

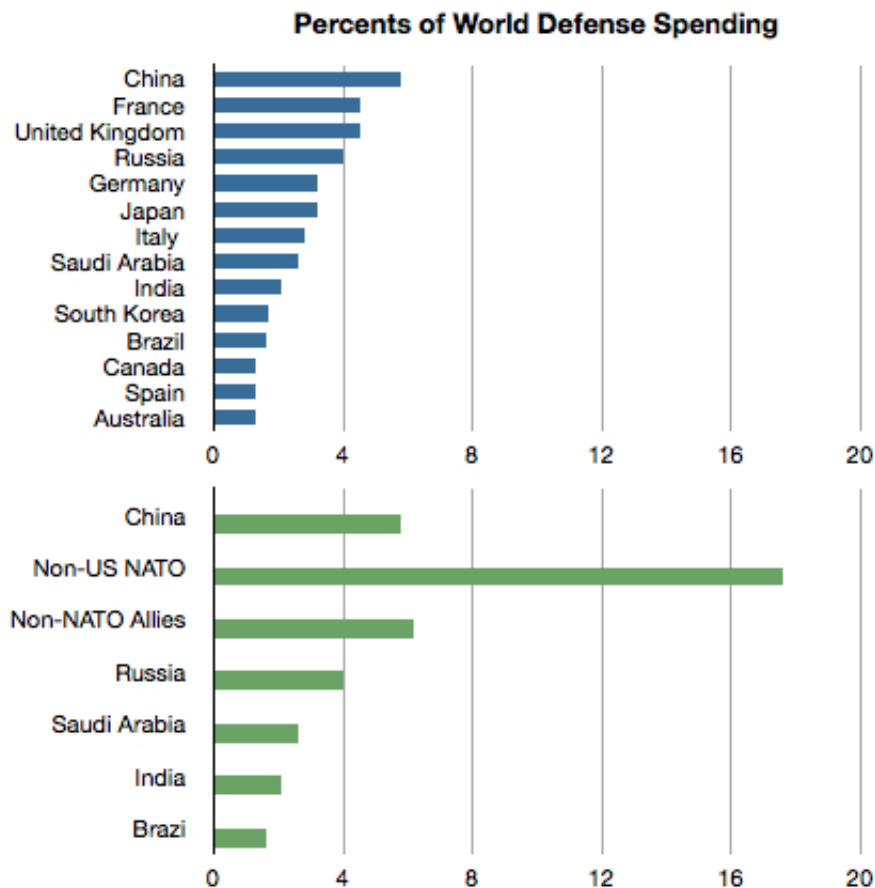
# [Matt Yglesias](#)

Feb 25th, 2010 at 5:30 pm

## [Do NATO Members Spend Too Little on Defense](#)

On Tuesday, Robert Gates [took a whack](#) at America's NATO allies, accusing them of spending too little on defense. Justin Logan [observed yesterday](#) that this is largely by design—we've urged Europe *not* to develop any defense capabilities that are independent of NATO or duplicative of NATO so this gives them little incentive to invest. And Fred Kaplan observes that the issue of a [defensive alliance like NATO performing poorly in an expeditionary role](#) is a structural question that has little to do with individual spending decisions.

But I'd like to press on another issue. Is it actually true that NATO members are skimping on defense. Looking at the list of the [top 15 defense spenders](#) it seems to me that if you ignore the United States, the spending of our NATO allies and our Major Non-NATO Allies (Australia, Japan, South Korea) is very much in line with what you see from other countries:



Notably, if the United States spent \$0 per year on defense *NATO would still be the most powerful military alliance on the planet.*

- [Comments](#)
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## 35 Responses to “Do NATO Members Spend Too Little on Defense”

### 1. *Greg* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 5:57 pm](#)

You can attribute that largely to a guy who Americans both liked and thought was a huge dick, one Charles André Joseph Marie de Gaulle.

He was the driving force behind France being an first rate power again, not that it was actually possible, but *Europe* as a first rate power, well, that’s another matter. Of course, there’s this too:

« Dans dix ans, nous aurons de quoi tuer 80 millions de Russes. Eh bien je crois qu’on n’attaque pas volontiers des gens qui ont de quoi tuer 80 millions de Russes, même si on a soi-même de quoi tuer 800 millions de Français, à supposer qu’il y eût 800 millions de Français »

France, to this day, has the third largest nuclear arsenal, and after the Sovs and ourselves, the greatest potential to throw ICBMs around the planet.

