

The Military-Industrial Complex: Impacts on the Third World

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Global Research, December 11, 2008

GATT Watchdog and APRN 11 December 2008

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

Military-Industrial Complex and Impacts on the Third World Written by Aziz Choudry, GATT Watchdog Tuesday, 25 November 2008 16:57 Military-Industrial Complex and Impacts on the Third World We live and struggle in an era of blatantly militarized capitalism and the violence of capital. War, occupation, national security ideologies and repression of dissent –at home and abroad – make for booming business opportunities the world over. As pro-free market US journalist Thomas Friedman succinctly put it: “The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist – McDonald’s cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the builder of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley’s technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force and Marine Corps.”²

Militarized capitalism: The military-industrial complex in 2008

What is the military-industrial complex in 2008? Where is it? What does it look like? I am not even sure if the phrase, used so famously by former US president Dwight Eisenhower³ in 1961 is the best descriptor to encompass the many tentacles and facets of the war and security industry and the links and connections between capital and its political allies. Do terms like ‘defence industry’ and ‘arms trade’ adequately encompass the face of today’s war profiteers, whose devastating impacts can equally be found in the high-tech apartheid wall being built by Israel to seal off the West Bank and Gaza⁴, and its Western Hemispheric counterpart on the US-Mexico border⁵, in the computer flight simulation programs provided to US and British military by Canada’s CAE⁶, in private corporate mercenary armies like Blackwater, DynCorp and Aegis⁷ in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere⁸, in the outsourced intelligence, IT, interrogation and translation services of L-3/Titan⁹, in the massive military aid budgets which the US gives to the governments of Israel, Pakistan, Egypt and Colombia¹⁰, among others, and in the ‘hearts and minds’ operations of US Special Operations Forces based in the Philippines doing ‘humanitarian work’ – medical, dental and other social services, including infrastructure projects in many remote communities – services which should be the function of a government, in Mindanao¹¹, as much as it is in weapons production and arms exports.

Like all transnational corporations, these companies enjoy both patronage and revolving door relationships with the highest echelons of governments and their armed forces, tax breaks, support for exports, and all kinds of other incentives which help them to focus firmly

on their bottom line – profit. US administrations, regardless of their party allegiance, brim with politicians with investments and business interests in the defence industry and war profiteers, perhaps most vividly symbolized by Dick Cheney’s ties to Halliburton and its multi-billion-dollar contracts to provide construction, hospitality, and other services to the US military after the invasion of Iraq in 2003¹². But it is business as usual for US militarized capitalism. An April 2008 Centre for Responsive Politics report states that US Congress members invested US \$196 million of their own money in companies that receive hundreds of millions of dollars a day from Pentagon contracts to provide goods and services to US armed forces, ranging from aircraft and weapons manufacturers to producers of medical supplies and soft drinks.¹³ To cite a couple of typical revolving door examples, General Dynamics board of directors includes an ex-Vice Chief of US Army staff, a former US Air Force General, a former Chief of Naval Operations in the US Navy, and a former Chief of Defence Procurement at the British Ministry of Defence¹⁴, while Canada’s CAE’s current and former executives include a former Canadian minister for international trade and former PM Mulroney’s head of staff¹⁵.

Hired Guns, Big Bucks, No Rules

Private armies hired by governments and companies are not new. The British East India company hired private mercenaries to fight proxy wars and gain control over India¹⁶. But the exponential growth and sophistication and globalization of private security industry contractors like Blackwater and DynCorp, both of which derive well over 90% of their business from US government contracts, is striking. If regular soldiers often literally get away with murder, how much more so for private mercenaries given the lack of any oversight of their activities, under no effective regulatory regimes, although they are contracted by governments and paid out of public funds. They operate with impunity and immunity. They recruit and deploy former military and police from around the world, some of them veterans of the most repressive military forces in the world¹⁷. On their website, Blackwater, whose contract with the US State Department was recently renewed¹⁸ despite outrage at one of many incidents in which their guards shot and killed 17 Iraqi civilians in Nisour Square, Baghdad, last September¹⁹, claim: “We treat others with the highest degree of dignity, equal opportunity and trust. We respect the cultures and beliefs of people around the world”²⁰. On the ground, “Blackwater has no respect for the Iraqi people,” an Iraqi Interior Ministry official told a Washington Post reporter in 2007²¹. “They consider Iraqis like animals, although actually I think they may have more respect for animals. We have seen what they do in the streets. When they’re not shooting, they’re throwing water bottles at people and calling them names. If you are terrifying a child or an elderly woman, or you are killing an innocent civilian who is riding in his car, isn’t that terrorism?”

