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Defense cuts: start overseas

U.S. defense spending is too large, especially abroad; we're spending too much to defend allies capable of defending themselves.

Benjamin Friedman and Christopher Preble

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Recent reporting has claimed that the Pentagon is fighting to trim the defense budget, valiantly protecting taxpayer dollars against a wasteful Congress and tackling the ballooning federal deficit.

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There are two problems with that claim. For one, the fiscal year 2011 defense budget, which



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Encouragingly, members of President Obama's bipartisan commission on the deficit and debt have said that the military ought to be among the items on the table for possible spending cuts. Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and Reps. Barney Frank (D-Mass.), Walter B. Jones (R-N.C.) and Ron Paul (R-Texas) last month sent a joint letter to the commissioners arguing that the trims to the Pentagon budget should flow from cuts in overseas commitments.

The commissioners should take that advice.

The Cold War is over. While we were defending our allies in Europe and Asia, they got wealthy. The new status quo is that we offer them perpetual security subsidies — and risk being drawn into wars that do not serve our security interests.

The recent trouble regarding the sinking of a South Korean naval ship by Pyongyang is illustrative. Odious as North Korea is, we have no obvious interest in fighting for South Korea, which has grown far richer and militarily capable than its northern rival. South Korea can defend itself. So can our European and Japanese friends.

Nor can terrorism justify a huge military. Most of our military spending goes to conventional forces adept at destroying well-armed enemies. Terrorists are lightly armed and mostly hidden. The trick is finding them, not killing or capturing them once they are found. Counterinsurgency enthusiasts claim that we can only be safe from terrorists by using ground forces to rebuild the states where they operate. But we have learned the hard way that theory badly overestimates our ability to organize other nations'



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where Christopher Preble is director of foreign policy studies. They are members of the Sustainable Defense Task Force, an ad hoc advisory panel created by Rep. Barney Frank.

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