

# U.S. Should Be Paying Bills, Not Funding Global Military

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Global Research, November 04, 2011

[Global Times](#) 3 November 2011

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Militarization and WMD](#)

*Illustration: Liu Rui*

US President Barack Obama's recent announcement of a withdrawal from Iraq, coupled with talk of serious cuts in the US defense budget, tempts observers to hope that the US may finally break its addiction to runaway defense spending and tackle its massive debt. Such hopes were dispelled by US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's recently concluded trip to East Asia.

Although he declared at the beginning of his weeklong trip that the US is "at a turning point after a decade of war," he reaffirmed his commitment to policies that have overstretched the US military and saddled the country with a mountain of debt.

In his first trip to Asia as defense secretary, Panetta assured US allies that the US will continue a foreign policy based on maintaining dominance in every corner of the globe without regard to whether such a stance is fiscally sustainable.

The world needs reassurance of the US' commitment to pay its bills, not more promises of American willingness to serve as a proxy military for wealthy allies.

America's military presence in Japan is a classic example of how the US' misplaced priorities undermine its own interests, with the US straining its own finances to subsidize the defense needs of one of its richest creditors.

Japan owns \$900 billion in US treasury bills, making it second only to China in its holdings of US debt. One reason for such massive US borrowing is that America allocates 4 percent of its GDP to defense spending, dwarfing the 0.8 percent of GDP Japan spends on its military. Yet, instead of asking nations such as Japan and South Korea to take responsibility for their own defense, Panetta assured them that the US will not withdraw a single soldier from East Asia.

While Panetta's stance is disappointing, it is not surprising. The compromise between Obama and the Republican-led Congress that ended the debt ceiling fight stipulated that \$600 billion would be cut from the US defense budget if Congress could not find an alternative way to reduce the deficit. To stave off these cuts, Panetta and the US Department of Defense have attempted to weave elaborate tales of woe to stoke the US addiction to military spending. Panetta repeatedly warned that such cuts would result in a "hollowed out" military, while warning that China's defense spending continues to increase. Panetta neglects to mention that, even if the cuts come to fruition, the US defense budget

will still be many times larger than China's.

If the US makes difficult cuts now and informs its wealthiest allies that they are responsible for their own national security, it can avoid the imperial overstretch that has doomed so many empires in the past. Such a move will also save the US from the awkwardness of borrowing more money from China for the purpose of engaging it in an arms race.

Panetta is fighting the wrong enemy. The US military budget exceeds that of all other great powers combined. The US could cut its defense budget in half and still have the world's best-equipped military.

If the US ultimately falls from its perch as the world's most powerful nation, it will not be because it failed to spend enough on its military, it will be, as was the case with the Soviet Union and the British Empire, because it could no longer pay its bills.

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