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BY ERIKA SCHELBY

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As the War in Ukraine Devastates the Nation's Ecosystems, the World Reaches Record-High Military Spending



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In the U.S., proponents supporting military expansion and increasing defense spending have prevailed despite the more pressing need to divert all available resources to fight the impending disaster being faced by humanity: climate change.

While ignoring the climate disaster, the U.S. is not only spending to boast its own military powers but also providing Ukraine with weapons and other aid in its ongoing conflict with Russia.

With the war in Ukraine raging on, the U.S. Senate voted 86 to 11 in May and gave its approval to President Joe Biden's massive additional aid package of \$40 billion to help Ukraine on top of the nearly \$14 billion authorized just two months prior. This total financial aid package for Ukraine of around \$54 billion is now almost as large or larger than the entire 2021 defense budgets of several countries: France's military budget was \$56.6 billion in 2021, Germany's was \$56 billion, Japan's was \$54.1 billion and Australia's military spending stood at \$31.8 billion. In contrast, there are also other ongoing struggles and attempts by some countries to achieve independence worldwide. They grab little attention and receive no substantial financial support.

Environmental Impact of the Ukraine War

Ukraine, which in 1986 had to withstand the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, is a large country with fertile soils. Environmental scientists warn that these valuable soils are currently being subjected to ecocide. Just one bomb makes a crater in a field and then releases toxic heavy metals into the soil. Now multiply this by thousands, with relentless exploding missiles and artillery shelling, and you will certainly produce an ecological wasteland.

In the Donbas region, pollution was already a problem even before the current conflict began. Coal mines have been operating in this area for the last 200 years, and the region also has a lot of heavy industry. It has suffered from disruptions and electricity shortages during the low-key civil war that has been going on in eastern Ukraine since 2014. According to the Conflict and Environment Observatory, there are 900 large industrial facilities in the Donbas region and 5,500 industrial facilities operating there since 2013. Most were built in the Soviet era. Furthermore, eastern Ukraine, where the Donbas is located, has 227 mines, and the region has 10 billion metric tons of stored industrial waste. Add the current relentless artillery shelling to the mix and the situation becomes acutely grim.

Both the weapons of the East and of the West are ravaging, poisoning, and destroying Ukraine's landscape. It doesn't matter if the military hardware employed comes from the aggressor Russia or from the weaponry supplied by the U.S. and NATO. There are many countries that have already been devastated by recent wars; the world does not need another one.

Human Cost of the Ukraine War

For now, more soldiers on all sides will die. More Ukrainian civilians will perish or be plunged into homelessness and economic hardship. Deliveries from the West started out with small arms, ammunition and Stinger and Javelin missiles. Weeks later there is progress; now heavy weapons ranging from artillery systems to helicopters to Switchblade drones have begun to arrive in Ukraine. In response, Russia has been targeting railway lines, warehouses, oil depots, and other vital infrastructure to stop the flow of Western weaponry to Ukraine.

Ukraine is—or was—known as the breadbasket of the world, providing wheat and other food products to various countries of the current heat and drought-stricken Global South. Before the war, Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia imported between 25 and 80 percent of their wheat from Ukraine. Pakistan bought nearly 40 percent of its wheat from the country, and Bangladesh received 50 percent of its wheat from both Russia and Ukraine. Prices per bushel have increased by 38 percent as compared to last year. The supply chain had become dysfunctional, with ports in the firing line or closed by blockade and the Black Sea was seeded with mines by Ukraine and Russia. Their removal is difficult and will take months. Some mines are drifting and endangering all shipping, not to mention marine wildlife and ecosystems.

The sense of ludicrous waste evoked by these happenings is persuasive. Anatol Lieven, a senior research fellow at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, takes a long view on this matter. “I strongly believe that in view of climate change, a century or so from now most of the basic preconceptions underlying the strategies of leading world powers will be seen by our descendants to have been profoundly irrational,” he writes.

The Actual Cost of the Ballooning Military Expenditure by the U.S.

For the moment, there is much noise about winning. Ukraine must win, say voices in the West. It will not have the resources to win, say others. But is such a war winnable at all? Or will it merely shift the geopolitical dynamics? In sheer size, Russia is the largest country on Earth. It has about 2 percent of the world’s population and natural resources amounting to around \$75 trillion as per 2021 figures. These include rich supplies of copper, lead, iron ore, zinc, bauxite, nickel, tin, mercury, uranium, magnesium, gold, silver, platinum, tungsten, titanium, diamonds, and, of course, oil and natural gas. In addition, due to the large forested areas in Russia, it accounts for an estimated 20 percent of the “world’s standing forest resource.”

Russia shares its vast, sparsely inhabited and resource-rich landmass on the European continent with the Asian majority of the global population. This combination has powerful

potential. So consequently, what will the impact be if this war grinds on to become a long slog of attrition? How can there be more than a pyrrhic victory for anyone? When and how will it end? Will Ukrainian independence still be recognizable? Also, considering how things tend to be arranged in this world, one wonders if the massive amounts of aid given to Ukraine by the U.S. and NATO have been provided without undue strings attached.

No matter how this calamity develops, our descendants will fail to comprehend the necessity for what has been the largest worldwide prewar military expenditures, which exceeded (in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic) \$2 trillion for the first time. Of course, it is idle dreaming to imagine what even a quarter of these gigantic sums of hard-earned taxpayer money—which were invested in unproductive lethal hardware and its maintenance—might instead have done for humanity and the battered blue planet it calls home.