### 2. *bubba* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:02 pm](#)

NATO would still be the most powerful military alliance on the planet.

It would be the most expensive, not necessarily the most powerful or efficient. Those depend on who you fight and where.

### 3. *kafka* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:04 pm](#)

Clinton’s late 90s defense budgets, inflated to today’s dollar, would be about \$500 billion. Compare that to just over \$700 billion in Obama’s defense budget. And I’m not saying Clinton’s defense spending was completely justified either.

Only our sheltered, arrogant, tone deaf elites could possibly believe this country can afford such bullshit.

### 4. *some dude* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:06 pm](#)

I wish American elites realized how paranoid and insane this kind of thing makes them look. Europe has extremely powerful defensive military forces, large nuclear arsenals, and could muster up the most powerful armies the world has ever seen if there were any need to do so because China decided to invade Germany or whatever. It would make a lot more sense for the Dutch to start lecturing us about how we

should stop pissing so much money away on garrisoning the planet and instead spend some more money on basic social services.

5. *Greg Says:*

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:10 pm](#)

*It would be the most expensive, not necessarily the most powerful or efficient. Those depend on who you fight and where.*

If it's toe to toe with the Sovs in the Fulda Gap, and for the first time since the Franco-Prussian War the Germans don't have to fight on two fronts, I'd say the Germans would have demonstrated for a third time why they took on the world twice by themselves.

Oh, and this time their big-cat-named tank wouldn't have had to worry about being mechanically unreliable or lacking fuel.

Of course, the Sovs would have grinded out through pure attrition, along with judicious use of tactical "devices" but hey, great fun while it's still going on!

6. *Greg Says:*

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:11 pm](#)

*I wish American elites realized how paranoid and insane this kind of thing makes them look. Europe has extremely powerful defensive military forces, large nuclear arsenals, and could muster up the most powerful armies the world has ever seen if there were any need to do so because China decided to invade Germany or whatever. It would make a lot more sense for the Dutch to start lecturing us about how we should stop pissing so much money away on garrisoning the planet and instead spend some more money on basic social services.*

The Bundeswehr is *\*still\** a generation ahead of the US Army in tactical and operational doctrine.

And the SAS and 2<sup>ième</sup> Régiment d'Étranger Parachutiste are at least as good as anything we've got crawling around in Afghanistan.

Yet we're blowing wads on useless shit every fucking day.

7. *fletc3her Says:*

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:18 pm](#)

I'm disappointed you left the U.S. off the chart. But, since we spend over seven times as much as the next highest country it would make the differences between the other countries hard to see.

I think Gates point is that we spend more than twice as much on defense as all the other NATO countries combined. However, I think that has more to do with our inability to rein in defense spending rather than the need for other countries to spend more.

8. *Trevor Says:*

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:22 pm](#)

Why should the Europeans spend any more than they're spending now? Last I heard – *they* weren't keeping Apartheid Israel in the Slow Genocide business. Get it through your head, Bob, hector, don't hector – they're not going to budge.

9. [\*democraticcore\*](#) Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:22 pm](#)

If you look at this in terms of GDP per capita, it is clear that non-US NATO and other “allies” (Japan, ANZ) could afford to spend much, much more on defense. And what exactly are the French doing with their pricey military? At least the US uses its military, and in recent years, we're battling .500 – one good war (Afghanistan), one bad war (Iraq). In fact, there is probably a great deal that could be accomplished in the world today militarily that is not being done. It would have been nice if something had been done to stop the Rwandan genocide. Human rights catastrophes are taking place all over Africa (Darfur, the Congo, etc.). The overstretched US military is obviously not in a position to do anything about it. What are the French doing?

10. *some dude* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:32 pm](#)

Do you seriously think that a Western military could do anything about Darfur or the Congo? Really? France's military is designed to prevent people from invading France and her allies and to permit her to establish naval blockades and air superiority where necessary, not to wage unwinnable wars in Third World countries for feel-good purposes. It's not really that out there a concept.

