

**Agora briefing :**  
*Is global rearmament  
flying under the radar?*

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## Executive summary

This piece discusses the issue of global rearmament in the post-Cold War world, highlighting how it has been allowed to advance unchecked and unscrutinised. It rarely makes the headlines, unless it involves those nations who use military authority as a means to project strength when they feel insecure. Had rearmament been noted and acted upon, perhaps the instability of today's world could have been mitigated against.

## Background

The context for this piece is the ongoing war in the Ukraine, plus the very real tensions surrounding the future of Taiwan as President Xi of China seeks to unify his people (those on mainland China) with a foreign policy success.

The issue of global rearmament is an immediate threat to world peace, and is a problem that has been gathering pace since the mid-1990s. It is a question that has two sides: nuclear; and conventional. A major concern regarding nuclear weapons relates to how many are being stockpiled across the globe, in particular by the USA and Russia. There are also fears of nuclear proliferation, with marked apprehension over attempts made by Iran, a so-called 'rogue nation', to construct nuclear weapons [1]. If Tehran was successful then there is a concern that this would destabilise the Middle East, and be an existential threat to Israel. In addition, there is trepidation over the proliferation of nuclear weapons even amongst democratic allies: Australia will be receiving nuclear submarines as part of a trilateral arrangement with the US and UK, the so-called AUKUS agreement. Given that Australia has voiced concerns over China, it is conceivable that Canberra could overreact if a regional conflict erupted. There is always the risk of escalation with more nations having access to these non-conventional weapons. Nonetheless, there is likely to be little movement on this matter. Neither Washington D.C. nor Moscow will enter into discussions on nuclear disarmament at this moment in time. President Putin has, after all, already mobilised his nuclear forces as a deterrent during the invasion of Ukraine. Putin has also taken the decision to deploy some nuclear weapons to Belarus - yet another escalation in his game of brinkmanship.

The more immediate threat, however, and one which affects far more nation states, is posed by the rearmament of conventional weapons and the increasing size of militaries. By 2021, 2.2% of the world's GDP was being allocated to armed forces; with recent decisions, this figure is set to rise further [2]. Germany, for example, in the wake of Russia's invasion of the Ukraine, has upped defence spending to 2% of GDP and allocated €100 billion to modernising their army [3]. Yet 'Russia's invasion of Ukraine has only accelerated a movement that began a few years ago after the annexation of Crimea in 2014' [4]. It is also important to point out that this is not a solely European phenomenon; rearmament has been going on outside of Europe since the 1990s. There are many interconnected drivers behind global rearmament. At a most basic level it is driven by national self-interest. Money is spent by states on their armed forces primarily as a deterrent, to ensure that others do not attack them. That this is necessary is indicative of another driver, namely uncertainty over the global strategic environment. You wouldn't, after all, spend money on defence if you didn't fear attack. Additionally, in an uncertain world, nations will often group together, in formal or informal alliances, as a show of strength. To be a part of these groups, states will have to contribute somehow to the broader defence of the group, or

risk being left to try and survive on their own. NATO countries, for instance, are expected to spend a minimum of 2% of their GDP on defence. That this rarely happens suggests how some countries view this collective defence as a means for protection on the cheap. A final factor would be what President Eisenhower termed the 'military-industrial' complex, a symbiotic relationship between defence industries and armed forces, where both benefit, financially and otherwise, from military build-ups, arms races and rearmament.

Despite appearances, the post-Cold War world has not been an era of international peace. Arguably, the 21st century has so far seen a contest between democracy and autocracy, which vaguely mimics the 20th century challenge between democracy and fascism. It was not, however, meant to be this way. President George H. W. Bush envisioned a post-Cold War world based on 'a partnership whose goals are to increase democracy, increase prosperity, increase the peace, and reduce arms.'<sup>[5]</sup> That disarmament was even mentioned demonstrates a sincere hope that the world could become more peaceful. However, as Henry Kissinger has pointed out, this was, 'for the third time ... America thus proclaim[ing] its intention to build a new world order by applying its domestic values to the world at large.'<sup>[6]</sup> Such a claim presupposed that America had the power to shape the world, the moral authority to do so, and that the rest of the world would stand idly by and allow Washington D.C. to make its vision a reality. None of these presumptions have proven correct.

