The failure of war and its weapons

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The World Health Organization's definition of violence is "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation". This note puts its main emphasis on the use or threat of force against larger communities, especially between states and interstate alliances. It is concerned with the recent experience of violent conflict at this level and how that relates to the possibilities of a more peaceful world. In doing so it explores five main elements, all in the context of the post-1945 world – weapons of mass destruction, conventional warfare, the military system, political violence after 9/11 and current and future drivers of large-scale violent conflict.

Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)

The three main WMD groups are nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of which the most destructive as currently developed are nuclear weapons. These originated at the end of World War II when two small weapons were used against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki killing at least 150,000 people and injuring many more. In the early post-war years increasing tensions between two alliances, NATO and the Warsaw Pact, resulted in a huge armaments competition in which the nuclear element resulted in arsenals large enough to cause global catastrophe.

The Hiroshima bomb detonated with a force of just over 10 kilotons (equal to 10,000 tons of conventional high explosive) but within a decade the United States and the Soviet Union were building megaton weapons, at least a hundred times the power of the Hiroshima bomb. The use of 20 such weapons against the centres of population of a large country would kill many millions of people, have catastrophic social and economic effects and set the country back many decades.

Even so, this did not prevent a nuclear expansion to extraordinary levels, mainly by the United States and the Soviet Union. Between them these states built up their nuclear stockpiles to a combined total of over 60,000 by the early 1980s. Other states followed, albeit at a lower level of hundreds rather than thousands of weapons, with the UK, France, China and Israel all developing their own nuclear arsenals by the end of the 1960s, to be followed by India in the 1970s, Pakistan in the 1990s and North Korea more recently.

Not all states capable of developing nuclear weapons did so, even if some, such as Sweden, Switzerland, Brazil and Argentina actively considered doing. Only one state has developed nuclear weapons and then given them up, this being South Africa at the end of the apartheid era.

Five further features of nuclear weapons have current relevance. The first is that although nuclear weapons have not been used in warfare since 1945, there have been numerous serious accidents, some of them involving radioactive contamination and others involving nuclear weapons lost and never recovered. The second is that the nuclear era has seen a very wide range of types of nuclear weapons developed, many of them hugely more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb but others much smaller and intended for battlefield use. The latter have included short-range missiles, artillery, anti-aircraft missiles, anti-submarine depth bombs and torpedoes and even landmines light enough to be carried by one person.

Related to this is the third element - that nuclear weapons have been seen as useable in conflicts short of world war, and a number of nuclear weapons states have actively pursued policies of the first use of nuclear weapons, including the NATO alliance. The combination of perceived usability and diversity brings us to the fourth feature, the experience of crises and incidents that have been experienced since 1945, some taking the world dangerously close to a nuclear war. They include the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and the *Able Archer* episode of 1983, but to these have been added a substantial number of false alarms which fortunately were not acted on but could also have resulted in an accidental nuclear war.

The final element, stemming in part from the pervasive presence of nuclear weapons, the tendency towards first use and the dangers from crises and accidents is that the idea that nuclear deterrence is a stable phenomenon is highly dangerous, even if repeatedly used by states to assure their populations that nuclear weapons keep the peace.

During the course of the 45-year Cold War there were repeated efforts made to bring the nuclear confrontation under control, and there were some useful bilateral and multilateral agreements. The former included the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union which involved the mutually verified dismantling of a class of weapons based in Europe, and a series of Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties which placed some curbs on the deployment of long-range missiles and bombers. Multilateral treaties included the Limited Test Ban Treaty and the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the latter allowing five existing nuclear weapon states – U.S., UK, France, China and the Soviet Union - to retain their forces while non-nuclear weapons states eschewed the right to build their own arsenals.

A condition of allowing the five NPT signatories with nuclear weapons to be party to the treaty was their willingness progressively to de-nuclearise, but while there were significant reductions in the early post-Cold War years, all five countries maintain arsenals and have actual programmes or plans to modernise their systems. In the 1990s there was a significantly decreased commitment to retaining nuclear arsenals and some of the leading political and military participants in the Cold War even supported the idea of moving realistically to a nuclear-free world, but these intentions were not realised.

Instead, by the 2010s, three major developments were unfolding that increased the risk of a return to some of the crisis circumstances of the Cold War. One was the controversy over Iran's nuclear weapons intentions, with the United States and Israel intent on preventing any actual weapons development. This initially seemed contained by a multilateral agreement in 2015 but two years later the incoming Trump administration in the United States made it clear that the agreement was not acceptable. The second was the clear nuclear ambitions of the Kim Jong Un regime, including a number of nuclear weapon and long-range missile tests, an aspect subject to negotiation at the time of writing.

