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Why U.S. defense spending keeps growing?

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by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Feb. 3 (Xinhua) -- U.S. military spending stands at record highs and keeps growing, although the country's once long list of enemies has shortened.

Indeed, the Cold War ended nearly two decades ago and U.S. forces are scaling down presence in Iraq and Afghanistan. Then why the U.S. defense spending keeps growing?

RECORD-HIGH SPENDING

Yet U.S. President Barack Obama on Monday requested congressional approval for 708 billion dollars in defense spending -- a record-high amount some analysts said was not only for the nation's defense but also for global dominance.

"American policymakers want the ability to intervene anywhere in the world," said Douglass Bandow, fellow at the libertarian CATO institute and outspoken critic of high military spending. "(But) America can no longer afford to play globocop."

"Offense is far more expensive than defense," he said, explaining that heightened defense spending reflects Washington's view of itself as a force for global stability.

The president's request included a 3.4-percent boost in the Pentagon's base budget and 159 billion dollars for U.S. missions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan.

The defense department said the funds are needed for a variety of costs from health care to missiles.

"This funding increase allows the DOD (Department of Defense) to address its highest priorities, such as the president's commitment to reform defense acquisition, develop a ballistic missile defense system that addresses modern threats, and continue to provide high quality healthcare to wounded service members," the department said in a statement.

Mackenzie Eaglen, fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said the spending is in line with U.S. objectives since 1945 -- taking an active global role to anticipate and manage threats, protect freedom, and prevent global conflict.

"The ability of the United States to reassure friends, deter competitors, coerce belligerent states, and defeat enemies does not rest on the strength of our political leaders' commitment to diplomacy," she said. "But rather, it rests on the foundation of a powerful military."

COSTS HAVE RISEN SUBSTANTIALLY

But some said the costs of that strength have risen substantially.

Carl Conetta at the liberal-leaning Project on Defense Alternatives at the Commonwealth Institute, contended that U.S. defense spending has risen significantly higher than the Cold War average.

Measured in 2010 dollars, average Defense Department budgets were 423 billion dollars between 1954 and 2001 --more than two-thirds less than Obama's request, he wrote in a report titled "An

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But analysts are at odds over whether figures have indeed ballooned or whether they should be viewed in the larger context of the U.S. federal budget and U.S. gross domestic product.

Eaglen of the Heritage Foundation said the figures seem high because the Defense Department is coming off a decade of underinvestment in the 1990s. Moreover, the defense budget pales in comparison to the overall increase in the federal budget, she said.

Bandow of the CATO institute said military expenditure as a percentage of GDP -- currently about 4.4 percent -- has fallen because overall GDP has nearly doubled since the mid-1980s and risen six folds since the early 1950s.

But U.S. military spending has risen substantially in real dollar terms, he said.

Others said the budget is not large enough, and said U.S. forces must still maintain their readiness to fight two simultaneous wars -- a requirement the military is beginning to de-emphasize.

FIGHTING EXTREMISM

One portion of the budget allots funds for fighting extremism overseas.

In an address from the White House on Monday, Obama sought congressional approval for an increase in funding for Pakistan to train and equip its forces to fight militants. He also requested an increase in the Pakistan Counterinsurgency Capability Fund to 1.2 billion dollars next year from 700 million dollars last year.

But many are debating over how terrorism is best fought. Critics of large budgets said a traditional military is not the best way to fight the country's No. 1 enemy and that foreign intervention only roils anti-American fervor in regions prone to militancy.

Supporters of hefty defense spending said Afghanistan needs the traditional U.S. military might to deny sanctuary to groups like al-Qaida.

Obama included a request for 33 billion dollars for a coming troop surge to the war-torn country in a bid to train Afghan forces and exit by 2011.

DEFICIT FEARS

But the heightened spending comes at a time of U.S. economic uncertainty, and fears are surfacing that U.S. deficits could one day prompt a downgraded credit rating.

Obama conceded on Monday that the deficit will balloon to record levels this year as he announced his 3.8 trillion dollar federal budget, but blamed the former administration for what he labeled as profligate spending.

The president said the nation's deficit would reach nearly 1.6 trillion dollars this year, significantly more than what the White House forecast last year.




"We won't be able to bring down this deficit overnight," Obama said from the White House. "We will continue, for example, to do what it takes to create jobs. That is reflected in my budget. It is essential."

Editor: Xiong Tong

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