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## Peace dividends in the age of armament

Arms industry deserves scrutiny at a time when defence spending threatens health

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Not since the second world war have global conflicts been so prevalent. And not since the end of the Cold War period that followed has the warfare versus welfare debate been so prominent. The 1980s and 1990s were a time of relative geopolitical calm, stimulating the peace dividend: governments defunding their militaries in favour of investment in the welfare state and public services, including health.

Current global unrest has pushed this debate to the forefront once again. Aggressions, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have heightened the need for security, shifting focus and resources from nations' spending on health and its social determinants such as education. The UK's recent commitment to increase defence spending to 2.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2027, robbing the foreign aid budget to do so, and the promise of NATO nations to spend 5% of GDP on defence by 2035, are proof of this. If UK military expenditure rises to 5% of GDP, the country's defence budget will be half that of the NHS. Foreign aid spending is a mere fraction of this, never exceeding an average of 0.4% of GDP for 63 NATO and OECD countries,<sup>1</sup> even before USAID and UK aid were gutted. Undoubtedly Europe must reduce its reliance on the US for security. But this cannot come at the expense of welfare or the soft power and benefits of foreign aid.

The return on investment in defence is also a matter of debate. Defence analysts emphasise its economic benefits, but independent analysts say military spending is less likely to provide the economic and social returns that would come from spending on health, education, and environmental protection.<sup>2</sup> Defence spending and procurement are notoriously inefficient and wasteful. With public services already crumbling and living standards declining in many countries, the political shift towards warfare from welfare even in the context of unstable geopolitics seems disproportionate and is deeply worrying, especially for health. Ongoing national security is vital, but so too is the enduring need for a peace dividend—a commitment that maintains health and welfare spending for the wellbeing of populations and societies, both domestically and globally.

### Necessary evil?

An under-recognised aspect of these security debates is the role of the arms industry in health, the topic of a new series in *The BMJ* ([bmj.com/collections/arms-industry-health](https://bmj.com/collections/arms-industry-health)). Two articles by Bellis and colleagues set out the direct health effects of weapons and war on populations, including horrendous levels of civilian deaths, and show how the activities of the industry itself—through lobbying, marketing, media manipulation, and narrative framing—exacerbate

harms associated with unrelenting conflict and violence around the world.<sup>3,4</sup> They argue that, like the tobacco, alcohol, and fossil fuel industries, the arms trade should be seen as a commercial determinant of health, where corporate practices matter as much as products. A linked editorial outlines research and clinical priorities to challenge the growing power imbalance between the arms industry and public health interests.<sup>5</sup>

By framing the arms industry as a commercial determinant of health, we can scrutinise its activities and examine the extent to which the industry (and its influence on governments) perpetuates deadly armed conflict rather than peace and prioritises its mindboggling profits at the expense of health.

### War is bad for health, good for business

Focus on the arms industry and health is also timely because the world's largest arms fair, Defence and Security Equipment International, is in London on 9-12 September 2025. Backed by the UK government, it will be attended by some 50 000 delegates, including top buyers such as the old powers of US, France, and Germany, and newer powers such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates. In 2023 revenue from sales of weapons and military services by the 100 largest arms companies exceeded \$630bn.<sup>2</sup> In 2024, global military spending exceeded \$2.7tn. In 2025, as conflicts rage and defence budgets expand, the mood of arms sellers is buoyant.

In contrast, campaigners are deeply alarmed. Despite at least 10 international treaties restricting arms sales to countries at risk of violating humanitarian law or committing war crimes, such trade continues. The UK resumed sales to Saudi Arabia after a UK court deemed them unlawful,<sup>6</sup> implicating British weapons in the assaults and human rights violations occurring in Yemen. Although the US is by far the largest supplier of bombs, missiles, and other weaponry to Israel, the UK continues to sell components for the F35 fighter jets being used to decimate Gaza.<sup>7,8</sup> And the same governments that are calling for ceasefires have hardwired conflicts of interest such that arms companies have extraordinary access to decision makers, including revolving doors between manufacturers, military, and governments,<sup>9-12</sup> which drive sales.<sup>3,4</sup>

### Medical actions

The *BMJ* series instigates essential scrutiny of the arms industry, its health harming activities, and its unhealthy relationship with governments. Health advocacy for the peace dividend must be revived and strengthened to ensure investment in the other great threats to human security, including climate change, infectious disease, and economic inequality, is not

compromised. While today's geopolitics create an urgency to arms and defence spending, there is equally an urgency to recognise the implications to population and planetary health of further armament. Worryingly, the arms industry's route to profiteering is finding a receptive audience among politicians seeking power.

Medical journals have a history here. In 2005, it was revealed that Reed-Elsevier (now RELX), which owns the *Lancet* and other leading health and science journals, also owned and organised arms fairs.<sup>13</sup> Protest by journal editors, doctors, and anti-arms trade campaigners led to the publisher divesting from the defence sector in 2007.<sup>14-16</sup> In 2025, journal editors' support of an International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War campaign helped ensure the World Health Organization's re-engagement with nuclear weapons as a health issue.<sup>17</sup> A global peace dividend campaign was established by science and health leaders in 2021 to "cultivate peace-supporting economic opportunities in fragile and at-risk countries."<sup>18</sup> We believe that this campaign deserves renewed support from medical journals and all health professionals, and we must go further in our scrutiny of the arms industry by recognising it as a commercial determinant of health. It is often argued that there are no winners in war—only losers. This is not quite true. There is always a winner, and that is the arms industry.

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