The final development is the substantially increased reliance that Russia in placing on nuclear weapons as it combines re-establishing itself as a great power with the reality of a weak economy and inadequate conventional forces. This coupled with bitter arguments over Russian behaviour in Ukraine, Crimea and Syria and the enlargement of NATO and its spread to the immediate neighbourhood of Russia, mean the East-West relations have witnessed a marked deterioration over the past decade. An overall picture is of nuclear weapons involving particular risks and dangers during the Cold War followed by some drawing back in the 1990s. That though has been reversed with the risk of return to the dangers of the Cold War era. There are currently proposals for a full Nuclear Weapons Convention but while these are supported by many non-nuclear weapon states the current nuclear weapon states are opposed.

The situation is rather different for chemical and biological weapons, both of which are subject to world-wide conventions that ban production, deployment and use, though not research on defence measures. The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) came into force in 1997 and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) was agreed in 1972. The former has verification and inspection procedures but the latter does not.

The prohibition of chemical weapons since 1997 has only been partially successful. It requires all parties to the treaty to destroy all their CW stocks, which in the case of the Soviet Union and the United States involved tens of thousands of tons of chemical agent. Most have now been destroyed but CW use has persisted recently in the war in Syria. Moreover there are serious concerns that the future development of highly effective neuro-active chemical agents may extend the potential for chemical weapon use and an added concern is the uncertain border between the use of riot control agents and chemical weapons.

There are currently very few biological agents that can be effective in most forms of violent conflict although this does not hold true for anthrax or for some toxins. The concern here is that the very rapid developments in biotechnology in general and gene manipulation in particular mean that there is potential to produce "tailored" biological or toxin weapons. Moreover this is in the context of a very active research field in which dual-use technologies are common. What makes this particularly worrying is that the BTWC is a very weak treaty and repeated efforts to strengthen it over the past decade have failed.

In general, chemical and biological weapons do not have the destructive potential of nuclear weapons at present and are meant to be constrained by treaties, but the recent erosion of the CWC and the inherent weakness in the BTWC mean that the scope for breakout is considerable. If that were to happen in either area the potential for a particularly dangerous escalation in violence would be considerable.

Conventional warfare

From 1945 through to 2001 there were frequent wars affecting many millions of people. In the first 30 years many of these were wars of decolonisation but these also connected to the second major trend in international conflict, proxy wars fought indirectly between the western and Soviet power blocs. Among the worst of the conflicts, around 70,000 people were killed in both Nicaragua and El Salvador, 390,000 in Angola, over 600,000 in the Horn of Africa and over a million in Mozambique. Wars fought within the East-West context in Asia were even worse, including 1.3 million killed in Afghanistan, 2.3 million in Vietnam and three million in Korea.

These are all figures for direct deaths but this disguises a much greater impact since the effects extend to the far larger numbers of injuries, many of them leading to later deaths because of poor medical resources. Furthermore, societies in many poorer countries in this era had far more limited national support systems including poor transport and housing, lack of insurance and capacity for providing emergency relief. One consequence was that conflicts had the effect of seriously damaging already limited development prospects.

There have also been some sustained conflicts breaking out on occasions into open warfare, examples being the LTTE rebellion in Sri Lanka, the Israeli/Arab conflict and Indo-Pakistan confrontations. In overall terms, though, the dominant causes of conflict in the 45 years to 1990 were the proxy wars and these are estimated to have killed 10 million people and seriously injured 25 million more, figures that give the lie to the idea that the nuclear stalemate kept the peace. In the 1990s there were periods of major conflict that followed directly from the end of the Cold War, most notably the complex and often interrelated conflicts in former Yugoslavia, the Afghan civil war and the wars in the Caucasus. There were also intense and hugely costly wars in the Great Lakes region of eastern Africa. Throughout this period, there were efforts principally by UN diplomats to prevent conflicts developing and UN agencies were also involved in mediation and peacekeeping initiatives, but these were not substantial in relation to the extent of the conflicts.

Over the entire period from 1945 to 2001, arms industries worked hard to ensure buoyant arms sales ranging from light weapons through to tanks, aircraft, long-range missiles and warships. One effect of the widespread availability of light weapons in regions where outright war developed was that in chaos of war and post-war disorder, light weapons would “cascade” down to individuals and small communities without any central control. This proved a particular problem in the 1990s, a period that also coincided with a brief

decline in world military spending which was largely due to the collapse of most of the Soviet bloc economies and ended with the start of the “War on Terror” in 2001.

2001 and after

The killing of close to 3,000 people in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 heralded a widespread period of conflict in the Middle East and South Asia that continues to the present day. The attack itself was partly a provocation by the al-Qaida movement, an incitement to the United States to try and occupy Afghanistan, much as the Soviet Union had failed to do two decades earlier. The alternative approach would have been to treat the killings as appalling examples of mass transnational criminality and bring those behind the attacks to justice through international legal means.

