, the final year of the Korean War, military outlay ran to \$416.1 billion. Expenditure during the Vietnam War peaked at \$421.3 billion in 1968.

By contrast, in 2010 — even before the Afghan surge and other unplanned expenditure — the administration expected to spend \$517.8 billion. That's more than during the lengthy, but often warm, Cold War.

Expenditure as a percentage of GDP has fallen because the U.S. economy has grown. GDP in 2010 (in 2000 dollars) will run to about \$11.7 trillion. That is almost twice as much as in 1986, more than three times as much as in 1968, and nearly six times as much as in 1953.

Military outlay should be tied to threats, not economic growth. Can anyone credibly claim the military threat facing America is two, three, or six times as great today as during those years?

Today the U.S. does not face a significant military threat. As Colin Powell famously declared in 1991 when chairman of the Joint Chiefs of

Staff: "I'm running out of enemies. I'm down to Castro and Kim Il Sung."

The U.S. has no great power enemies. Relations with China and Russia are at times uneasy, but not confrontational, let alone warlike.

Washington is allied with every other industrialized state.

America possesses the most sophisticated nuclear arsenal and the most powerful conventional force. Washington's reach exceeds that of Rome and Britain at their respective peaks. Other nations, most notably China, are stirring, but it will take years before they match, let alone overtake, the U.S.

Even subtracting the costs of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars leaves American military outlay around five times that of China and 10 times that of Russia. Combine a gaggle of adversaries, enemies and rogues — Burma, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Syria — and the U.S. spends perhaps 25 times as much.

The United States is not alone. The European Union has 10 times the GDP and three times the population of Russia. Military outlay by the U.S. plus its NATO allies accounts for about 70 percent of world military spending. Add in America's other allies and friends, such as South Korea, and the total share of global military outlay hits 80 percent.

In short, Washington spends what it spends not to defend America but to maintain the ability to overpower other nations. But it will become increasingly expensive for America to preserve the ability to attack countries like China.

Terrorism remains a pressing security threat. However, terrorist attacks, though horrid, do not pose an existential danger. Al-Qaida is no replacement for Nazism and Communism, nuclear-topped ICBMs and armored divisions.

Nor is traditional military force the best way to combat terrorism. Indeed, foreign intervention often promotes terrorism, like swatting a hornet's nest. America's military spending is determined by its foreign policy.

America's commitments are a matter of choice. They don't make sense today. Engagement is good, but military force is not the only form of engagement. And any international involvement must balance costs and benefits. Adjusting commitments would allow a vastly different, and less expensive, force structure. The U.S. could make significant cuts and still maintain the globe's strongest and most sophisticated military — one well able to defend Americans.

Even Secretary of Defense Robert Gates acknowledges that "resources

1/19/2010

Military spending — for what? | The Ja...

are scarce." Washington must reorder its priorities. That means cutting back on the U.S. government's role abroad. American primacy is bound to diminish. Decisions as to how and at what rate this occurs should be made by Washington, not forced by events.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, is the author of several books, including "Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire" (Xulon). This article is adapted from Reason.org.

The Japan Times: Tuesday, Jan. 19, 2010

(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)