11. [\*democraticcore\*](#) Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:42 pm](#)

I guess the French are pretty busy keeping Andorra at bay. In fact, the threat of encirclement by an Andorra-Luxembourg alliance can't be discounted. This is way more important than doing something about the slaughter of millions, which is just “feel good” stuff.

12. *Mike K* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:43 pm](#)

The Bundeswehr is *\*still\** a generation ahead of the US Army in tactical and operational doctrine.

And the SAS and 2<sup>ième</sup> Régiment d'Étranger Parachutiste are at least as good as anything we've got crawling around in Afghanistan.

Is there any facts to back that up? I might believe the SAS, but the Germans? I doubt it. The real factor in military prowess is fighting (surprised?); the Germans have ZERO fighting experience since May, 1945—I don't see them being very good. Neither do some of their officers I've talked with over the years.

13. *Greg* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:49 pm](#)

The Germans still use Mission tactics.

We didn't in the War and haven't since then.

I didn't say "combat experience", I said doctrine.

14. *Greg Says:*

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:49 pm](#)

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I didn't say "combat experience", I said doctrine.

15. *Ray Says:*

[February 25th, 2010 at 6:58 pm](#)

There is a huge problem that is overlooked when using the defense spending of countries by percentage. It costs Western countries much more to produce their missile defense systems than say China. So to use the price tag as a measure to talk about countries defense spending is misguided.

China could produce the exact same and quantity of weapons as the US in any given year for substantially less. So to use the cost of producing the weapons in a Western Country versus China or Russia as a metric to say the West is overspending on Defense is flawed.

All I see is proof that Western countries are overpaying for defense. The costs driven by the increasing use of Defense contractors to build up their arsenals. A state controlled Military production will be cheaper and more efficient every time.

16. *Greg Says:*

[February 25th, 2010 at 7:02 pm](#)

Actually, that's not quite true.

The Corps at least officially adopted Mission tactics/command (what it's called in English) in the 80s

However the fundamental tactical principle of the Army remains superior firepower. For chauvinistic/nationalist reasons we didn't do a very good job adopting German tactical ideas after the War. Moreover we also didn't really adopt anything like Deep Battle on an operational level

The Army is very good if not the best at what it does, which is apply overwhelming firepower.

But since 1953, with the exception of the set piece in Kuwait, we haven't been involved in anything requiring that. In fact, we probably couldn't have used it in a WWII scenario, since that would have resulted in millions of West German deaths.

Our doctrine has been awful largely because it suits the fairly corporate posture of the Pentagon, since senior officers won't rock a boat that promises millions for them in retirement. This is because adopting Mission tactics would also make hundreds of billions of dollars in equipment superfluous. The defense industry doesn't like that too much.

17. *some dude* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 7:06 pm](#)

*This is way more important than doing something about the slaughter of millions, which is just “feel good” stuff.*

Since it's not actually possible for a Western military to stop the slaughter you're talking about, there would be no reason to deploy one other than to make Westerners feel good about themselves. It would be masturbation on a global scale, not a serious response to an actual problem.

18. *Greg* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 7:07 pm](#)

*All I see is proof that Western countries are overpaying for defense. The costs driven by the increasing use of Defense contractors to build up their arsenals. A state controlled Military production will be cheaper and more efficient every time.*

One of the worst aspects of our national culture these days is that it is accepted that public servants at the SEC, the Fed, the Treasury, the FDIC, and of course the Pentagon, are allowed to seamlessly transition into positions with the people they used to deal with for the government. It's a hopelessly corrupt system that results in dead soldiers and impoverished citizens.

19. *democraticcore* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 7:44 pm](#)

#17-

Nonsense. Military intervention by international organizations like the UN and NATO has a track record of being effective in dealing with civil wars and genocidal situations. NATO forces effectively put an end to genocide in the former Yugoslavia. It took NATO too long to act, but once it did, it was effective. Clinton acknowledges that the failure to act in Rwanda was one of the greatest shortcomings of his Presidency, and it is generally recognized that even a modest expenditure of military force by NATO in support of the UN could have ended the bloodshed. UN forces led by the British effectively ended the civil war in Sierra Leone. Again, it was too slow in acting in Sierra Leone, but ultimately, it was effective. I am reasonably optimistic that we can achieve a positive outcome in Afghanistan, but in large part, that will depend on our ability to recruit other countries (and not just NATO) to participate. UN peacekeeping missions can be extremely effective, but the problem is that they are frequently understaffed to deal with major conflicts, as was the case in Rwanda. There is no reason why Western countries should not assume a greater responsibility for staffing these missions.

