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Disarm the G20!

The nuclear arms race threatens our very existence. Where's the protest movement demanding the disarmament of the G20?

Read this article in German and Russian.

Right now, two critical developments are literally threatening the very existence of humankind: the climate crisis and the possibility of nuclear war. There is a broad consensus when it comes to the severity of climate change, even if there is still absolutely no sign of a solution despite the affirmations by many governments. But at least the climate debate is a lively one, accompanied by countless demonstrations against policies that are damaging to the environment.

By contrast, the risk of nuclear disaster has largely disappeared from the public consciousness. The peace movement and the end of the Cold War at least led to a temporary turnaround in policy, but this has long given way to rearmament on an unprecedented scale. Although the number of nuclear warheads has decreased, from over 70,000 at the end of the Cold War to fewer than 14,000 today, this is still more than enough to lay waste to the world several times over. Above all, however, it is the modernisation of weapons in the US, China and Russia and the nuclear ambitions of countries like Israel, North Korea, India and Pakistan that have increased the risk of armed conflict and the potential for the use of nuclear weapons.

Accordingly, military spending is rising sharply: At over USD 1,800bn a year, it is now more than 50 per cent higher than it was during the last days of the Cold War. It’s only natural to ask where this will lead us in a situation when NATO demands a further hike in spending, China seeks to keep pace with the rest of the world, Russia makes aggressive overtures towards some of its neighbours, India responds to China and the Saudis and Iran fuel the arms race in the Middle East.

The old world order is past

The connections between climate and armaments policy are most clearly illustrated by the wars and violent conflicts in recent decades, the resulting refugee movements and migrant flows and the backlash that has followed. Although the risks of climate change and arms build-up are well known, there are currently no signs of a turnaround. Like lemmings jumping off the cliff, these two crises are heading for a disaster that appears unavoidable.

The old world order, with its semi-functioning multilateralism and compromise in a spirit of give and take, have been superseded by nationalist aspirations and the reckless pursuit of supposed self-interest – and we are seeing climate agreements being questioned and even revoked, while arms controls forums and corresponding treaties are allowed to slide.

There's no question that the arms control treaties of the 1980s and 1990s between the then major powers, the Soviet Union/Russia and the US, are now something of an anachronism. Today, systemic antagonism is no longer the issue; instead, the unchecked arms race represents a threat to humankind in its entirety. This is why geopolitically ambitious powers like China, India and Saudi Arabia need to be included in arms control efforts if the catastrophic trends are to be reversed.

The G20 exclusive club

Now, the G20 summits are one 'natural' forum for achieving this. The 19 member countries of the G20 and the EU are responsible for 82 per cent of global military spending. The G20 accounts for almost all arms exports, and its arsenals are home to 98 per cent of the world's nuclear warheads. The geopolitical interests in Europe, Southeast Asia and the Middle East that are driving rearmament and even arms races are bundled in the G20.

It could be that the lack of high-profile protests against the current military armament is one reason why there are no disarmament and arms control forums.

The members of this exclusive club are also the main perpetrators of global warming. And the climate change deniers can be found there too. The 19 members – the US, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Russia, Turkey, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, India, China, Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and Australia – bear the primary responsibility for the current catastrophic trends.

So why do the regular G20 summits never address the topics of disarmament and arms control? How can the lemmings be persuaded to come to a halt and turn around? In principle, there are three possibilities: Scientifically substantiated risk analyses, i.e. appealing to their reason; public pressure and an insistence on upholding their inherent values; and, above all, respect for human rights and international law even in the face of opposition.

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Scientific analyses and public pressure are currently being used as a response to the climate crisis. The vast majority of scientific studies have identified what needs to be done and where in order to trigger a reversal in the trend. But governments – albeit by no means all of them – have only begun taking more serious action since the 'Fridays for Future' movement gathered pace and the scientific warnings and popular protest combined to form a movement that can no longer be ignored.

It could be that the lack of high-profile protests against the current military armament is one reason why there are no disarmament and arms control forums. The causes and risks of violent conflicts, the damaging side-effects of arms exports, the present danger of nuclear war – they have all been researched and documented in numerous studies, and yet the momentum for arms control that prevailed in the 1990s is nowhere to be seen. There is a lack of scientific analysis of the risks of war, a lack of political and economic warnings against continued armament and, quite simply, a lack of high-profile support for the peace movement.

The G20 should be the target of any such protest movement. When the perpetrators of the crisis gather for the next summit in Saudi Arabia in November 2020, they will have to be forced to acknowledge the demands of a loud protest movement if things are to change for the better. A call to 'Disarm the G20!' might finally shake up the main players in the climate and arms crisis.

This includes upholding the aforementioned values even among a disunited community. While European nations continue to sell arms to countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia and hold their tongue when it comes to violations of human rights in China and elsewhere, there can be little hope of any forward-thinking resolutions on the part of the G20. Merely paying lip service to European values, coupled with a fear of jeopardising the business of a handful of defence firms, oil companies and car manufacturers, will not be enough to prevent the disasters that are threatening the very existence of humankind.



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