For Britain there have been similar hurdles. Formerly the world's sole great power, modern Britain is still trying to maintain its relevance on the global stage. With economic crises this becomes more difficult, especially when funding the armed forces falls out of political favour, due to the decisions of political leaders rather than the actions of brave soldiers. To this end, like America, Britain lost a lot of moral authority during the disastrous Iraq war, and the sudden withdrawal from Afghanistan did not help the matter. However, Britain's willingness to send material and money to aid Ukraine has enamoured her to the world once again, and shone a light on Britain as the defender of democracy. For how long London will be able to maintain this level of spending is unknown, but there are benefits to being seen to be on the right side of history. Aside from the monetary aspect, there is the gifting of military equipment and arms to Ukraine. These supplies were intended for the British military but, as Kiev's need was, and is, greater, they have been sent to bolster the resources of the Ukrainian army. This means that there is a risk of supplies running out for British troops if they continue to be sent overseas. It could, therefore, be argued that by sending arms to Kiev, London is perpetuating global rearmament; the military-industrial complex will have to ramp up supply to both re-supply British forces, and to enable the west to continue to arm Ukraine. There is also the chance that British weaponry might not make it to the Ukrainian front lines, instead being sold on the black market by unscrupulous actors. These arms could then land in the hands of any number of armed groups, spreading death and destruction yet further afield. Better weapons are then needed to combat these forces and so the cycle continues.

Britain has, although a key protector of the tenets of democracy, aided global rearmament. Projections of power remain important to how Britain views its place in the world, and without a strong, technologically advanced military, why would any foe feel threatened by a tiny island in the North Sea? Hence the joint military exercises with NATO members, the sending of British naval ships to the Far East to keep an eye on China, alliances and agreements with America, Australia, Japan etc. But the more Britain and her allies try to bolster democracy, and their own intrinsic goals, this creates an imbalance that adversaries seek to correct, most notably through arms development.

National interests have, understandably, remained the priority for leaders. The Taiwan Straits crisis of 1995/96, for example, demonstrated to Beijing that it needed to drastically improve its military capabilities, if the Communist party was going to be able to deter the U.S. from interfering in Chinese affairs. Since then, China has spent vast sums on creating a military more capable of defending her shores. This has concerned Washington D.C. to the point where President Obama initiated a foreign policy 'pivot' to East Asia during his terms of office. In Russia, since his ascent to power in 2000, President Putin has initiated various state rearmament programmes in a bid to revive the power of the Soviet Union. This has increased tensions in Europe and the world, which culminated in the 2014 annexation of the Crimean peninsula, and has since developed into the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It is clear then that America's post-Cold War vision did not suit China or Russia. They thus took decisions to alter the status quo to their own liking. Meanwhile, Europe has not fallen in line either. Peace in Europe, coupled with continental wide divisions, left the foreign policies of western nations at odds with one another. As Kissinger has remarked, 'the absence of both an overriding ideological or strategic threat frees nations to pursue foreign policies based increasingly on their immediate national interest.' [7] It is also obvious that, since the Cold War, 'power has become more diffuse and the issues to which military force is relevant have diminished.' [8] In short, the pursuit of national self interests has created an imbalance in the international system, which conventional military strength is no longer able to counter. For instance, the American military, although still the superior conventional fighting force, has had to deal with unconventional warfare where its shortcomings have been demonstrated. Furthermore, its superiority has been slowly eroded, both by the rearmament of Russia and China, as well as the increasing importance of technology i.e. cyber warfare. This has similarities from history, notably how the Royal Navy was reduced from 'ruling the waves' to having to retreat to home waters as competitors modernised more quickly.