However, you are probably correct that European countries are unlikely to do much in this respect given the current realities of European politics, which are becoming increasingly isolationist and Eurocentric. That is why the US would be well-advised to reconsider its definition of its “allies” and look beyond NATO. We should be cultivating closer military relationships with countries like India, China, and Brazil, all of which are quite prominent on the chart, which are likely to find themselves in the years ahead in situations in which they are directly implicated in conflict zones. China and India are already very much implicated in Afghanistan, and their involvement will be critical to long-term stability in the region.

20. *some dude* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 8:43 pm](#)

Good to see that the Green Lantern theory lives on somewhere!

21. *Colin Laney* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 9:58 pm](#)

*Notably, if the United States spent \$0 per year on defense NATO would still be the most powerful military alliance on the planet.*

The difference in wages distorts these figures. High wage countries in NATO don't just pay their soldiers more — a *lot* more — than countries like China and India, they have higher expenses for food, shelter, weapons, and everything else.

22. *Peter* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 10:47 pm](#)

I'm surprised that Israel is not on the list of the top 15 defense spenders.

23. *fostert* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 10:47 pm](#)

“The difference in wages distorts these figures”

True, but the differences in the quality of the weapons distorts it the other way. The Chinese can make SAM for less than us, but can their SAMs shoot down a Russian Hind? Or even one of our lesser armored helicopters? No. Our SAMs can shoot down pretty much anything that flies. When we look at the difference in costs (as we should), we also need to look at differences in quality. The Chinese could have sold all the SAMs they wanted to the Afghans fighting the Soviets, but it would have made no difference. Only the Stingers could take the Hind helicopter gunship down. The Hind could dive quickly and avoid almost any SAM in the world and land before those missiles could lock on. The Patriot could hit them so high they couldn't go into the dive. That's a fundamental quality difference. Chinese SAMs just wouldn't work at all, meaning 0% efficiency. Our SAMs worked at about 70% efficiency. There's a big difference between not working at all and working most of the time. So this argument is kind of like saying a car is a car, and that a Porsche won't perform any better than a Yugo. If you believe that, go ahead and buy the used Yugo because it's a car. And I've been to Serbia, and there's a lot more old German cars than Yugos that still run. And our weapons are expensive, but they're really good. You pay for quality.

24. *fostert* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 10:53 pm](#)

“I'm surprised that Israel is not on the list of the top 15 defense spenders.”

Well, their nuclear program is off budget because they still claim they don't have one. And then we supply a good chunk of the rest of it. That comes from our foreign aid budget and our defense budget. It won't show up as a line item in our defense budget because the agreements with our defense contractors is that Israel gets what they want for cheap, and the contractors just write that loss into the cost of what we buy. Man, cost-plus is a nice way to make money and hide it. Wish I could get that deal.

25. *some dude* Says:



[February 25th, 2010 at 11:01 pm](#)

Israel is also the size of a really big but not enormous metro area, population-wise. The IDF may be pretty nasty pound for pound, but there's no reason it should rate especially high in absolute terms.

26. *fostert* Says:

[February 25th, 2010 at 11:34 pm](#)

“Israel is also the size of a really big but not enormous metro area, population-wise.”

Well, the largest population of Jews in the world is still the New York metropolitan area (bigger than Israel). And a good portion of Palestinians live there as well. The logical solution would be to relocate all non-Jews out of Long Island and just make that Israel. And then we could give Queens to the Palestinians. That would involve the least possible relocation and disruption of the factions. They are already there anyway. And Queens and Long Island can take the populations easily if they just kick out the remaining Italians and Irish. So why can't we just do that? Under the Israeli concept, kicking out indigenous populations is obviously not a problem, so let's do it too. And those populations would like to live somewhere better, anyway. And I'm not being facetious here. I'm serious. If these populations were in America, they'd have nothing to fight over. And for that, we should pay for nice houses in northern New Jersey for Irish and Italians to pay for it.

