

World Military Spending Still Rising

Despite economic recession and government austerity, the world's military spending continued to grow last year, exceeding \$1.7 trillion, with the United States accounting for more than two-fifths of that money, as Lawrence S. Wittner reports.

By Lawrence S. Wittner

On April 17, as millions of Americans were filing their income tax returns, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) released its latest study of world military spending. In case Americans were wondering where most of their tax money – and the tax money of other nations – went in the previous year, the answer from SIPRI was clear: to war and preparations for war.

World military spending reached a record \$1,738 billion in 2011 – an increase of \$138 billion over the previous year. The United States accounted for 41 percent of that, or \$711 billion.

Some news reports have emphasized that, from the standpoint of reducing reliance on armed might, this actually represents progress. After all, the increase in “real” global military spending – that is, expenditures after corrections for inflation and exchange rates – was only 0.3 percent. And this contrasts with substantially larger increases in the preceding 13 years.

But why are military expenditures continuing to increase – indeed, why aren't they substantially *decreasing* – given the governmental austerity measures of recent years?

Amid the economic crisis that began in late 2008 (and which continues to the present day), most governments have been cutting back their spending dramatically on education, health care, housing, parks, and other vital social services. However, there have not been corresponding cuts in their military budgets.

Americans, particularly, might seek to understand why in this context U.S. military spending has not been significantly decreased, instead of being raised by \$13 billion – admittedly a “real dollar” decrease of 1.2 percent, but hardly one commensurate with Washington's wholesale slashing of social spending.

Yes, military expenditures by China and Russia increased in 2011. And in “real” terms, too. But, even so, their military strength hardly rivals that of the United States. Indeed, the United States spent about five times as much as China (the world's #2 military power) and ten times as much as Russia (the

world's #3 military power) on its military forces during 2011.

Furthermore, when U.S. allies like Britain, France, Germany and Japan are factored in, it is clear that the vast bulk of world military expenditures are made by the United States and its military allies. This might explain why the government of China, which accounts for only 8.2 percent of world military spending, believes that increasing its outlay on armaments is reasonable and desirable. Apparently, officials of many nations share that competitive feeling.

Unfortunately, the military rivalry among nations – one that has endured for centuries – results in a great squandering of national resources. Many nations, in fact, devote most of their available income to funding their armed forces and their weaponry.

In the United States, an estimated 58 percent of the U.S. government's discretionary tax dollars go to war and preparations for war. "Almost every country with a military is on an insane path, spending more and more on missiles, aircraft, and guns," remarked John Feffer, co-director of Foreign Policy in Focus. "These countries should be confronting the real threats of climate change, hunger, disease, and oppression, not wasting taxpayers' money on their military."

Of course, defenders of military expenditures reply that military force actually protects people from war. But does it? If so, how does one explain the fact that the major military powers of the past century – the United States, Russia, Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Japan and China – have been almost constantly at war during that time, in one way or another? Perhaps the maintenance of a vast military machine does not prevent war but, instead, encourages it.

In short, huge military establishments can be quite counterproductive. Little wonder that they have been condemned repeatedly by great religious and ethical leaders. Even many government officials have decried war and preparations for war – although usually by nations other than their own.

Thus, the release of the new study by SIPRI should not be a cause for celebration. Rather, it provides an appropriate occasion to contemplate the fact that, this past year, nations spent more money on the military than at any time in human history.

Although this situation might still inspire joy in the hearts of government officials, top military officers and defense contractors, people farther from the levers of military power might well conclude that it's a hell of a way to run a world.

Lawrence S. Wittner is professor of history emeritus at SUNY/Albany. His latest

book is *Working for Peace and Justice: Memoirs of an Activist Intellectual* (University of Tennessee Press).
