Major Arms Exporters and the Global Arms Complex

By Amitabh Pal
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There are few things as infuriating as the annual report by one of my favorite research organizations.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute released on March 19 its yearly global arms report, with data showing that arms transfers for the past four years have increased by a quarter over the 2002-2006 period. Asia is leading the world in the wrong direction.

> "Asia and Oceania accounted for 44 per cent of global arms imports, followed by Europe (19 percent), the Middle East (17 percent), the Americas (11 percent) and Africa (9 percent)," the report says, adding that "India was the world's largest recipient of arms, accounting for 10 per cent of global arms imports."

A staff member of the group explained India's motivation to CNN.

> "India procures arms in relation to its tense relationship with Pakistan and increasingly sees China as a potential threat," said Siemon Wezeman, a senior analyst with SIPRI. "It also wants to assert itself as a major regional or even global power."

If India wants to compete with China, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has a better suggestion.

> "Life expectancy at birth in China is 73.5 years; in India it is still 64.4 years. Infant mortality rate is fifty per thousand in India, compared with just seventeen in China, and the under-five mortality rate is sixty-six for Indians and nineteen for the Chinese," Sen wrote in The Hindu newspaper last year. "Almost half of our children are undernourished, compared with a very tiny proportion in China. Comparing ourselves with China in these really important matters would be a very good perspective, and they can both inspire us and give us illumination about what to do—and what not to do."

Alas, instead of taking Sen's sage advice, India is instead driven by delusions of global grandeur and is embarking on a whopping $200 billion defense modernization drive over the next decade.

Then there are the arms merchants that shamelessly profit by peddling these instruments of death. Here, the revelations of another recent SIPRI analysis, this one released on February 27, are also quite depressing.

> "Sales of arms and military services by the largest arms-producing companies—the SIPRI Top 100—continued to increase in 2010 to reach $411.1 billion," says the report (though the rate of increase slowed as compared to 2009).

U.S.-based weapons manufacturers occupy pride of place.

"Sales by the forty-four U.S.-based companies accounted for over 60 percent of all arms sales by the Top 100 arms-producing companies in 2010," the analysis says.

Should we be proud that the United States still makes something or should we be embarrassed that one of the few things it knows how to manufacture is so destructive?

The report also points out how consolidated this industry is.

"The global arms industry continues to be highly concentrated, with the top ten arms-producing companies accounting for 56 percent, or $230 billion, of total Top 100 arms sales," the report says. While companies in most realms of the economy have suffered, the weapons behemoths continue to flourish. "The data for 2010 demonstrates, once again, the major players' ability to continue selling arms and military services despite the financial crises currently affecting other industries," says Susan Jackson of SIPRI.

Dominating the list are giants such as Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Dynamics, Raytheon, and Northrop Grumman. (Lockheed Martin itself had $35 billion in arms sales in 2010!)

The question is: What can be done about this? Many years ago, economist John Kenneth Galbraith had the suggestion that the U.S. weapons industry be nationalized, with the logic that the dynamics of the arms bazaar anyway made a mockery of the whole idea of a free market. Fighting Bob La Follette had the same idea. It's time to consider it once again.

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