

Spending More Than NATO, Russia and China Combined, the US Again Ratchets Up Defense

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Despite the possibility of threats from terrorists and so-called rogue governments, the United States for the first time in its history stands as the world's sole superpower, unthreatened by the military might of any foreign nation. Yet it continues to spend more for defense than the combined total of its NATO allies, plus Russia, and China, and it is engaged in a new military buildup that could lead to another arms race again involving weapons of mass destruction.

Threat assessment analysts provide a number of possible justifications for the new buildup, but all are based on questionable assumptions about such factors as new weapons technology and the behavior of potential adversaries, and all are unpersuasive.

There seems to be a propensity for security overkill that will always drive a certain sector of society to want more protection regardless of costs and objective conditions. For this group, fear of the unknown is reason enough for a military buildup, and the future is inherently unknown. Hawkish politicians exploit these fears by advocating greater military strength at every stage of the war and peace cycle. Never mind that those inclined in this direction often confuse size and strength, and act as if more arms spending means more strength.

Parties Push Defense Spending Increases

Historically, in the United States, politicians in both major parties have had success by calling for defense spending increases whenever the trend has been stable or on a downward path. That is what happened at the end of the Carter presidency when candidate Ronald Reagan promised to rebuild our "hollowed out" military forces, and that is what is happening now at the end of the Clinton presidency. In fact, there are several disturbing parallels between the two periods.

Once again, a Democratic president has decided to increase the defense budget in the last year or two of his term, and once again the leading Republican candidate — presently, George W. Bush — promises to spend even more. The substance of the Reagan military buildup and the present one also have something in common. Both are mostly across-the-board infusions of money aimed at buying more of what the Pentagon already has. There was little if any effort behind Reagan's buildup to restructure military policy or military forces to make them more effective. There was, for the most part, a rush by each of the military services to spend more on their pre-existing priorities. Much the same thing is happening now.

Clinton initially proposed \$280 billion for the fiscal year (FY) 2000 budget, a significant increase over the year before. Presently, the figure stands at \$292 billion and will rise further with the supplemental appropriation for Kosovo peacekeeping expenses expected early in calendar year 2000. The FY 2000 budget, adjusted for accounting gimmicks, is approximately \$13 billion larger than last year's, and the FY 1999 budget was higher than the previous budget and the one before that. The defense budget is likely to continue rising for at least the next several years.

Clinton to Decide on BMD This Summer

Among the more distressing developments in this year's defense debate was the continuing failed efforts to eliminate or curtail major programs that are unnecessary or unaffordable, or both. The F-22 fighter aircraft is the prime example. After the House of Representatives deleted the funds to begin purchasing this controversial aircraft, the White House, the Pentagon, and the defense industry waged a vigorous campaign to restore the

money. The funds were restored after some cosmetic changes were made to the program. The episode is widely seen as a signal to the military services that the White House and Congress will not stand in the way of requests for funds for existing programs or for new initiatives. The Navy plans to request funds for a new aircraft carrier and more submarines, the Army hopes to expand its troop strength and purchase a new series of medium and lighter weight weapons, and the Air Force intends to acquire a large number of additional B-2 bombers and electronic warfare aircraft.

The most disturbing development concerns ballistic missile defense. The administration has been lukewarm to Ronald Reagan's idea of a missile shield, but this year the White House changed its position, substantially increased funding for a national missile defense system, and went along with a congressional resolution calling for deployment of the system as soon as technologically possible. Last year, Clinton opposed an identical resolution and it was defeated in the Senate. The president is supposed to make a final decision about deployment in mid-2000.

Although billions of dollars are being spent each year for missile defense research and development, construction of a national system has been placed on hold, until now. There are several reasons why this program should be kept on hold. One reason is that the complicated system envisioned has not been shown to be operable. A recent report, made by a group appointed by the Pentagon to monitor progress, was highly critical of the inadequate testing and the poor management of the system. The same group issued a similar critique of the program in 1998.

Even assuming it can be made to work, the problem with missile defense systems is that they are vulnerable to countermeasures. While it is possible to intercept one or more enemy missiles, under certain conditions, this capability can be easily overwhelmed. Any missile defense system is numerically limited and can be defeated if dozens or larger numbers of warheads or decoys, or both, are sent against a target. It may even be possible to incorporate effective countermeasures into a single enemy missile.

Moscow Still Resisting ABM Changes

The administration argues that a nationwide missile defense is intended to protect against rogue nations such as North Korea, Iran and Iraq, and it has begun talks with Russia about changing the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty in order to permit its deployment. But Moscow appears to be not so inclined and has warned the United States that it will respond to such a deployment by building more longrange missiles and warheads. China also warns that U.S. action will trigger a new global arms race, and the Chinese make the obvious but often ignored point that they will have to spend more on arms and divert resources from economic development. U.S. allies in Europe are cool to the idea of a nationwide missile defense. In a meeting at NATO headquarters in early December, they told Defense Secretary William Cohen of their concerns about how Russia, China and others would react and the effects of an arms race on the French and British nuclear deterrent forces.

A few days prior to the NATO meeting, Cohen was in Germany criticizing Berlin's plans to cut military spending. The Defense Secretary is displeased with the reluctance of Germany and other European governments to increase their military budgets. Immediately after his return to the United States, Cohen wrote in an op-ed article in the Washington Post saying "the allies will have to spend more on defense."

As the new century dawns, most Americans are thinking of ways to enhance sustainable economic growth and prosperity. One would hope that the Clinton Administration would persevere in its commitment to direct domestic and international resources toward peaceful purposes. Thus far, U.S. defense budget increases have been relatively modest. The Pentagon, however, argues that it has large unmet demands in the areas of readiness

and procurement. If the political environment becomes even more amenable to expansion of the defense sector, much faster rates of growth are possible. A new arms race can only exacerbate the situation.

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