That approach was completely unacceptable to the United States and its close allies and, instead, the war against the al-Qaida group was rapidly extended to a much wider conflict that involved regime termination not just in Afghanistan but in Iraq and Libya as well. In Afghanistan, the al-Qaida movement was suppressed and the Taliban regime was terminated within three months of the 9/11 attacks. In January 2002 President George W Bush identified an “axis of evil” of rogue states that were supporters of terrorism and aiming to develop weapons of mass destruction. This was seen as a wholly unacceptable risk and if these states did not cease their actions and change policies then it was appropriate to take pre-emptive action. The Saddam Hussein regime was terminated in March and April 2003 and President Bush could then point to major successes in both Afghanistan and Iraq, successes which made the United States and the world community much safer.

The reality proved to be disastrously different. The al-Qaida movement remained active after its eviction from Afghanistan with numerous attacks against western targets from Spain to Indonesia and Morocco to Egypt. Moreover, within three years of the termination of the Taliban in Afghanistan it re-emerged to progressively take control of substantial rural areas. Large numbers of western troops were drafted into the country to prevent the collapse of the government peaking at some 140,000 troops by 2012. The Taliban persisted and most of the western troops have been withdrawn but the war is expected to continue into its 18th year.

In Iraq the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime was followed not by the building of a peaceful oil-rich pro-western state but by seven years of insurgency made hugely worse by bitter internal inter-confessional conflict. U.S.-led forces appeared to bring the conflict under a degree of control by 2010 and most of the 100,000+ western troops were then withdrawn. The success was illusory, with an even more extreme offshoot of the al-Qaida movement in Iraq evolving into ISIS which gained control of much of northern Iraq by early 2014, extending its territorial control to include much of northern Syria which was already embroiled in its own civil war.

In 2011 the Gaddafi regime in Libya was terminated following NATO support for an insurgency. Following this, though, Libya moved into serious instability with hundreds of individual militias competing for control. Moreover, much of Libya's substantial arsenals of weapons came into general circulation with many of them spreading to other areas of conflict across North Africa, the Sahel and the Middle East.

As of 2018 conflict continues in Libya, extreme Islamic movements are active across northern and eastern Africa, the Sahel, the Middle East, Afghanistan and parts of South-East Asia and there are repeated warnings of the risk of terror attacks in western Europe. The total human costs of the wars, made even worse by the Syrian civil war are well over half a million people killed, far more than 10 million people displaced across borders or within their own countries and weak or failing states in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya.

The wider global picture is complicated by renewed tensions between Russia and NATO member states and a consequence of the "war of terror" and renewed East-West tensions have been a world-wide increase in military spending. Western armed forces and armaments companies experienced some contraction in the 1990s with the decrease in governmental spending which was a consequence of the decline of its former enemy, the Soviet Union. The lack of an enemy was rectified by al-Qaida's attack on 11 September 2001 and further enhanced by the declaration of an "axis of evil". These new enemies have now been further enhanced by the perceived threat from Russia and, as a consequence, world military spending is exceeding its Cold War peak and is expected to continue to grow, not least with the Trump and Putin governments leading the way. The military system can, in these circumstances, look forward to a bright future.

The military system

The term "military-industrial complex" was used by the former military commander and U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower at the end of his second term in office. He used it to warn of the dangers of a military development and production system that was sufficiently integrated and powerful to have considerable influence in determining international security policy, the persistent tendency being to prioritise violent responses to perceived threats. It is a system that has elements that have evolved over centuries but was hugely boosted by the mass production techniques that came to the fore in World War II, especially in the Manhattan Project that produced the first atomic bomb. At the core of the complex is a largely self-sustaining system demonstrating a high degree of integration between manufacturers, the military and political leaderships, all benefitting from security policies predicated on the potential and actual use of force.

It is more sensible to talk of a military-industrial-academic-bureaucratic complex, given the involvement of universities and research institutes and bureaucracies, each gaining from financial resources based on raised perceptions of external threats that require capabilities based on military forces. The complex in any one country or alliance is largely self-supporting and self-sustaining, with high levels of component interaction. Thus many

academic centres will be largely staffed by former military, significant income streams will come from government and arms companies and many of the students will be from military backgrounds. Senior military and civil servants will commonly be recruited as consultants by arms companies when they retire, especially if they have worked in areas of procurement and weapons development. They may also link with security think tanks that are largely funded from industry and government departments. This “revolving door” is a common feature in most countries and tends to place a premium on military capabilities as primary responses to security challenges.