The moral authority of America to lead has also been proven to be flawed, which has only added to international uncertainty. The post 9/11 'war on terror', which saw invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, resulted in the death of thousands of innocent civilians and the wrongful imprisonment of countless others. This heavy handedness contributed to a wave of violence, with terrorist attacks killing thousands across the globe. This hostility demonstrated to all that there was no

international security in the traditional sense; battles fought by armies, navies and air forces, it seemed, were a thing of the past. Furthermore, hostile actors could hit civilians at home, thousands of miles away from any frontline. The result of this, for nation states, was to argue that if America cannot defend us, we will defend ourselves. Decisions were thus made to rearm, to greater or lesser degrees. In addition, the effectiveness and trustworthiness of the west's foreign policy has been undermined for some time now. The aforementioned invasion of Iraq, the incompetence of leaders and the ineffectiveness of the United Nations in controlling its member states have all contributed to a sense that there is a power vacuum. It is also the case that fighting necessarily needs weapons; this leads to a proliferation of weapons to both state and non-state actors, which causes more fighting and so continues the cycle. Meanwhile, with the west dealing with their self-made problems in the Middle East, Russia, China and others were able to build up their respective forces with no oversight from the U.N.

As the distance between the west and others has increased, these have been offset by improved relations between certain actors. It makes sense that Russia, much maligned, would see common cause with President Bashar Al-Assad of Syria, a leader who violently held onto power through the indiscriminate killing of his own people. The readmission of the latter to the Arab League demonstrates the success of this relationship. It also demonstrates, perhaps, efforts by another actor to want to reshape the post-Cold War world, namely Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The Crown Prince has already been using his country's vast wealth as a means to orchestrate matters within the Middle East, so who knows if his plans stretch further? Much has been made of the relationship between Russia and China; both powers view themselves as challengers to a global system dominated by America. However, this is only skin deep. China is not likely to get involved in a European conflict and risk antagonising America. In addition, Russia fears China's presence at both poles, which it views as being within its own sphere of influence [9]. This is, of course, at odds with the general school of thought that Russia and China are being pushed and/or pulled together by western aggression. Meanwhile, as NATO has been slowly growing post-Cold War, and with Finland and Sweden set to join this alliance, Russia's genuine and historical fears of encirclement will continue. That this alliance is purely defensive matters not.

A significant problem with rearmament is that it will inevitably lead to more tension between states. As nations rearm, their neighbours feel obliged to do the same in order to maintain their own security. There is also the risk of arms races; supersonic missiles are just the latest in a long line of technological leaps that cause powers to panic spend in order to keep up. The other side of this coin is that internally there will be pressure to utilise any new military resources. Why spend so much money on building up your ability to fight and then not doing so? Equally, soldiers that are trained to fight want to fight. Of course, this brings to mind President Eisenhower's quote: '[that] 'our toil, resources, and livelihood are all involved. So is the very structure of our society. In the councils of government, we

must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex.' [10] It is evident that 'Eisenhower was worried about the costs of an arms race with the Soviet Union, and the resources it would take from other areas -- such as building hospitals and schools.' [11] This is a fundamental problem with rearmament; it takes resources away from dealing with the climate crisis, with health crises, and from those less fortunate. Money is a finite resource, and the more that is spent on our militaries means that there is less available to help ordinary civilians. Of course, rearmament benefits those in defence industries, as lucrative contracts can be won from government. There will also be increased spending on a nation's army, navy and air force, which provide jobs for thousands and opportunities for our young people to see the world and make a difference.

## Conclusion

Global rearmament is a very real problem that has become so entrenched across the globe that it is difficult to see the genie being put back into the bottle. The military-industrial complex is very powerful, and so are the armed forces that are designed to defend each state. Breaking the military-industrial complex would go some way towards a global society less inclined to spread lethal weapons. Furthermore, advancing diplomacy must be seen as a states' greatest asset, rather than acting on spurious ideas of territorial aggrandisement. Nevertheless, we have to keep working to negate the problems of rearmament and utilise the funds to save the planet we all live on, otherwise military successes against neighbours will have been for nothing. Perhaps this means correcting mistakes made with the creation of the United Nations? This organisation has deep rooted flaws which, if resolved, could lead it to becoming a real driving force for disarmament.



## About the author

Dr Adam Jolly graduated from the University of East Anglia with his PhD in 2022, specialising in nineteenth century Anglo-Russian history.

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