In 2021, the United States spent \$801 billion on defense. During that year, the pandemic remained a looming threat. Meanwhile, the country decided to end the war in Afghanistan. The country enjoyed a few months of peace before it began to support the new war in Ukraine in February of 2022. The U.S. spends more on defense than the next nine nations listed by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in its report, “Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2021”—this includes China, India, the UK, Russia, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Japan and South Korea. As to what the U.S. aims to accomplish in the Ukraine war, it seems to have moving targets. What started out as efforts to help Ukraine now seem to have turned into attempts by the U.S. to weaken Russia, which requires pumping more heavy and expensive weapons onto the battlefield. This will surely prolong the fighting and enhance bitterness. It can keep diplomacy silenced. As Martin Luther King Jr. noted, “Wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows.”

So let’s turn away from the war’s short-termism and consider something long-lasting and familiar: the U.S. defense budget. Regardless of current events, it remains reliably huge, decade after decade. The price tags are staggeringly high in various categories. Moreover, according to Brown University’s Costs of War Project, “the U.S. Department of Defense is the world’s single largest institutional consumer of oil—and as a result, one of the world’s top greenhouse gas emitters.”

On September 1, 2021, the Department of Defense (DOD) Draft Climate Adaptation Plan (DOD CAP) was submitted to the National Climate Task Force and Federal Chief Sustainability Officer. Belatedly, DOD CAP “identified climate change as a critical national security issue and threat multiplier... [It could] degrade installations and

infrastructure, increase health risks to our service members, and could require modifications to existing and planned equipment.”

The U.S. Army followed, releasing its first climate strategy on February 8, 2022. It “[produced] 4.1 million tons of carbon dioxide and other pollutants” in 2020. The Army acknowledges that it must prepare for a world subjected to conflicts driven by climate change, water access disputes, drought, and both social and governmental instability. Its climate strategy also shows the Army’s awareness that extreme weather events already have a negative impact on its soldiers. But that is the case not only for the troops but also for ever-larger segments of the American population. While the mainstream media landscape is to be commended for increasingly covering the issue of climate change, the enthusiasm for attention-grabbing headlines about climate disasters spends far too little time (if any at all) explaining to the public the context and causes leading to these disasters.

The U.S. Army climate plan sounds ambitious, however late it is in coming. It calls for reducing emissions in half by 2030; seeks to electrify all noncombatant vehicles by 2035; wants to eliminate greenhouse gas emissions from Army installations by 2050; and will train the next crop of officers to function well in a far hotter and far more chaotic world. Microgrid technology will be installed on all Army posts by 2035, and concerns about the environment and climate issues must be part of all decisions made in the management of the Army’s enormous land holdings, which are estimated to cover between 1 to 6 percent of the globe’s land surface, including some 750 military bases worldwide. Improper disposal of waste, burn pits, ground and water contamination, noxious air pollutants, lack of transparency, and other issues have to be tackled. It is good to have a plan, but so far there is no funding, and it all remains theoretical.

As Scientists for Global Responsibility (SGR) reports, the militaries of the world enjoy a charmed existence with “large loophole[s]”: “[I]n the Paris agreement, governments are not required to provide full data on greenhouse gases being emitted by armed forces.” This, according to SGR, undermines efforts to deal with the climate crisis. Furthermore, despite its good intentions, the greening of the military is widely impossible. “Every major weapon system developed, from fighter jets to aircraft carriers to you name it, is extremely carbon-intensive,” said Oliver Belcher, a professor at Duke University—who studied military emissions—according to Task and Purpose. “Weapons systems lock in certain carbon-intensive technologies.”

Today, there is a separation between U.S. civilians and the military that is reinforced through the media, society, and the military-industrial complex itself. There is no military draft anymore. The separation makes it easy to forget that the U.S. military has a commander-in-chief who is well-known to the general civilian population: the U.S. president. The person holding this position can, at least to a large and apparently growing extent, decide what the military must do and how they will be employed. Therein lies a striking contradiction: The U.S. military is a super-potent instrument that can be employed in an autocratic manner to satisfy U.S. imperious tendencies embedded within the democratic republic.

It is time to question whether the U.S. needs to have the global influence that it does, including 750 military bases around the world. Does the populace know or care? And if it does not, why pay so much for it, and for so long? These and many other questions related to the ballooning military expenses require greater scrutiny by American voters soon.

It is repeated often, but still falls on deaf ears, and it is also the message from the 2022 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute that took place in May when 2,600 participants from 150 countries and more than 70 partner organizations gathered for the ninth annual Stockholm Forum. The institute published a major report for the occasion: “Environment of Peace: Security in a New Era of Risk.” A comprehensive account of how the “environmental crisis is increasing risks to security and peace worldwide.” The report shows “most of all,” said SIPRI Director Dan Smith, “what can be done about it.”

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Erika Schelby is the author of *Looking for Humboldt and Searching for German Footprints in New Mexico and Beyond* (Lava Gate Press, 2017) and *Liberating the Future from the Past? Liberating the Past from the Future?* (Lava Gate Press, 2013), which was shortlisted for the International Essay Prize Contest by the Berlin-based cultural magazine *Lettre International*. Schelby lives in New Mexico.

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