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## Washington is awash in debt, yet hawks want us to borrow even more

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Uncle Sam is headed toward insolvency. Warned the Congressional Budget Office this month: “By the end of 2021, federal debt held by the public is projected to equal 102 percent of GDP. Debt would reach 107 percent of GDP (surpassing its historical high) in 2031 and would almost double to 202 percent of GDP by 2051.”

Note: Greece was only around 140 percent when it suffered its calamitous and destabilizing debt crisis.

Washington’s inveterate hawks fear this will complicate their attempt to sell an ever-growing military budget. Wrote Joni Ernst and James Carafano, U.S. Senator and Heritage Foundation vice president, respectively: “A frozen defense budget will not satisfy the needs for the military to counter threats ranging from an emboldened China, a revanchist Russia, and perpetual bad actors such as North Korea and Iran.”

Ernst and Carafano insist that real outlays must increase three to five percent annually “to project power and uphold our alliance commitments.”

Why are they so eager to impoverish Americans to defend other nations? To read Ernst and Carafano and others like them, you would think Washington’s allies are all impoverished, helpless, micro-states — imagine the fictional Duchy of Grand Fenwick, with a few score men under arms, a tank or two, and perhaps a couple of biplanes dating back a century, multiplied around the world. How can these heroic beleaguered few hold off the Slavic hordes, the Persian masses, the North Korean legions, the Chinese colossus, and more? Without ever-increasing U.S. military spending, a new Dark Ages threatens to descend upon the earth.

This might be a great plot for a new post-apocalyptic novel. But it has nothing to do with present reality. Yes, China is emboldened, but it will not attack America. There will be no invasion force heading toward Hawaii and California. There will be no nuclear first strike on the United States.

Even if the People’s Republic of China surpasses America in overall economic strength, it will remain poorer with significant weaknesses, including a declining and aging population. Beijing’s designs, even if malign, are far more limited — to prevent Washington from coercing/attacking the PRC by establishing the equivalent of the Monroe Doctrine in Asian-Pacific waters. Beijing wants to employ anti-access/area denial to keep America out.

This is a problem, but far more for Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam, and perhaps also for Australia and South Korea. How to counter China? The strategy begins with these other states, all of which sensibly hope to avoid confrontation and conflict. With American aid they should turn an A2/AD strategy against Beijing.

Such a process should start with Japan. If it believes itself to be under threat, it should be spending more, a lot more, than one percent of GDP on the military. It is not Washington's place to tell Tokyo how much to spend. But U.S. officials should make clear that Americans will not take on extra debt to aid nations which can provide for themselves.

Dealing with Russia, revanchist but beleaguered, is much easier. To listen to the usual suspects in Washington, you would imagine that it was June 1945 and Joseph Stalin's Red Army was heading toward the Atlantic, overrunning war-ravaged nations and conquering everything in its path. In fact, 75 years have gone by, and the world has changed.

Vladimir Putin is no friend of liberty or democracy, but he has shown no interest in launching a cataclysmic war against America. Indeed, Russia and the United States have no essential strategic differences or causes for war.

Nor is there any evidence that Moscow plans or even desires to conquer Europe. Russia would find the continent, and individual nations, such as Ukraine, to be indigestible. Rather, Putin — and many influential Russians — see their nation threatened by an aggressive West, evidenced by NATO expansion, color revolutions, dismemberment of Serbia, and more. Hence the policy to create frozen conflicts with Georgia and Ukraine, keeping them out of NATO.

In any case, why is it necessary for the United States to bankrupt itself to protect a continent that enjoys 11 times the economic strength and three times the population of its presumed antagonist? Despite years of American begging, demanding, and whining, European military outlays still dramatically lag behind U.S. levels and expectations. Most Europeans don't fear Russia and believe America would protect them no matter what. Rather than constantly reassure the Europeans, Washington should explain that it plans on following their example, worrying about its own people's well-being first. Indeed, that would be the best way to give meaning to Biden's "foreign policy for the middle class."

North Korea has taken on almost mythic status as a threat to America, but it wants the ability to strike the United States only as a deterrent, to prevent Washington from attacking it. Kim Jong-un is not suicidal, desiring to die in a radioactive funeral pyre in Pyongyang. Rather, he fears the great superpower which disarms and overthrows its opponents. Who can forget how Muammar Gaddafi died unpleasantly after foolishly trusting the United States and Europe and disarming?

Anyway, why is containing North Korea Washington's responsibility? Nearly seven decades have passed since the end of the Korean War left the South ravaged and vulnerable. Today the Republic of Korea possesses about 50 times the GDP and twice the population of the North. Seoul enjoys a massive technological advantage, overwhelming international support, as well as good relations with what once were the North's military allies, Beijing and Moscow. Neither would back Pyongyang in another war. The Republic of Korea needed American support to survive in 1953. But not today.

Iran is ruled by a malign regime. However, its hostility does not occur in a vacuum. Consider U.S. policy — the 1953 coup, support for the Shah's repressive regime, 1980s backing for

Saddam Hussein's invasion, 1988 shootdown of the Iranian airliner, constant threats to attack, military support for Tehran's geopolitical enemies, and years of economic sanctions. A more conciliatory approach might leave the United States and Iran still at odds, but less than enemies.

Iran is also divided and isolated. It relies on missiles and proxy forces to mask its military weakness. Israel is a regional superpower and the United States has armed Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Now the Gulf States and Israel appear ready to cooperate openly against Tehran. As for Persian Gulf transit, Iran's only interest in interfering is to force the United States to end sanctions that prohibit Tehran's oil sales.

In fact, China and the Europeans rely more on Mideast oil and should make its security their responsibility.

Rather than intervene constantly in the Mideast, Washington should step back. America's responsibility is at best secondary or tertiary. There is no justification for a military build-up amid a tsunami of red ink.

The world may be dangerous, but America remains secure. Its foreign commitments and military deployments should reflect that welcome reality. The United States no longer can afford to police the world. It is time for other nations to fulfill their responsibilities.

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