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Bring our dollars home

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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.

There are two problems with that claim. For one, the fiscal year 2011 defense budget, which Congress is set to adopt, actually increases spending, though at a slightly reduced rate, which only in Washington would be considered a "cut."

Second, and most critical, the latest Pentagon authorization does nothing to address the cause of U.S. military spending profligacy: overambitious and nonessential objectives overseas.

The truth is that the United States no longer has a "defense" budget. The adjective is wrong. Our military forces' size long ago ceased to have any meaningful attachment to the requirements of protecting Americans.

The Pentagon is the conduit for more than a fifth of our federal spending, and it accounts for about 65 percent of the \$583 billion increase in annual discretionary spending since 2001.

But the dirty secret of American defense politics is that we are fairly safe. We are surrounded by vast seas and friendly neighbors. Yet our military spending is nearly equal to half the world's, and our allies spend most of the other half. Russia, China, North Korea, Syria and Iran collectively spend about a fourth of what we do on defense, according to statistics compiled by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Even if we cut our military in half, it would still be far bigger than that of any conceivable rival.

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' politics. Even if we could master that imperial art, it would not be worth the cost.

By avoiding the occupation of failing states and shedding commitments to defend healthy ones, we could plan for far fewer wars, allowing cuts in force structure, manpower, procurement spending and operational costs. The resulting force would be more elite, less strained and far less expensive.

Our deficit problem is an opportunity to surrender the pretension that we are the world's indispensable nation, preventing instability, shaping the international system and guiding history. We should be content to settle for being the big kid on the block that looks out for itself and occasionally helps friends in a bad spot. That approach would take advantage of the security we have, and save money we don't.

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