

Stop the Arms Race Madness

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has fed calls for the West to radically step up its own military spending. An arms race only increases the risk of a conflict between China and the US — a global disaster that we must do everything in our power to prevent.

With Vladimir Putin's disastrous invasion of Ukraine, the debate on military spending has forcefully reemerged at the center of global politics. But a strange paradox runs through its veins. On the one hand, all illusions of Russian military might are crumbling, under the weight of an invasion that looks doomed to failure. On the other hand, the West's leaders are acting as though the complete opposite was the case.

While Russian propagandists would have you believe that their army is "just getting started," as Putin boasted last summer, everyone with eyes on the battlefield can see a different reality unfolding. T-54 tanks produced during Stalin's reign are being dusted off [and sent to the front](#). Missile attacks are becoming scarcer in the face of sanctions impeding their production, and rusty artillery shells are increasingly [hampering Moscow's efforts](#) to maintain superior firepower. Even the highly anticipated winter offensive in Donetsk has turned out to be a whimper, with no real gains to show for the thousands of dead Russian soldiers now littering the hellish wasteland around Bakhmut.

The idea of a "Potemkin village" — all display, no substance — was first used to prop up Empress Catherine's achievements in Crimea. The same doctrine seems to apply to the Russian military's efforts in the region. Despite this obvious decline in Moscow's military capacity, a feverish arms race is being spearheaded by the Western alliance, gripping all countries across ideological divides.

German chancellor Olaf Scholz has declared the war a "turning point," vowing to spend an extra €100 billion on the German military in the coming years. Not to be outdone, French president Emmanuel Macron plans to raise his country's military budget by 40 percent by 2030 — a 100 percent rise since he first took power in 2017. And in the United States, no expense is ever spared in funding the military-industrial complex, which has more [than doubled since the start of the new millennium](#).

But while it's a bonanza for them, it's the rest of us who have to put up with the costs — and the dangers that result.

Working People Foot the Bill

This is evident in Germany, where the backdrop to the proposed €100 billion arms spending spree is an ever-increasing struggle for the country's poorest to stay afloat. This in large part owes to spiraling gas and food prices, which have forced many people [to turn off the heat](#). In France, the country's military ambitions come as a hard sell for the millions being asked to work more hours for less pay: [Hugely unpopular pension reforms](#) have been [rammed through](#) the National Assembly, while inflation bites into the household incomes of average workers. In Britain, the government is stealthily introducing massive [budget cuts of up to £28 billion](#) in public services, at the same time

declaring [a doubling of](#) the annual defense budget over the next seven years.

Nowhere has the war been more explicitly linked to sacrificing workers' rights than in Denmark, where the government [has abolished a public holiday](#) in order to finance increased defense spending. "There is war in Europe, and we need to strengthen our defenses. . . . And that will require everyone to contribute a little more," says the Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen. Exempt from this call to sacrifices are those profiteering from the crisis, such as the partly state-owned energy company, Ørsted, which posted a [record profit](#) of \$5 billion last year, or the Danish shipping giant Maersk, with its [surplus of \\$31 billion](#) — the firm's best-ever annual result.

The war effort has taken an especially heavy toll on workers' rights in Ukraine itself. As the Ukrainian researcher [Lidiia Tkachenko](#) explains: "Under martial law, the rights of workers were seriously limited, while companies were able to fire workers and/or minimize personnel costs."

This is not just a European problem. In South Korea, a proposal of a [sixty-nine-hour work week](#) was announced almost simultaneously with an annual [increase of almost 7 percent to the military budget](#) over the next five years. All these new squeezes on working-class living standards must be seen in relation to their government's efforts to fund more arms.

The strangely absent question remains: Where does the increased threat to the Western borders come from, which necessitates such drastic measures? Surely not the anemic Russian military, disintegrating before our very eyes in Ukraine. While the Russian army is failing to achieve even limited objectives in the Donbas, it is laughable to think that it could pose a threat to the collective West, let alone members of the NATO alliance.

The Myth of Under-Preparedness

Still, the West continues building up its conventional deterrence, as though the threat of an actual invasion were real. The framing is clear: despite already massive military budgets, and even though NATO members constitute more than half the world's total military expenditure, the West has been caught off guard. In the words of EU foreign affairs chief [Josep Borrell](#): "Preparing for the future . . . means repairing the underspending of the past." This discourse revolves around the need for the West to "wake up" and realize its naivete, with Lord Robertson, the former secretary general of NATO, even urging British prime minister Rishi Sunak to "[act as a wartime prime minister](#)."

The conjured image of an alliance woefully underprepared to deal with the threat of war is frequently espoused by the mainstream media, where [stories](#) of ammunition [shortages](#) have become a [near-daily occurrence](#). If these claims have some merit, it's misleading to draw a parallel between artillery stockpiles and general preparedness. The artillery war currently on display in the Donbas has pointed to holes in the NATO arsenal — but that's because it is a scenario that would never unfold within NATO borders. Every piece of artillery would simply be shredded by the air and naval superiority at the core of NATO's military doctrine, but which — for both logistical and political reasons — has so far played no role in Ukraine.

While the Admiral Kuznetsov, Russia's sole aircraft carrier, [languishes in a state of permanent repairs](#) in Murmansk, the United States recently inaugurated its latest addition to the fleet, the [USS Gerald Ford](#), at a cost of about \$17 billion. While Russia struggles to maintain the skies above Ukraine, the US Air Force and its vastly superior fleet of thirteen thousand planes has not even entered the fight. As such, the argument of artillery shortages only becomes relevant in the regional context of supporting Ukraine, not as a general assessment of NATO's defensive capabilities.

