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U.S. Wastes Money on Weak Allies

By [Doug Bandow](#)

It's always better not to fight alone. Presumably that's why Washington has paid small states to fight on America's behalf. Alas, it's a wasteful policy which has encouraged countries to neglect their own defense. The Obama administration is continuing to expand U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Yet the military is stretched: American personnel have been in battle and on occupation duty continually since late 2001. Military outlays run roughly \$700 billion and, adjusted for inflation, exceed spending at any point during the Korean, Vietnam and Cold Wars.

Moreover, international support for America's wars is ebbing. Although Washington enjoyed more backing for attacking Afghanistan than invading Iraq, fatigue is affecting America's closest allies. Countries like Canada intend to withdraw their contingents and even heretofore steadfast Great Britain is debating its commitment.

In an attempt to pump up the number of allied personnel, Washington plans to rent support from a gaggle of small states which have contributed about 1,300 troops, or about one percent, of the total troops in Afghanistan.

The Pentagon currently runs a \$350 million program to improve anti-terrorism capabilities of allied powers. Much of the money has been earmarked for Yemen, a source of terrorist attacks on the United States.

Another \$50 million is being directed to Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia and Lithuania. Exactly what they have to do with terrorism is less clear, since none of them has ever been targeted by al-Qaeda.

The money will mostly go to purchase equipment, with some funds spent on training to deal with roadside explosives. The Pentagon rejects charges that the money is "bribery," but it's hard to see what else Washington is buying.

Rick Nelson of the Center for Strategic and International Studies argues: "at the end of the day, we're asking these allies to join us and we want them to be valuable partners. And some lack the resources to be partners in ways we need them to do so."

Why, however, does the United States want Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, and Lithuania as partners in Afghanistan? Not to be unkind, but why bother? None are serious military powers offering serious military forces. Most embarrassing was the Bush administration's "Coalition of the Willing," a

group of 49 supposedly essential allies which backed the war in Iraq.

Six didn't even have a military. Another 39 contributed nothing to the war. Among the global leaders backing up America were Albania, El Salvador, Eritrea, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Tonga, and Uzbekistan. Only Australia, Denmark, Great Britain, and Poland contributed military forces, and only Britain's contingent was substantial.

Aid money flowed freely, however. Salon's Laura McClure talked of the "Coalition of the Billing."

The shameless effort to buy political cover for the George W. Bush administration brought to mind President George H.W. Bush's campaign to win support for his war against Iraq. Egypt, Iran, Syria, and Zaire all received aid, debt forgiveness or other economic benefits to win their support.

Secretary of State James Baker told Yemen's UN ambassador after voting against the Security Council resolution authorizing war against Iraq in October 1990: "That was the most expensive 'no' vote you ever cast." The United States immediately suspended a \$70 million aid program. (Since then Yemen has become an expensive client state hooked on Washington's money.)

A number of nations subsequently contributed occupation troops, with a few European states providing low thousands. Most of the contingents barely registered, however: 24 Moldovans, 29 Kazakhs, 40 Estonians, 46 Armenians, 51 Filipinos, 55 Tongans, 61 Kiwis, and 77 Macedonians. Iceland provided two soldiers. Some countries, including Mongolia, Romania, Latvia, El Salvador, Singapore, Bulgaria, Azerbaijan, Albania, Czech Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua, Thailand, Dominican Republic, Portugal, Hungary, Norway, Lithuania, and Slovakia at least broke three digits. Japan provided 600 people, but they were not allowed to defend themselves: Danish and Australian personnel had to guard the Japanese "soldiers."

This was politics disguised as military assistance.

The practice is being repeated in Afghanistan. Ten countries-eight European states along with Canada and Turkey-break four figures, most on the low side. Another 18, all Europeans other than Georgia and New Zealand, have provided contingents numbering in the three digits.

Then there are the true behemoths: 95 from Finland, 90 from Azerbaijan, 70 from Slovenia, 40 from Armenia, 40 from Singapore, 25 from United Arab Emirates, 15 from Greece, 10 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 9 from Luxembourg, 8 from Ukraine, 7 from Ireland, 6 from Jordan, 4 from Iceland, 4 from Montenegro, and 3 from Austria.

Small contingents like these obviously are of marginal value, especially since most countries place a variety of "caveats," or restrictions, on the use of their personnel. Figuring out what to do with a handful of people who aren't supposed to be anywhere near gun shots in the midst of a war isn't always easy.

This doesn't mean that members of small contingents don't sometimes die. However, personal heroics cannot rescue missions undertaken far more for political than military purposes. Washington is prepared to pay almost any price to avoid standing alone internationally, irrespective of the military value.

Another problem with the desire to enlist small allies is diverting the attention and resources of friendly nations from genuinely vital pursuits. Training militaries in Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, and Lithuania to confront terrorism seems curious when several of those nations have far more to fear from Russia. In fact, Georgia rushed home its 2,000-man contingent from Iraq during the war with

Moscow. Instead of training its soldiers to fight Washington's wars, these nations should be preparing their forces to exact a high penalty from any invader.

At the same time, the United States will be exacerbating Moscow's paranoia by underwriting the militaries of those countries that seem most hostile to Russia.

That may be inevitable with the small nations foolishly allowed into NATO-which illustrates how such members actually are net security negatives for America. Most dangerous is Georgia, a non-NATO state which has open territorial controversies with Russia and which fired first in the August 2008 war.

Even worse from America's standpoint is the fact that these nations appear to believe that providing minuscule aid in Iraq or Afghanistan entitles them to be defended by the United States-presumably with nuclear weapons, if necessary. Many Georgians begged for American intervention against Russia. "We helped you in Iraq" was a common refrain.

Last December Mikheil Saakashvili explained that his government sent troops to Afghanistan to win Washington's favor: "Even though Georgia is not yet a NATO member-and while we know our path to membership may be long-we see ourselves as firmly allied in purpose and values with the U.S. and the transatlantic community." Saakashvili also has said that "Georgia will be more protected" once the Afghan and Iraqi wars are resolved, according to Paul J. Saunders of the Nixon Center. Michael Hikari Cecire argues that in buying American arms "Georgia hopes to purchase security guarantees against powerful Russia."

America's military is overstretched, but the cause is Washington's policy of promiscuous intervention. Renting tiny contingents of soldiers from minor allies is no solution. Washington should stop pretending that it can buy itself out of the growing morass in Afghanistan.

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