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Not even the pandemic could stop a new arms race

The pandemic could have been a chance to reverse high military spending globally. Instead, we could be heading towards a new Cold War-style arms race

One year ago, on 23 March at the beginning of the pandemic, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called for a global ceasefire. He said: 'Now is the time for a collective new push for peace and reconciliation. And so I appeal for a stepped-up international effort — led by the Security Council — to achieve a global ceasefire by the end of this year ... The world needs a global ceasefire to stop all 'hot' conflicts. At the same time, we must do everything to avoid a new Cold War.'

His urgent appeal has gone unheard. Looking at the ongoing conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Libya, Ethiopia and many others, at the arms supplies into these conflicts, at the military budgets at their highest level ever, at the arms industry which is experiencing a boom, at largely absent arms control negotiations and at intensified geopolitical rivalries, we see the opposite of a 'push for peace and reconciliation'. We are at the beginning of a new arms race and possibly also of a new Cold War.

The outbreak of the pandemic is actually a wake-up call and a demand for global cooperation. This crisis cannot be solved at national levels. Given the economic fallout of the pandemic, with economic decline in many countries and increasing debts of public budgets, one could actually have expected a reversal of military expenditures. The contrast could not be starker.

Prioritising the military over the economy

During the March 2021 National People's Congress, China's President Xi Jinping called on the military to always be ready in an 'increasingly insecure situation'. China's military budget is likely to continue to rise after more than doubling during the last decade. A week later, NATO

Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, proudly announced that '2020 marked the sixth consecutive year of growth in defence spending ... with an increase in real terms of 3.9 per cent from 2019 to 2020'.

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The US, at the top of the list by far, spent nearly three times as much money on defence in 2020 than its perceived rivals China and Russia combined. A March 2021 study by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London confirms that, despite the Corona pandemic, military budgets hit new record levels worldwide. Nostalgic 'Global Britain, ... with the highest defence budget ever,' to quote Prime Minister Boris Johnson, relies, like many other countries, on a military-backed geostrategic foreign policy.

The British government plans to lift the cap on the number of Trident nuclear warheads and increase its number from 180 to 260. This would end a 30-year process of gradual nuclear disarmament. Never, since the early 1990s, has the military burden on global income been so high as now. Given the present trend, even higher economic burdens can be expected.

Rising arms exports in crisis regions

The transfer of arms remains at a high level, according to a new Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) study. The US remains the largest exporter, increasing its global share to 37 per cent and exporting to 96 states. Almost half of the US arms exports went to the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia — a core party to the war in Yemen — receiving one quarter of the US exports.

The increase in US arms exports from the previous period of reporting widened the gap between the US and second largest arms exporter, Russia. Almost a little offended, the Russian state defence company ROSTEC criticised the methodology of SIPRI statistics. The Russian global export share in arms was, in fact, higher than reported by SIPRI, according to ROSTEC. Both France and Germany increased its exports of major weapons substantially during the reporting period, putting China, whose exports declined, into fifth place.

Despite discouraging trends, UN Secretary

It is not surprising that the bulk of the arms exports are sold to crisis regions, particularly into the Middle East. Crises fuel the global arms

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trade. The world's largest importer of arms is Saudi Arabia, but also other countries of that region are among the largest importers: Egypt, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and also Israel and NATO-member Turkey. This reflects the volatility of this region as well as the regional and geopolitical conflicts and strategic interests. Even Germany with formally restrictive arms export regulation, has exported arms in large quantities to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE and Qatar as well as Algeria, none of them in high regard for democratic and humanitarian values (which are supposed to be a criterion for German arms exports).

The big arms producing companies are primarily located in the US, Western Europe, Russia and China, but the arms industry is increasingly present also in the global South. The enormous growth of these companies is a result of high investments in the modernisation of the armed forces. Governments in the high-income countries are investing particularly into new technologies: artificial intelligence, the automated battlefield, unmanned drones, militarily relevant space technology, but also in modernisation of nuclear weapons and its carrier systems. This trend is particularly worrying since there are no serious arms control initiatives to prevent an arms race.

Hope for peace

Can we expect a forceful initiative from the new Biden Administration? There are few indicators that raise hope: to reinstate the Iran nuclear agreement and cautious advances towards North Korea which both did not, so far, fall on fertile ground. The relationship to China — with the trade conflict looming large — is not too promising. The tone is confrontational. The Biden Administration is leaving 'America first' behind and keen on rebuilding its neglected alliances in Europe and in Asia. There is fear of China's assertive, sometimes aggressive foreign policy and its development of a strong and modern military force that might be used to settle territorial disputes.

Despite discouraging trends, UN Secretary General Guterres should loudly repeat his call from March 2020. The United Nations is the place to negotiate. At the same time, it is clear, that the problem lies within the Security Council itself and thus, it's the place where it should be solved. The Permanent Five members of the Council possess almost all of the 13400 nuclear warheads; they are responsible for over three quarters of

the arms trade and for over 60 per cent of global military expenditure.

That is no easy task. But during the Cold War between East and West, imminent threats of mutual destruction were even more discouraging and dangerous. With a Biden administration that is considering reducing the role of nuclear weapons in security policy, the time might be right for such an UN initiative and 'for a stepped-up international effort.' A reversal of present trends would free resources to cope with the real global problems such as the pandemic, climate change and global poverty.

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Herbert Wulf
Duisburg

Herbert Wulf was Director of the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC) from its foundation in 1994 until 2001. He is currently a Senior Fellow at BICC and an Adjunct Senior Researcher at the Institute for Development and Peace, University of Duisburg/Essen where he was previously a Deputy Director.