

Indefensible:

The Myths that Sustain a Bloated, Corrupt and Dangerous Global Arms Business

The global arms trade is suffused with corruption, imperils the vulnerable and makes us all less safe. Yet arms merchants and their government supporters can turn to a set of time-honed and well-packaged arguments to justify the status quo. Each one of the claims is either deeply questionable or simply untrue. The arms business needs to be undressed. Then, we will find its claims are indefensible; nothing more than myths.

Myth 1: Higher military spending equals increased security.

'If you want peace prepare for war'. The world spends a lot on preparing for war, \$1672 billion at the last estimate by SIPRI. But does this vast spending bring peace and security? Very often not, for many reasons:

- As one country seeks security with increased armament and military spending, it can create insecurity in others, triggering an arms race that makes everyone less secure. China's vast increases in military spending is at least in part driven by their sense of insecurity in the face of overwhelming US military dominance; but China's growing military power is creating insecurity among its neighbours such as Japan and Viet Nam, who in turn are rearming.
- The world's biggest spender on military equipment, the US, doesn't just prepare for war, it frequently goes to war, encouraged by the overwhelming firepower its spending affords it. But the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have brought the US anything but peace and security, and have torn those countries to pieces.
- Much military spending is designed to provide security to dictatorial regimes *against* their own people. Saudi Arabia is the world's third largest military spender, with a vast security apparatus devoted to maintaining the absolute power of the Saudi royal family (and now to flattening Yemen).
- Military means can be very ineffective at solving security problems like terrorism, where police and intelligence work and negotiations are far more likely to succeed. Meanwhile, the biggest global threat today, climate change, is not one that can be solved by military means.

Myth 2: Military spending is driven by security concerns.

The decisions to build, sell or buy weapons systems often have little to do with defending the nation. Other factors at play include claims that weapons systems generate economic benefits (see Myth 4); and pure corruption—that is, the kickbacks and access to public funds are the rationale for the deal, and the weaponry is a ruse.

One example: Lockheed Martin's new albatross, the F35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft which demonstrates how the U.S. military-industrial-congressional complex — as Eisenhower almost called it — is at its most inventive when finding new ways to waste ever more money. The F-35 is the most expensive aircraft program in history, costing \$1.5 trillion and rising, while suffering a stream of technical problems that have delayed it by years. Many commentators argue that it doesn't even match the capabilities of other earlier, cheaper fighters. What it does do is provide vast revenues for the arms industry, and with production of the plane having a presence in every Congressional district, it is virtually guaranteed support regardless of its failings, as representatives vie to bring jobs and funding to their districts. It doesn't create nearly as many jobs per \$billion as other potential areas of spending, but if the jobs aren't enough to keep Congress onside, the millions of dollars of campaign contributions by the big F-35 contractors to members of Congress generally is.

Very often, the motives for arms deals are even more blatant. Saudi princes were allegedly paid hundreds of millions in kickbacks in relation to the Al Yamamah series of arms purchases from BAE Systems coming from a UK-Saudi government deal. French warship and submarine maker DCN has sold ships of dubious quality and military value to Taiwan, Malaysia, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia among others in which key decision-makers have received massive bribes. Corruption can affect other areas of military spending as well; Iraq, Nigeria and South Sudan have all had problems with armies of 'ghost soldiers', whereby senior commanders received salaries on behalf of soldiers that did not exist. Such low-level forms of military corruption, including ghost soldiers, skimmed-off salaries, fake supply contracts, stolen equipment funds, illegal selling-off of military equipment for private gain, can have devastating effects on the effectiveness of armed forces, and can contribute to severe human rights abuses. Ukraine is estimated to have lost \$32 billion worth of military assets in the 1990s through such theft. This and massive corruption in procurement left Ukrainian troops without basic equipment when fighting Russian-backed rebels in 2014.

Myth 3: We can control where go after they're purchased and how they are used.

Criticisms of arms sales by western countries are invariably met with the response that governments exercise extreme care when approving the export of arms, applying rigorous criteria on human rights, conflict, and international law. So what could possibly go wrong?

Plenty. For one thing, friends can prove to be highly unreliable allies, or worse, easily turn into future enemies. There is no better example of this than Iraq, to whom the US supplied large quantities of arms in the 1980s, including, most shockingly, agents for chemical and biological weapons. Secondly, diversion of arms from their intended recipient is a common problem. Arms dealers can easily fake end-user certificates so that weapons supposedly destined for a 'legitimate' state recipient are diverted to a war zone. Or states may

re-export arms against the wishes of the original seller. When states collapse, such as Somalia in 1991 or Libya in 2011, there can be a huge outflow of arms to neighbouring countries.