But where on Earth should these "underprepared" — we are led to believe, "malnourished" — NATO

militaries ever find the means to adjust their spending to the current situation? One could humbly suggest that the Pentagon stop wasting money on funding [conspiracy theories](#), or even that it cut back slightly on the [\\$200 billion](#) being thrown at a largely useless submarine fleet. But when it comes to financing the military-industrial complex, the neoliberal logic of limiting government is rarely applied rigorously.

If the war in Ukraine has proven anything, it is that the military gap between NATO and Russia is even larger than most analysts thought before February 24, 2022. But maybe we should have been less surprised, considering the enormous discrepancy in military spending between the two sides. NATO countries already spend roughly sixteen times more on the military — an estimate that doesn't even take into account the already-announced budget increases, nor the huge [corruption issues](#) inflating the Russian figures. With a fraction of its stockpiles, the alliance has made Ukraine capable of holding its own, and likely go on the offensive soon. As such, the argument of sacrificing workers' rights in order to finance increased military spending becomes wholly contradictory to the facts on the ground in Ukraine.

Behind its pompous rhetoric, the Kremlin is well aware of this fact. This is why the Finnish application for NATO membership was not met with any real response by Russia, who instead [withdrew its troops from the border](#). Indeed, the Russian threat to the Western alliance does not come from a conventional military invasion, where its vast fleet of obsolete Soviet-era tanks would roll across the borders. Instead, Russia seeks to destabilize and subjugate its rivals through subterfuge, misinformation, and forming alliances with like-minded right-wing ideologues in the West. This strategy is aptly referred to as "the Gerasimov Doctrine" by many analysts, deriving its name from the current commander in chief of the Russian armed forces, aware of the military power gap more than most.

Chinese Enemy

But who then, are we arming ourselves to fight, if not the failing, corrupt, weaker-by-the-day Russian military? For an increasing number of pundits and politicians, the terrifying answer to that question seems to be — China.

Preparing the general population for an actual war is the first step on the path to open conflict. In both China and the West, this prospect is now being frequently [entertained](#), with [Xi Jinping](#) echoing the [Pentagon's assessment](#) of needing to prepare for war. This manufacturing of consent seamlessly fills the ever-more dangerous, bellicose rhetoric that has been brewing for years among the hawks of all countries, further amplified by a rise in Sinophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic. This growing distrust has recently seen the [proposed ban](#) of the Chinese social media [giant TikTok](#), wrapping the legislation in a draconian surveillance package [some have dubbed](#) "the Patriot Act on steroids."

What the hawks rarely mention are the consequences such a war would have on a global scale. At best, this would lock the world in a power struggle for decades, exacerbating our current plethora of crises, from accelerating the climate crisis through increasing the inflation and hunger catastrophes. At worst, we would be going down the path of a global nuclear holocaust.

While some analysts call the growing conflict [doomed to escalate](#), we must reject such notions. Nothing is inevitable in politics. The gradual normalization of diplomatic relations between China and the United States during the 1970s should be an example for Western leaders. Lifting the American trade embargo in 1971 allowed for a gradual lowering of tensions that is sorely need today. But this kind of sensible détente policy — overseen by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, of all people — seems a far cry from the actions of their Republican heirs, hell-bent on further antagonizing Beijing through [visits to Taiwan](#) and calls for [American boots in Taipei](#). Now more than

ever, the world needs to come together in combating the threats facing our species as a whole, from mass extinction to a potential climate apocalypse.

In the West, this starts with strengthening the diplomatic hand of the people in Beijing less prone to “wolf warrior diplomacy,” and more open to diplomatic solutions. The appointment of former US ambassador Qin Gang as minister of foreign affairs provides such an opportunity. In a recent opinion piece in [the Washington Post](#), Qin opened the door to more “mutual cooperation” on both sides of the Pacific. Rather than cynically dismissing this as disingenuous games, the West — even if it sees itself as China’s geopolitical “rival” — must hold Qin to his word, and provide a show of goodwill and de-escalation.

As well as increasing diplomatic efforts, we also need to stop antagonizing Chinese efforts to promote peace — regardless of their motives. [China’s peace plan for Ukraine](#) might be inadequate for both sides of the war, and is ultimately unlikely to lead anywhere. It nevertheless presents the West with another opportunity to strengthen diplomatic relations. When Qin [recently announced](#) that his country would not sell weapons to any parties in the Ukraine war, this should have been celebrated as an important step in neutering the Russian war effort, thus bringing the war closer to an end.

Instead, the rising tensions surrounding Taiwan have led to even more rearmament in the region. The [Australian government](#) has pledged a staggering £200 billion to the development of a [nuclear submarine fleet](#), while Japan vows to [increase](#) its military spending by 60 percent in the coming five years. And with the mayor of Seoul now pushing for [South Korean nuclear weapons](#), is it any wonder that China feels pressured to increase its own military spending and presence? Behind the scenes, the aggressive rhetoric has started worrying even the hard-line [Taiwanese government](#). Josep Borrell’s recent [suggestion that the EU](#) should start patrolling the already crowded waters of the Taiwan Strait only adds to these worries.

The arms race madness needs to stop before it’s too late. By all means, let us help the Ukrainians defend their homeland from the illegal Russian invasion. But their sacrifice must not become an excuse for the escalation of tensions elsewhere — and should not come at the cost of workers’ living conditions. It’s a tricky balancing act for sure, but it’s a diplomatic tightrope the world needs to walk. Its future might depend on it.

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