

COSTS OF WAR

Why the United States should not exaggerate the threat posed by Russia or raise military spending as a result

The U.S. military budget is poised to surge above \$800 billion, and many Members of Congress cite the threat posed by Russia as a key reason it must continue to rise. [According to](#) House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith, “the FY23 budget would be ‘bigger than we thought,’ as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine ... complicated the U.S. security posture and impressed a greater sense of urgency for funding defense priorities.”

But in a new study from the [Costs of War Project](#), military strategy expert Lyle Goldstein offers evidence to the contrary, and lays out the case for why the United States should not engage in threat inflation when it comes to Russia, or use Russia as an excuse to expand the military budget. [See the full paper here.](#)

1. Russia is a comparably weak military force and there is no cause for fear of a Russian military threat to the United States.

Russia has invested far fewer resources in its conventional military than the United States and views its own military strength as lagging very significantly behind the U.S. Though U.S. military spending has long surpassed Russia's, it has escalated dramatically in the post-9/11 era. Consider:

- The Russian military budget amounts to less than 1/10 of the U.S. military budget, just one-fifth of non-U.S. NATO spending, and six percent of the NATO defense spending aggregate.
- The U.S. Navy has more than 10 times the number of aircraft carriers as Russia, more than 5 times the number of large surface combatants, and more than double the number of amphibious attack ships and nuclear submarines.
- Russia has just 37% of the total U.S. combat aircraft.

Russia’s comparative military weakness is on display in its war in Ukraine, in stark contrast to what many predicted pre-invasion. The reality is that Europe can and should take its security into its own hands, freeing the United States to trim its own military budget.

	RUSSIA	U.S.
Main battle tanks	13,530	6,209
Aircraft carriers	1	11
Amphibious warships	20	42
Cruisers	4	24
Destroyers	11	68
Frigates	15	21
Corvettes	40	-
Nuclear submarines	28	68
Non-nuclear submarines	21	-
Military aircraft	1,379	3,761
Attack helicopters	404	867
Nuclear weapons	6,500	6,125
Military satellites	109	141

2. An increase in military spending and conventional

forces in Europe from the United States and NATO could paradoxically prompt Russia to rely more heavily on its nuclear forces.

Russia has invested heavily in nuclear weapons as opposed to its comparatively weaker investment in conventional forces. It holds the world's largest stockpile of nuclear weaponry. An unclassified report from the Naval War College predicts "Moscow is unlikely to use nuclear weapons ... unless the Putin regime judged that an

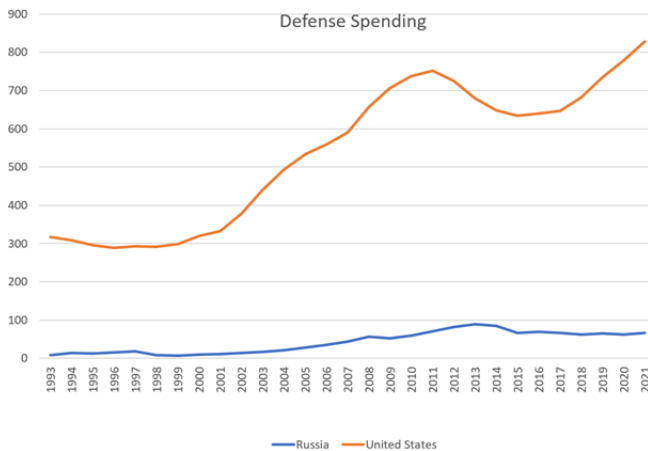
impending defeat during conflict would undercut the government's legitimacy and create an existential threat via domestic upheaval (through loss of territorial integrity or other pivotal wartime event)." Rather than meeting Russia's buildup with a U.S. buildup and fostering a new arms race, a far more effective way to remain secure would be to reinvigorate arms control negotiations.

2021 Defense Expenditures

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3. Historically, threat inflation has led to disastrous and unnecessarily costly U.S. foreign policy decisions.



Note: This disparity is actually understated, since this figure does not include total U.S. spending on nuclear weaponry -- some of which is outside of the Defense Department budget.

For example, the famous "missile gap" in the 1960s turned out to be completely backwards - even though politicians convinced themselves that the Soviet Union had hundreds of ICBMs and that the United States needed to catch up, the reality was that the Soviet Union had two missiles and the U.S. had a vastly larger arsenal. Such threat inflation persisted over the

course of the Cold War, and resulted in the United States spending more than \$10 trillion in 2022 dollars on nuclear weaponry. These mistakes should not be repeated.

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