Thirdly, arms may be used in ways not intended by the seller – although they should often have been foreseen. French and other European arms supplies to Rwanda during the early 1990s played a key role in facilitating the 1994 genocide.

Fourthly, don't say it too loudly, but western states aren't always quite as fastidious in their concern for how their arms will be used as they make out, especially in situations concerning broader strategic interests or the fortunes of key national arms producers. The US and UK happily supplied arms to the Indonesian dictator Suharto even as he was using them to commit mass atrocities in East Timor. When the US treated Saddam Hussein as a useful ally and supplied Iraq with arms, they were under no illusion as to the regime's human rights record, or the human toll of the Iran-Iraq war. The UK is currently turning a blind eye to the use of its weapons by Saudi Arabia to target civilians in Yemen, and continuing to supply the Kingdom unabated.

What of the Arms Trade Treaty, signed in 2013 by over a hundred nations, intending to control the conditions under which arms are exported? It is a significant step to have an international treaty on the arms trade for the first time, but the criteria it applies for states to allow arms sales are lax and full of loopholes and carry no enforcement mechanism. In many cases, they are weaker than the criteria supposedly followed by national export legislation. Secondly, the Treaty does not cover all weapons, and third it does not include all types of arms transfer, such as loans, military aid, and weapons supplied under government-government defence cooperation agreements. It is unlikely that the ATT will stop a single significant arms deal by the major producers that would have gone ahead without it.

Myth 4: The defense industry is a key contributor to national economies.

When security justifications for military spending and arms trade falter, the economic value of the arms industry is often presented as the clincher. The defense industry, claim supporters, sustains millions of jobs, is worth billions to the economy, and is a key driver of technological innovation.

In fact, even in the biggest arms producers, the military sector is only a small proportion of the economy, and the arms industry only a tiny proportion of employment—and the economic role of arms exports is even smaller. But looking to the broader picture, most of the economic evidence, collected from dozens of statistical studies within and across countries, suggests that military spending if anything tends to have a negative effect on countries' economic growth rates in the long-term, or at best no measurable effect at all.

Of course, large amounts of government spending on anything—even digging holes and filling them in again—will create jobs. But studies in the US show that spending on the military (including both personnel, operations and armaments spending) creates considerably fewer jobs per billion dollar than just about any other major area of spending, in particular than healthcare, education, or infrastructure. And each of these alternative sectors does far more to benefit the nation's future well-being and economic development than military spending.

When it comes to technology, while it might once have been the case that military technology produced big 'spin-offs' for civilian industry, now the reverse is true: the civil sector is at the technological cutting-edge. The arms industry depends on innovation from the civilian sector – 'spin-ins' for advancement, especially in terms of IT and communications technology. Moreover, some of the big 'spin-offs' of the past, such as the claim that the internet was the result of military R&D, are not quite what they seem. It is true that in the early years, the US military saw the potential of computer-to-computer communications and gave the technology a push, but it did not invent the idea, and the subsequent development of the internet into something that could connect sources of information and images the world over—the world-wide web—came entirely from the civilian side.

Myth 5: Corruption in the arms trade is only a problem in developing countries.

Corruption is a feature of the arms trade the world over, developed and developing countries alike. Former finance expert Joe Roeber, after studying vast numbers of documents, estimated in 2005 that around 40% of bribes paid in international trade deals worldwide were related to the arms trade. Several factors make the arms trade 'hard-wired for corruption', as Roeber put it: the huge value of the deals, offering personal enrichment for bribe-takers and make-or-break affairs for arms sellers; the technical complexity of deals, allowing bribe-payers to target just a few individuals who understand the process; and the veil of secrecy and impunity accorded to matters of national security, among others.

UK arms company BAE Systems devoted considerable effort to securing arms deals with the help of bribes over the years, with a shell-company, Red Diamond Trading, established in the British Virgin Islands tax haven to pay out vast commissions to middlemen in arms deals, who would in turn pay bribes to key decision-makers. Arms deals in which Red Diamond was involved, and where strong evidence of corruption emerged, include those with Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Tanzania, Austria, the Czech Republic and Hungary. Thus developed and developing producing and purchasing countries alike engaged in corrupt practices.

German engineering company Ferrostaal, with substantial involvement in the maritime arms industry, is also a serial briber. Internal documents leaked in 2010 showed suspect payments worth hundreds of millions of dollars made over the previous decade relating to deals the world over. Major arms sales in which corrupt

payments were allegedly made include German submarine sales to Greece and Portugal.

The arms trade can also corrupt political systems and democratic practices. Of particular concern is the 'revolving door' that exists between the military and the arms industry, with senior military officers in the US and UK (among others) routinely taking positions in the industry on retirement, placing them in a strong position to influence decisions by their former employer. In turn, arms industry personnel are frequently seconded to defence ministries, and are included in key decision-making bodies on defence policy. Arms companies such as Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Booz Allen Hamilton and SAIC are even involved in producing the US Presidential Daily Briefing!

