

## The Political Economy of Security

By

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As Americans enter an era of unprecedented technological innovation and global instability, the question of how to secure the nation's future looms large. While discussions around deterrence often focus on military strategies, weapons modernization, and the shifting balance of power, there is an economic dimension to national security that is largely overlooked. Without proper fiscal management, the United States risks losing its ability to maintain credible deterrence in the face of growing challenges.

Specifically, if the United States does not reduce government spending and reduce the national debt, the nation's ability to modernize the nuclear arsenal and keep pace with rapid technological advancements is not possible. It is time for a "guns versus butter" debate that ultimately reigns in domestic spending.

The relationship between economic power and military strength is well-documented. As Paul Poast notes, "[Money is power.](#)" [Paul Kennedy's research](#) empirically shows, from the Roman Empire to the Cold War, that economic decline often precedes the erosion of military dominance. In today's context, the United States faces a growing national debt, [projected to surpass \\$50 trillion by 2033](#), according to the [Congressional Budget Office](#). While this staggering figure is often discussed in terms of domestic economic consequences, such as inflation and interest rates, its implications for national security are equally alarming. The costs of servicing this debt, combined with rising entitlement spending, will leave fewer resources available for defense.

### Deterrence and the Need for Modernization

Deterrence, particularly nuclear deterrence, is the [bedrock of American security strategy](#) since the end of World War II. The ability to deter adversaries—whether through nuclear capabilities or advanced conventional forces—depends on maintaining a credible threat of retaliation. This requires not only a robust military infrastructure but also a commitment to modernization.

The American nuclear arsenal, a cornerstone of deterrence, is [aging](#). The [nuclear triad](#)—comprising land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), ballistic missile submarines, and strategic bombers—was largely developed during the Cold War. Many of these systems are nearing the end of their operational lives, and without significant investment, they will soon become less effective. The [Sentinel ICBM](#) program and the [Columbia-class submarine](#) are critical components of this modernization effort, but they come with hefty price tags. The Department of Defense estimates that modernizing the nuclear triad will cost over [\\$1.5 trillion](#) over the next 30 years.

This modernization is not optional. As adversaries like [China](#) and [Russia](#) expand their nuclear capabilities, failure to update our arsenal would undermine the credibility of American deterrence. In addition, [North Korea's continued nuclear development](#) and [Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons](#) only increase the need for a reliable deterrent. However, modernization is only possible with sustained investment. If the US continues its current fiscal trajectory, defense

spending will only decline, as it already has, by the [growing demands of interest payments](#) on the national debt and mandatory spending on programs like Social Security and Medicare.

## **Technological Advancements: The New Frontier of Deterrence**

Beyond nuclear modernization, the future of deterrence will be defined by emerging technologies. As Michael Horowitz notes in his [2020 article](#), artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, autonomous drone warfare, cyber warfare, and hypersonic weapons are reshaping the nature of conflict. These technologies have the potential to transform military operations by providing advanced capabilities for precision strikes, autonomous systems, and cyber operations that can incapacitate an adversary's critical infrastructure without the need for traditional warfare.

However, the integration of these technologies into the American defense apparatus requires substantial investment in research, development, and deployment. [China is already making significant strides in AI and quantum technologies](#), while [Russia continues to prioritize hypersonic weapons development](#). The US cannot afford to fall behind in this technology race, as the consequences for deterrence are dire. A nation that lacks cutting-edge capabilities risks becoming vulnerable to both traditional and non-traditional forms of warfare.

Yet, technological innovation is expensive. Maintaining a competitive edge in AI, cyber capabilities, and other advanced technologies requires not only a well-funded military but also a robust industrial and academic infrastructure. If government spending continues to spiral out of control, the funds necessary to develop and integrate these technologies will be diverted to service the national debt or shore up social welfare programs. This creates a vicious cycle in which the American military falls further behind while adversaries close the gap—or even surpass the United States—in critical areas.

## **The Economic Roots of Military Power**

The decline in military readiness that results from unchecked government spending and rising debt is not hypothetical. Historical examples illustrate the dangers of economic mismanagement leading to military weakness. The Soviet Union, for instance, collapsed, in part, because it [overextended itself militarily](#) while failing to [manage its economic challenges](#). While the US is far from Soviet-style economic collapse, the lesson is clear; no nation can maintain military dominance without a strong economic foundation.

Paul Poast, a leading scholar on the political economy of security, [highlights the importance of economic capacity in sustaining military power](#). Military expenditures are only sustainable if the state has the economic resources to support them. Poast argues that focusing solely on military budgets without addressing the underlying economic conditions that make those budgets possible is a recipe for disaster.

In the American case, [the growing national debt is directly threatening the economic foundation](#) necessary for sustained military investment. Interest payments on the debt already consume \$900 billion each year, and that figure is expected to rise significantly in the coming decade. As interest rates increase, so will the cost of servicing the debt, leaving fewer funds available for national defense. Without a course correction, this fiscal irresponsibility will leave the US incapable of maintaining its military superiority, much less modernizing its forces for the future.

## **The Path Forward: Fiscal Responsibility as a National Security Imperative**

To avoid this grim future, the US must prioritize fiscal responsibility as part of its broader national security strategy. There are no historical examples of any nation borrowing its way to prosperity. This begins with reining in government spending and reducing the national debt. While this may require difficult political choices—such as reforming entitlement programs or scaling back certain discretionary spending—the alternative is far worse. A nation that cannot afford to invest in its defense is a nation that cannot defend itself.

Moreover, reducing the national debt would free up resources for the investments necessary to modernize the nuclear arsenal and integrate emerging technologies into the military. By putting the nation's fiscal house in order, it is possible to ensure that the US remains a global leader in both traditional and technological forms of deterrence. Failure to do so risks not only economic consequences but also the erosion of America's ability to defend its interests and allies in an increasingly volatile world.

The political economy of security is not just about guns and bombs—it is about dollars and cents. If the nation fails to address the growing national debt, the US will prove unable to modernize its nuclear arsenal or keep pace with the technological change that is defining the future of warfare. Fiscal responsibility is not just a domestic issue; it is a national security imperative. Only by controlling spending and reducing debt can deterrence remain credible.

By taking the necessary steps now, the nation can secure a future where America's deterrent capabilities remain strong and its security unassailable. Failing risks a future where deterrence fails, and with it, the ability to protect the nation and its allies. The stakes could not be higher.

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