Three further features of the complex are relevant. One is that the complex often depends very heavily on arms exports, but these are dependent on potential buyers seeing threats to their own security to the extent that arms companies are all too ready to exaggerate those threats, either in their own marketing processes or by funding appropriately orientated research in think tanks and academic centres. Countries with thriving arms industries will provide diplomatic and other support for arms sales, mounting exhibitions, facilitating travel and providing intelligence and there is also the widespread problem of bribery and corruption in the system, even if this is commonly masked through the use of local “agents” who open the necessary doors and use their “commission” to good effect.

Secondly, it is also helpful to see the military-industrial-academic-bureaucratic complex as a series of interlocking and mutually dependent bureaucracies, the success of which is dependent on demonstrating need. Thus, an arms company that sees one of its weapon systems used in a war will publicise that through the industry and in the defence and security journals, not infrequently under the heading “combat proven”. A major intelligence agency depends for its future well-being and possible expansion on demonstrating to the political leadership and the wider public that the country faces serious security threats for which the agency requires additional funding.

Thirdly, one of the trends of the past two decades has been for the privatisation of many elements of the security system especially the growth of private military and security companies. They may frequently be employed in areas of recent or evolving conflict where they are less accountable than the formal military and they also have the advantage for the employing state that casualties attract little media attention.

Finally, a further relevant development has been the progressive merging and consolidation of the world’s arms companies into a handful of very large transnational corporations. These do not just have very well funded lobbying systems but the consolidation also means that competition is increasingly limited. There may therefore be just a single corporation with the capacity to build aircraft carriers or nuclear missile submarines and this, combined with the revolving door, means persistent problems of cost control, so much so that cost inflation becomes the norm.

Global conflict trends

In the near future there are several causes for concern, including the risk of war between Iran and Israel backed by the United States. Extreme Islamist groups continue to be deeply problematic and there is potential for a renewed axis of tension between Russia and NATO. Beyond this, though, are three global trends which show every sign of combining to lead to global fragility and instability, a surprising situation considering the development of numerous technologies that should make life more fulfilling for the whole world community.

One trend is centred on the abject failure of the current economic system to deliver sufficient equity and emancipation. In addition to the one percent of extremely high net wealth individuals and families lies the wider issue of the development of a trans-global elite of around one fifth of the world's people that accounts for some 85 percent of the wealth and even more of the annual income. The way the neoliberal economy has developed has brought growth at a price and is increasingly resented by the majority. There is, indeed, the paradox of the real and impressive improvements in education, literacy and communications across the Global South in the past half century that have actually resulted in far greater awareness of the wealth-poverty divide. We therefore have what may be described as the phenomenon of the "knowledgeable margins" and the bitterness, resentment and anger that this brings and the real risk of an era of "revolts from the margins" as already witnessed in the Middle East and South Asia.

This trend is made far more dangerous as the impact of climate disruption begins to take effect, especially in the poorer parts of the world where there can be immediate and severe consequences not just for individual communities but for whole states. The need to migrate to countries where reasonable living might just be possible is likely to become intense but will face even greater opposition than has been experienced in the past few years in eastern and southern Europe, opposition made more likely be met with pervasive but fundamentally inappropriate military responses.

An assessment of the risk written almost two decades ago summarised the consequences, especially when the likely responses extend to the military suppression of potential and actual revolts:

> What should be expected is that new social movements will develop that are essentially anti-elite in nature and draw their support from people on the margins. In different contexts and circumstances they may have the roots in political ideologies, religious beliefs, ethnic, nationalist or cultural identities, or a complex combination of several of these. They may be focussed on individuals or groups but the most common feature is an opposition to existing centres of power. They may be sub-state groups directed at the elites in their own state or foreign interests, or they may hold power in states in the South, and will no doubt be labelled as rogue states as they direct their responses towards the North. What can be said is that, on

> present trends, anti-elite action will be a core feature of the next 30 years – not so much a clash of civilisations, more an age of insurgencies. (*Losing Control,* 2000, p.98)

Conclusion

After the most devastating war in history, the decades since 1945 have been marked not by a more peaceful world but by numerous conflicts, the development of weapons of mass destruction, a deepening socio-economic divide and an environmentally constrained world. Over the last 73 years the global experience has been of multiple conflicts feeding into a military complex that has sucked in trillions of dollars of wealth and vast amounts of intellectual endeavour, appalling diversions from the proper task of responding fairly to human needs and aspirations.

Not only do we now need to address the core issues of a failing economic system and potentially catastrophic climate disruption but we have to do so in the context of a military outlook best described as the control paradigm which is rooted in the idea of suppressing threats not understanding their causes. Instead we have to move towards a process of peaceful change that is predicated on the power of nonviolent approaches. Given the severity of the problems facing us, and the utter failure of the "war on terror", such a requirement may now be more evident but the power of the existing system is formidable and it will take much endeavour to change direction.