Myth 6: National security requires blanket secrecy.

For some aspects of defence and security, there is a clear justification for secrecy by governments: war planning, technical details of advanced weapons, and the names and activities of intelligence agents, for example. But governments tend to apply wide-ranging secrecy to military, intelligence, and security matters far beyond the legitimate demands of national security.

This may be for many reasons: for one thing, because governments want to hide things that their citizens have a legitimate right to know about. Several countries publish absolutely no information about their defence budget, and many more provide only the barest details, frequently leaving out considerable off-budget spending, so that citizens have little or no idea how their money is being spent in this area. Such lack of transparency can be an effective cover for corruption. Excessive secrecy can also be used to deceive the public and parliamentarians for the purpose of achieving a particular policy goal, such as the manipulation of intelligence in both the US and UK to justify the Iraq war.

In other cases, excessive secrecy can result from more banal bureaucratic reasons. Studies in the US suggest that millions of documents are subject to classification not for overriding security reasons but because classification, and access to classified information, is a key mark of status among government employees, and secrets can be a vital commodity for trade between different agencies. An over-cautious approach that treats classification as the norm, with no disincentive for unnecessary secrecy, is also a factor. The result is both that important aspects of policy are kept out of the public eye and public debate, and that important information fails to be shared between different agencies, one of the factors, according to the 9/11 Commission, behind the failure of intelligence agencies to prevent the 9/11 attack.

The 2013 Open Society Justice Initiative, following consultations with over 500 experts in 70 countries, proposed a more positive approach with the Tshwane Principles on National Security and the Right to Information. These included:

- [A presumption of the public right to know, requiring specific justification for secrecy;
- [that governments should never withhold information on violations of human rights and international humanitarian law;
- [a public right to know about systems of surveillance;
- [protection for whistleblowers and journalists;
- [a fundamental right of public access to judicial processes, regardless of invocation of national security concerns;
- [independent oversight of the security sector; no indefinite classification of information, beyond the need for secrecy, and;
- [clear procedures for requesting declassification of information in the public interest.

Myth 7: Now is not the time to challenge the global arms business.

“The world is a more dangerous place than ever”. This, or similar formulations, have been heard from the mouths of politicians, military figures, security pundits, and especially the arms industry, for a very long time. Surely now is not a good time to challenge the global arms business when we need to protect ourselves against the myriad threats we face?

Over the past few years, and especially with the calamitous events of 2016, the world has become more dangerous. But in fact, up to around 2011, the global trend in the number of armed conflicts and the number of people killed in armed conflicts had been falling steadily for decades. Despite a recent upturn, largely due to the war in Syria, the level is still well below that of the Cold War. Meanwhile the frequency of famines and mass atrocities remains at an all-time low.

Both for psychological and political reasons, we are prone to ‘threat inflation’. Fear of terrorism is high, but in fact a US resident is more likely to be killed by drowning in the bath than in a terrorist attack. Threat inflation is also frequently used for political ends – the perception of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein as an insane megalomaniac bent on killing Americans, in league with Al Qaeda, and possessing weapons of mass destruction was carefully cultivated by politicians, amplified by the media, and used to justify the disastrous invasion of Iraq. This picture was false on every count. Excessive reaction to perceived threats indeed tends to be self-fulfilling, creating a more dangerous world. The election of Donald Trump is a prime example.

It is indeed more necessary now than ever to challenge the fear-mongering that justifies the global arms business, massive militarization and securitization, and the resort to military force—by Russia, Saudi Arabia and many others as well as the US and its allies—that brings about so much destruction and perpetuates a cycle of instability, fear and violence.

Bonus Myth 7.5: Nothing can be done about it

As 2016 comes to an end, it is easy to believe that everything is hopeless. Trump is in power, Russia and Assad are crushing Aleppo while the world watches, the arms business is protected by powerful political interests, and the voices against it are too weak and too seldom heard.

Major change never comes easy, and one individual can do little. But acting collectively, bringing together voices against militarism the world over, there is a lot that can be done. Some of the key elements of action against the global arms business and its corrupting effects include:

- [Learn to recognize the myths and dispute them;
- [Develop and promote ideas about long-term, human security and how to achieve it;
- [Demand transparency in military spending and arms acquisition;
- [Demand accountability over corruption in the arms trade, and protection for whistleblowers;
- [Act in solidarity, fitting strategies to different local contexts and issues, but working together across countries.

Together, we can foster an evidence-driven, accountable and transparent public discussion of the global arms business. Together, we can start pointing out the absurdities that protect a business to the detriment of the security and economic prosperity of the world. By doing so, we can make the world a safer, more prosperous and more harmonious place.