All dollars, no sense

A February 2008 Center for Arms Control and Non-proliferation report notes that, adjusted for inflation, the Pentagon budget for fiscal year (FY) 2009 is the largest since World War II – US \$ 515.4 billion²²: more even than during the Vietnam and Korean wars, or the peak of Reagan’s Cold War spending. The US spends more than the next 45 highest spending countries in the world combined, accounts for 48% of the world’s total military spending, 5.8 times more than China, 10.2 times more than Russia, and 98.6 times more than Iran. The same report cites US Office of Management and Budget estimates that total annual funding for the Defense Department alone will grow to \$546 billion by FY 2013 – a conservative estimate. Total Pentagon spending, not including funding for the Department of Energy or for actual combat operations for the period FY’09 through FY’13 will reach \$2.6 trillion. Last

year, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)²³ estimated that world military expenditure in 2006 reached US \$1204 billion – a 3.5 % increase in real terms since 2005, and a 37% increase over the 10-year period since 1997. In 2006, the 15 countries with the highest spending accounted for 83% of the world total.

While the US military-industrial complex and military spending dwarfs the rest of the world, it has had a multiplier effect on other countries, coupled with its military aid packages and global ‘security’ hysteria. Japan recently announced major military upgrades while, South Korea, China, and Russia have all increased military spending,²⁴ 2008 is a record year for Israeli defence spending²⁵. By 2006, four of the world’s 100 top arms production firms were Israeli: Israel Aircraft Industries, Israel Military Industries, Elbit Systems and Rafael²⁶. An October 2007 CBC report, based on customs data only on exports specifically for military use, found that between 2000 and 2006, Canada’s arms exports rose 3.5 times, during which time Canada, the world’s sixth-biggest supplier, exported CDN \$3.6 billion in military goods. But there is little transparency on arms control, and the true picture of Canadian military exports is hard to track since the federal government has not released annual reports providing detailed information covering the years since 2002 to Parliament. A former subsidiary of Montreal-based SNC Lavalin, SNC Tec, for example, manufactures small arms ammunition for US military (SNC Tec was sold in 2006 to General Dynamics, after antiwar activists highlighted the Canadian corporate connection to bullets fired from US guns in Iraq)²⁷.

A license to kill: The façade of arms control

Identifying and tracking the many tentacles of the weapons and agents of mass destruction is frustratingly difficult. For all of the criticisms of Third World governments’ secrecy and lack of transparency in terms of defence spending and military operations, so many loopholes exist in so-called First World countries with regard to arms control. For example, most military shipments from Canada to the US go untracked, since they do not require government permits because of a defence agreement signed between Ottawa and Washington in the 1940s. Some critics have noted that the export licencing requirements are so minimal that it is possible that some of that equipment moves to third parties²⁸.

Some EU governments have undermined, bypassed or ignored national export criteria and the EU code of conduct on arms exports. Spain and other countries (including the US and Britain) have authorized transfers of equipment and other assistance to Colombia into the hands of state security forces and paramilitaries who have committed major human rights abuses. Italian-made small arms have also been shipped to countries in conflict or where violations of human rights occur, including Algeria, Colombia, Eritrea, Indonesia, India, Israel, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Pakistan and Sierra Leone.²⁹ British activist and writer Mark Thomas³⁰ illustrates how British high-tech company Radstone does not require a licence to export supplies the computer components comprising the “brains” of the Predator drone, an unmanned Aerial vehicle produced by General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, which was used by the CIA to fire missile strikes at Yemen against Al-Qaeda suspects in 2002, and in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan in 2006, the latter attack killing possibly up to 25 people including 5 women and 5 children. British researcher Anna Stavrianakis³¹ argues that “[r]ather than acting to restrict arms exports, the guidelines against which arms export licence applications are assessed are vague and interpreted in such a way as to facilitate exports”. She continues, “the pro-export stance of successive UK governments, the close relationship they have with the arms industry, and the emphasis on military power as an indicator of prestige on the world stage, must all be challenged, as they form the

parameters within which licensing occurs”.

