

Global arms spending tops \$1.9 trillion as fight against COVID-19 is starved of resources

Bill Van Auken
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Amid the grim worldwide tally of over 3 million confirmed coronavirus cases and roughly 220,000 deaths—along with the scientific certainty that both figures grossly underestimate the real toll of the deadly virus—a report released this week provided another set of sobering statistics.

According to the annual report issued by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), global military spending has reached a new post-Cold War high, topping \$1.9 trillion in 2019. This is a vast quantity of social resources that has been funneled into the preparations for a new world war, under conditions in which humanity is confronting the ravages of a global pandemic.

“This is the highest level of spending since the 2008 global financial crisis and probably represents a peak in expenditure,” Nan Tian, a researcher at SIPRI, told the AFP news agency.

As always, US imperialism led the surge in ever more obscene levels of expenditure on militarism, accounting for 38 percent of global arms spending. Washington’s military budget for 2019 (fiscal 2020) was \$738 billion, a 5.3 percent increase over the previous year, and equal to 3.4 percent of US GDP. US military spending exceeded that of the next 10 highest-spending countries combined.

Driving this spike are the massive appropriations being made for the Pentagon’s nuclear triad—including new land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, new long-range bombers, a new cruise missile and a new nuclear-armed submarine. There has also been a focus on producing new smaller, more “usable” nuclear weapons, bringing the threat of a catastrophic war ever closer.

The total figure given by the SIPRI does not include \$12.6 billion appropriated to the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), a semi-autonomous agency within the Department of Energy, for “Weapons Activities,” i.e., manufacturing, maintaining and modernizing US imperialism’s stockpile of nuclear missile warheads and bombs.

The immense sums being spent to modernize and develop the US arsenal are in preparation for what US strategy documents define as “great power conflicts,” with China and Russia first among the targets. The Pentagon expects to spend \$500 billion

over ten years in modernizing all aspects of the US nuclear triad.

US imperialism’s arms expenditures far exceed those of its “great power” rivals. In 2019, it spent well over two and a half times more than its chief economic rival, China, whose \$261 billion military budget is the world’s second largest, and well over 10 times more than the supposed arch menace, Russia (\$61.4 billion), which placed fourth on the list of top spending nations.

Washington’s immense military buildup enjoys the support of all factions of the US political establishment, proceeding under both Democratic and Republican administrations. Democratic opposition to Trump has never been based upon hostility to militarism; it has instead targeted his administration over its supposed reluctance to adopt a sufficiently aggressive posture toward Russia.

It is assured that both parties will provide ample support for the Pentagon’s latest budget request of \$740.5 billion, which represents a \$2.5 billion increase over the last year.

China’s increase in military spending has closely tracked the country’s economic growth, which means that, while it was 5.1 percent higher than in 2018, it was 85 percent greater than in 2010. It accounts for 1.9 percent of Chinese GDP, as compared to 3.4 percent for the United States.

Following the US and China, the third highest military budget was that of India, which climbed to \$71.1 billion in 2019, a 6.8 percent increase over the previous year, and a 37 percent increase compared to 2010. The military buildup under the right-wing Hindu nationalist government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi dwarfs that of its regional rival, Pakistan, which spent \$10.3 billion, 1.8 percent more than in 2018. The two nuclear-armed South Asian countries have repeatedly come to the brink of war.

Rounding out the top five in terms of military expenditures was Saudi Arabia (\$61.9 billion), whose blood-soaked ruling monarchy spends the greatest share of GDP (8 percent) on arms of any country in the world. The lion’s share of this weaponry has been funneled into the kingdom by the US, which—under both Obama and Trump—has supplied the warplanes, missiles

and bombs that the Saudi regime has used to wage a near-genocidal war against Yemen, killing over 100,000 and bringing millions to the brink of starvation.

Germany, while placing seventh on the list after France, had the distinction of achieving the highest rate of increase (10 percent) in military spending of any of the major powers. The coalition government in Berlin has deployed troops in multiple military interventions in Africa, the Middle East, the Mediterranean and Afghanistan. Seventy-five years after the defeat of the Third Reich and the end of World War II, the German ruling class is itself once again preparing for “great power conflicts.”

As this report documents the immense wealth that has been spent to prepare for and to wage global war, it is abundantly clear that the global coronavirus pandemic has deterred none of the major powers, least of all the US, from further escalating this buildup.

On the contrary, Washington has systematically weaponized the deadly virus, using it as an instrument for vilifying China and justifying a military escalation in the South China Sea. At the same time, it has tightened sanctions against Iran, which has faced one of the worst coronavirus outbreaks in the world, and sent warships against Venezuela, whose health care system is threatened with collapse, with the aim of advancing its agenda of regime change in both countries.

The continued spending of trillions of dollars on arms and war amid the present pandemic represents a crime against humanity.

While the Democrats and Republicans overwhelmingly approved the \$738 billion for the Pentagon, they have systematically starved the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the principal US agency for combatting pandemics, of funding, with its budget suffering a 10 percent cut over the last decade (FY 2010-19). These funding cuts played a major role in the government’s failure to prepare for the pandemic and its chaotic response to the outbreak once it began, sabotaging the agency’s rollout of testing for the coronavirus and translating into unnecessary and preventable deaths.

The CDC receives barely 1.5 percent of the funding that is lavished on the Pentagon. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is preparing to spend billions of dollars bailing out major arms manufacturers, even as tens of millions of laid-off workers are unable to secure unemployment compensation, facing the threat of hunger and homelessness, while small businesses, denied promised aid, confront bankruptcy.

The vast resources spent on weapons could provide the means for combating the pandemic and preventing working people from being driven into poverty.

As a recent report prepared by the Global Campaign on Military Spending pointed out, the \$89 million being spent to buy a single F-35 fighter jet—the Pentagon projects purchasing as many as 3,000 of them—would fund 3,244 ICU beds for a

year, while the \$44,000 it costs per hour to operate these planes is roughly the equivalent of the average annual salary for a nurse across the OECD countries. Similarly, the price tag for one nuclear-capable Trident II missile—\$31 million—would pay for 17 million N95 respirator masks.

The SIPRI report exposes the fact that roughly three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, US imperialism is fomenting a new arms race that threatens humanity with destruction in a catastrophic world war between nuclear-armed powers.

In the struggle for the control of resources, markets and sources of cheap labor, capitalist militarism continues to consume a colossal amount of resources, diverting them from achieving the essential rights of the masses of working people to livable incomes, education, health care and a decent life.

The contempt of the capitalist ruling class for the lives of workers all over the world is demonstrated in its back-to-work orders, issued as COVID-19 claims an ever-increasing number of victims, just as it is in their resort to militarism to achieve the geo-strategic and profit interests of the banks and corporations.

The only answer to the criminal drive to war that threatens all of humanity lies in the mobilization of the international working class against capitalism. Workers must fight for the expropriation of the vast arms industry without compensation and the confiscation of the obscene profits of its major shareholders so that these resources can be mobilized to combat the global pandemic and assure the social needs of the vast majority of the population. These indispensable demands are bound inextricably to the fight for the transfer of power to the working class and the establishment of socialism.



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