

Free riders take advantage of America's extraordinary military spending

BY XIAOXIONG YI • May 19, 2010

Is the United States spending too much on defense?

Yes. American military spending amounts to more than 48 percent of the entire world's military spending and is equal to the military spending of the next 15 major powers combined. Even after more than two decades of massive military buildup to modernize its armed forces, China's military budget still is dwarfed by that of the United States -- \$77.9 billion in the 2010 fiscal year, compared to the Pentagon's \$680 billion.

President Barack Obama recently presented his \$719 billion 2011 defense budget to the Congress. But the total amount of all defense-related spending still is much greater than that enormous sum. "Adding all components of defense-related spending," summarizes Robert Higgs, senior fellow at the Independent Institute, "the grand total comes to \$1,027.8 billion, 61.5 percent greater than the Pentagon's outlays."

Is any country in the world a military threat to the United States?

No. As former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell famously put, "I'm running out of enemies ... I'm down to Kim Il-Sung and Castro." And Secretary of Defense Robert Gates puts things in perspective, "As much as the U.S. Navy has shrunk since the end of the Cold War, in terms of tonnage, our battle fleet is still larger than the next 13 navies combined -- and 11 of those 13 navies are U.S. allies or partners."

China probably represents the closest thing to a threat to America militarily because of its ambitious military modernization program and because of America's commitment to defend Taiwan. But, as Ben Blanchard of Reuters reports, "Big on spit and polish and parades but short on experience, new technology and force coordination, China's military has far to go before its bite begins to approach its increasingly loud, and for some fearsome, bark." The whole point of China's military modernization is not to challenge the U.S. militarily; but rather, to

make the U.S. forces stay at a distance.

Russia is the next major military spender. But not only is that Russia spends less than one-20th of the U.S. on its decrepit military, but also, as the recent signing of START II treaty indicates, Moscow now needs Washington's support to ensure its financial and diplomatic stability more than ever.

As for America's two "arch enemies," Iran and North Korea, Iran's current military budget is around \$4.8 billion, about the same as the estimated \$5 billion spent on the military by North Korea. "Just to give one an idea of how small \$4.8 billion is in comparison to what the U.S. is spending each year," writes Dave Lindorff, a contributing columnist for Business Week, "that number is roughly what the Pentagon spends on childcare and youth programs and morale and recreation programs on its bases."

So why does Washington continue to spend more on "defense" today than it did during the Cold War?

To begin with, "The United States," points out Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute, "continues to act as the globe's 911 number and micromanages the world. A hyperactive foreign policy requires a big military."

But there is another cause for America's excessive military spending. As Samuel Huntington and Tom Friedman have argued, America the superpower's spending has helped to establish a global "hegemonic stability." Such a system of hegemonic stability, unfortunately and inevitably, has encouraged other states, including many America's

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allies and partners, to take a free ride on America's account.

It would be OK if the United States could afford it. But it can't. In its latest report the IMF prepared for the Group 20 finance ministers, the fund estimates that the U.S. debt-to-GDP ratio would climb to 97 percent in 2011 and by 2015, U.S. debt is expected to jump to 110 percent of its GDP. As Badow warns, "America's current net liabilities has already exceeded its net worth and its national debt is as high as \$12.7 trillion. When it comes to the federal Treasury, there's nothing there. If Uncle Sam was a real person, he would declare bankruptcy."

The United States can no longer serve as the world's "911 number" and continue to spend so much more on defense than its allies do. While America still is and will remain to be a great power, we can no longer afford to proceed as if we are the sole superpower and to take on so many free riders. We have to convince our allies to stop taking a free ride on us, share our burdens and become responsible stakeholders.

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NO, I have some rules!

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