27. *urgs* Says:

[February 26th, 2010 at 12:11 am](#)

Israel is just too small to make it into the top 15.

28. *pd* Says:

[February 26th, 2010 at 2:04 am](#)

After our failure to conquer Canada during the war of 1812, President Madison secretly put a diabolical policy in place. Specifically in what he named “The United States of North America Plan” he proposed that we spend two hundred years posing as a close ally of Canada in order to lull them into a false sense of security. Based on this graphic it has apparently worked, as it clearly shows that Canada is finally defenseless against a US invasion. It may be premature now, but by 2012 we should be ready to spring the trap. And none too soon – our first goal should be capture of their banks, which will contain the only real money left in North America by then. James Madison – the father of our Constitution – little did the people of his times know of his darker side.

29. *abbl* Says:

[February 26th, 2010 at 2:14 am](#)

What kind of idiot would still call any of this “defense”? All you need for defense is a half-dozen nuclear missiles, at the cost of a few million dollars/year. Less money than the Pentagon spends on pencils.

30. *fostert* Says:

[February 26th, 2010 at 5:53 am](#)

“Specifically in what he named “The United States of North America Plan” he proposed that we spend two hundred years posing as a close ally of Canada in order to lull them into a false sense of security.”



Well, I think we got the false sense of security covered. Now why would we invade them? Oh yeah, resources. But our Chinese companies already bought those. Are we supposed to be concerned about Russian Chinese or European Chinese taking it over from our Chinese? Maybe we should be concerned about Russian mafias moving into certain places, but the Chinese mafias will take them out soon enough. We worry about invasion, but real invasions happen subtly. It's just immigrants that take over by out-competing us. Think I'm joking? You find a shrimp fisherman in Houston who isn't Vietnamese. The white guys couldn't compete against the Mexicans. But then the Vietnamese came in and took them all out. Ain't a white guy standing in that business. The Mexicans are delivering the shrimp now for the Vietnamese. And that's America. Ain't it beautiful? Yes it is, but it ain't grandpa's America for sure.

31. *fostert* Says:

[February 26th, 2010 at 6:09 am](#)

“Yes it is, but it ain't grandpa's America for sure.”

Take one step into Beaumont, Texas and you'll know what America will be. But it's not bad. Tamales for breakfast, Dim Sum for lunch, and BBQ for dinner. What's more American than that?

32. *fostert* Says:

[February 26th, 2010 at 6:32 am](#)

The weird thing is that few people ever get a form of food named after them. And the man most famous for it was a man who was a great traveler and mapmaker. So great, he had a chain of islands named for him. But they were later renamed Hawaii, and that name stands. He was truly a great man, but we only know him as the Earl of Sandwich. And we mostly know him by the form of food he used to save his servants some trouble. If there was anything he wanted to be remembered for, that wasn't it. But that turned out to be a very memorable thing. And now the current Earl of Sandwich owns a sandwich shop. And yes, it's called the Earl of Sandwich.

33. *fostert* Says:

[February 26th, 2010 at 7:12 am](#)

As for health care, the current system that conservatives love is simple. I get cancer, and I die. There's a good chance that modern cancer treatments could save me, but those are not for me, so I die. The current plan literally is death for me, and I'd like conservatives to admit that they want me to die. That is what they want, and I'm not asking for a vote. I'm just asking them to admit it. So tell me, why is my death helpful to our society? Needless to say, this has to be a damn convincing argument because I have personal interests with this issue. My life is on the line on this, your life should be too. Want to go there? I'm quite familiar with it, I can show you around if you'd like.

34. *Kolohe* Says:

[February 26th, 2010 at 7:16 am](#)

You look at any French General Officer's bio, you'll see that they've been involved in about the same number of overseas contingency operations as their American counterparts. The French have done and still do a whole bunch of ops in sub-saharan Africa over the past decade or two.

35. *beejeez* Says:

[February 26th, 2010 at 8:55 am](#)

Much more than any realistic threat assessment, the Defense budget is driven by Congress's pork addiction, by the weapons manufacturing lobby, and by voters who reward political candidates for questioning the patriotism of their opponents. Suggesting that the Defense budget is in any way designed to repel threats to the U.S. from China or Russia or Iran is just silly.

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