According to a 2006 Amnesty International³² report, over 200 Chinese military trucks – normally running on US Cummins diesel engines – were shipped to Sudan in August 2005, despite a US arms embargo on both countries and the involvement of similar vehicles in killing and abducting civilians in Darfur. Chinese military hardware is shipped regularly to Burma, including the 2005 supply of 400 military trucks to Myanmar’s army. Chinese military exports went to Nepal in 2005 and early 2006, including a supply of Chinese-made rifles and grenades to Nepalese security forces, who were brutally repressing people’s movements. China is also implicated in the growing illicit trade in Chinese-made Norinco pistols in Australia, Malaysia, Thailand and particularly South Africa, often used for crimes like robbery and rape.

Militarized repression of dissent and imperialist globalization

Many governments, from the Philippines to India to Colombia, are waging overt or covert wars against resistance movements and government opponents, fostering a climate of fear in which arms and equipment are used for containing domestic dissent and security crackdowns against ‘enemies within’ – resistance movements of the poor, mobilizations of women, Indigenous Peoples, the landless, peasants, and workers, movements against free trade agreements and neoliberal reforms. Conflicts over land and inequitable access to resources are fuelled and exacerbated by the militarization of corporate activities such as mining, oil, gas, industrial farming and forestry industries. For example, a US District court judge has agreed that there is evidence showing that Chevron paid and equipped Nigerian military and police to shoot and torture protesters opposing the oil company’s activities in the Niger Delta region³³. Freeport McMoran paid Indonesian military, police and private security forces who attacked local communities around its Grasberg gold and copper mine³⁴. And let’s not forget how the founder and chief executive of Aegis, former British Army Lt. Col. Tim Spicer³⁵ was also founder of Sandline, another mercenary company contracted by the Papua New Guinea government over a decade ago for US \$36 million for an ill-fated attempt to put down an indigenous independence movement in Bougainville, which had shut down the huge copper mine at Panguna, owned by a subsidiary of Rio Tinto³⁶. The military and the monetary, indeed.

As Uruguayan analyst/journalist Raul Zibechi notes, urban peripheries in Third World countries have also become war zones where states attempt to maintain order based on the establishment of a sort of ‘sanitary cordon’ to keep the poor isolated from ‘normal’ society³⁷. Such militarized containment of the poor reflects political and economic elites’ fear of challenges to state power from poor urban movements. The systematic undermining of states’ capacities to provide for the welfare of their populations, coupled with the disproportionate percentage of national budget’s spent on the military militarization has fuelled poverty and conflict.

Kollsman, Inc. a New Hampshire-based subsidiary of Elbit, an Israeli firm involved with building the apartheid wall in occupied Palestine, was contracted by the Department of Homeland Security³⁸ as part of a consortium that also includes Boeing subsidiary Boeing Integrated Defense Systems Unit to develop SBI-net, a high-tech security system for the U.S.-Mexico (and US-Canada) borders, part of the Secure Border Initiative³⁹. As New York-based activist groups Ad Hoc Coalition for Justice in the Middle East and Desis Rising Up & Moving (DRUM) put it, “Elbit will import Israeli military technology, tested on Palestinians, for use

against poor immigrants here.”⁴⁰

Militarization and enforceable free-market disciplines are tools to make countries ‘safe’ for foreign investors, at the expense of local communities’ rights to determine their own futures⁴¹. WTO agreements undermine social and environmental policies, but protect the war industry through a ‘security exception’ in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (Article XXI)⁴². The security exception states that a country cannot be stopped from taking any action it considers necessary to protect its essential security interests; actions ‘relating to the traffic in arms, ammunition and implements of war and such traffic in other goods and materials as is carried on directly for the purpose of supplying a military establishment (or) taken in time of war or other emergency in international relations’. While structural adjustment and trade and investment liberalization are being imposed throughout the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, health, education, and social budgets slashed, and support for most local industries or agriculture dismantled, corporate welfare and subsidies to defence industry, and high levels of military spending remains alive and well.

