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## The Real Culprit in Defense Spending: Strategic Hubris

Christopher A. Preble

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There is a wide and growing gap between what officials in Washington demand of the military and the resources made available to execute its missions. Fixing this problem is arguably the most important challenge facing the incoming Trump administration. Last month, Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work estimated that the current shortfall could be as much as \$88 billion per year, and that is merely to cover current operations and planned procurement. “That doesn’t buy you an extra ship, that doesn’t buy you an extra airplane, that doesn’t buy you an extra soldier or sailor or airman or Marine,” he said. “That just gets you where you need to be, fills in the hole.”

Work would solve this problem of the means-ends gap by expanding the means, i.e., grow the Pentagon’s budget, despite the fact that it is 36 percent larger in inflation-adjusted dollars than in 2000. Most defense-policy wonks here in Washington agree that we should be spending far more on the military, though they differ on how to do it. Democrats would prefer to raise taxes. Republicans would cut other spending, and divert the proceeds to the military. Most likely, however, increases in defense spending will be paid for with more borrowed money. This “pay for it later” approach would allow policymakers to avoid spelling out any painful tradeoffs. And it remains to be seen whether the budget hawks in Congress will be able to muster the votes to block a repeal of the bipartisan Budget Control Act.

There is a different approach to bridging the means-ends gap.

In a recent essay, Frank Hoffman of the National Defense University made a case for strategic discipline—in other words, focusing on the ends that we seek, not merely expanding the means to achieve them. “There is a better equilibrium point,” Hoffman wrote, “between rampant retrenchment and unbridled hegemonic primacy.” Borrowing from Ian Bremmer’s “cold-blooded, interest-driven approach . . . designed to maximize the return on the taxpayer’s investment,” which Bremmer calls Moneyball, Hoffman assigns to the National Security Council the responsibility to “assess risks and define the liabilities involved in each contingency instead of simply assuming that our leadership and credibility are at stake in every global flashpoint.”

In short, Hoffman concludes, “the United States needs to be more discriminate in judging its core interests and more disciplined in applying force and resources to secure them.”

Many writers here at The Skeptics take seriously the need for rethinking our strategic objectives. The United States needs to make better choices. The Department of Defense is misnamed. If we were serious about defending the United States, we could have a very different military, with very different missions. It would be a smaller military, based in the United States and its territories. It would deploy to places as needed, not attempt to be everywhere, all the time. A different grand strategy, what I and others call restraint, would involve the U.S. military in fewer wars. And a restraint-oriented military, while still the finest in the world by a wide margin, would be far less costly than our current one.

We can afford to rethink our foreign policy and reorient our military, because primacy, the strategy that the United States has pursued for decades, isn’t necessary to defend vital U.S. interests, and will become increasingly difficult to sustain, given low public support for it. The American people have consistently questioned the need for a vast, forward-deployed military, focused on defending other countries, most of whom can and should defend themselves. The latest polls merely confirm what we’ve known for a long time.

During the course of the campaign, Donald J. Trump hinted at some adjustments to U.S. foreign policy that were consistent with the public’s wishes. He questioned the wisdom of regime-change wars and armed nation building. He doubted that the benefits of America’s alliances always outweigh the costs. And he spoke to an American people that has grown tired of costly overseas adventures that don’t deliver on the promise of greater security.

Such positions were unpopular with a broad swathe of the GOP foreign-policy establishment, including a number of former senior officials in Republican administrations. Challenging the elite consensus is difficult, but Trump did it anyway. And he was rewarded in November.

Even if President Trump does not carry through on his promises to focus on “America First,” and even if he doesn’t revisit our global military posture, he can still fulfill his pledge to make the Department of Defense operate more efficiently. This will not be easy. It will require him to take on entrenched interests that defend the status quo.

However, the obsession with eliminating waste, fraud and abuse, though widely popular (who, after all, is a member of the “Waste, Fraud and Abuse Caucus” or gives money to the “Waste, Fraud and Abuse PAC”?), shouldn’t divert our attention from the central dilemma: America’s overly ambitious and under-debated grand strategy.