Capitalist killing machines get gender-sensitive makeover: Women resist

The burden of war, conflict, violence and militarized capitalism falls disproportionately on women. The impacts of women can be seen not only in conflict zones but through the proliferation of small arms and creeping militarization of communities and society at large, leading to more violence against women in domestic and community contexts, rapes, sexual violence, displacement and the exaltation of warrior masculinities. Women are more likely to become war refugees. Unsurprisingly then, it has also been women who have led resistance against militarization, war and violence, US military bases and the accompanying masculinization of broader society and social behaviour. It is usually women who pick up the pieces in communities ripped apart by war, violence and state repression. Cynthia Enloe notes that social workers who address issues of domestic violence “agree that military service is probably more conducive to violence at home than at any other occupation”.⁴³ Meanwhile, we are subjected to constant claims that a primary goal of the US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan is to liberate Afghani women. Commenting on this, Sunera Thobani notes, “one battle in the ideological war was to be waged on the terrain of gender relations, ... rallying western populations around fantasies of saving Muslim women would be more effective than rallying them around the overtly imperialist policies of securing US control over oil and natural gas supplies.”⁴⁴

Just as purported humanitarian concerns are wheeled out as justifications for thinly-veiled imperialist wars over resources⁴⁵, military contractors and war profiteering corporations portray themselves as inclusive, socially progressive and gender-sensitive. On their corporate websites, these corporations’ core business is painted over with a cosmetic veneer that could cause us to forget that it is for war and killing people. For example, Pentagon contractors like Northrop Grumman boast of their “workforce diversity”⁴⁶ and showcase their women executives. The Canadian and US defence industries have set up organizations like Women in Defence and Security (WiDS)⁴⁷, signed memorandums of understanding with Canada’s Department of National Defence, and are affiliated with the Canadian Association of Defence and Security Industries (CADSI)⁴⁸, an industry-led association of more than 550 member firms in the defence and security industries in Canada to “promote the advancement of women leaders in defence and security professions across Canada”. Raytheon, the maker of “Bunker Buster” bombs, Tomahawk and Patriot missiles, lobbed at Afghanistan and Iraq⁴⁹, causing many deaths proclaims: “Diversity at Raytheon is about inclusiveness — providing an atmosphere where everyone feels valued and

empowered to perform at a peak level, regardless of the many ways people are different”⁵⁰. Virginia-based Booz Allen Hamilton⁵¹, one of the biggest suppliers of technology and personnel to US government spy agencies like the CIA, NSA, Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), as well as the US Department of Defence and Department of Homeland Security (former CIA director R. James Woolsey is now a senior vice president of Booz Allen), also boasts how it is committed to diversity in the workforce “because we believe that diversity of backgrounds contributes to different ideas, which in turn drives better results for clients. To us, diversity means all the ways individuals differ from one another—race, gender, ethnicity, physical abilities, educational background, country of origin, age, sexual orientation, skills, income, marital status, parental status, religion, work experience, and military service”. Then there is Aegis Defence Services⁵² whose employees were caught on video randomly shooting automatic weapons at civilian cars in Baghdad’s airport road⁵³, which claims “Our equal-opportunity policy emphasizes our aim to create a work environment that is inclusive and non-discriminatory, where all employees are empowered by their individuality and encouraged to use it in order to achieve success”. Greenwashing environmentally destructive corporations is despicable enough. Yet there is something particularly obscene about the ways in which these corporations hide behind such mission and values statements and commitments to “diversity”, complementing the claims of the militaries in Afghanistan to be liberating Afghani women.

Conclusion

Many NGOs campaign for instruments like a Global Arms Trade Treaty. But when we see the spectrum of industries and political actors which benefit from militarized capitalism, and the way in which the US, Israel, and other leading producers and users of cluster munitions refused to attend last month’s Dublin Diplomatic Conference on Cluster Munitions which adopted an international treaty banning cluster munitions that cause unacceptable harm to civilians⁵⁴, it should be clear that we must go beyond these strategies to confront the system that underpins obscene profits for a few, at the expense of the many, through military contracting and war profiteering. That system is capitalism. Those of us who research must continue to expose and oppose militarization and the violence of capitalism in all its forms, in our communities, nationally and internationally. In doing so we need to support, build and sustain mass movements that understand the interconnectedness of war, neoliberal globalization, corporate profits, the repression of dissent, “peacekeeping”, “reconstruction”, the criminalization and militarization of immigration, violence against women, and colonialism.

NOTES

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