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Increasing defence expenditure may cost us our security

As nations divert larger proportions of their budgets to military uses, there is less available for climate, education, and other core human needs, with long term implications for health, write **Mohammed Abba-Aji** and **Nason Maani**

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One of the primary responsibilities of any government is to protect the lives and property of its people. We argue, however, that protection cannot be limited to protection from military security threats. Protection worthy of the name must extend to the destabilising effects of climate change, to health systems, and to people's health. While each of these forms of protection matters, the attention they receive is unfortunately far from equal, despite their effects on health and indeed security.

World military expenditure has risen for more than a decade, reaching \$2887bn (£2182bn; €2575bn) in 2025 and approaching 2.5% of world output, its highest share since 2009. The rise is happening at a time when development assistance is falling and health budgets in many countries are under pressure. Official development assistance fell to \$174bn in 2025, the largest annual reduction on record, with the five largest providers accounting for 95.7% of the decline. The picture is similar in the European Union where defence spending cumulatively increased, over 40% during the last two decades, to €418bn in 2025.

In the United Kingdom the reduction of aid to free up funds for the purpose of defence spending was stated explicitly. In February 2025 the government announced that it would cut aid from 0.5% to 0.3% of gross national income, its lowest share since 1999. That same year the UK cut its pledge to The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria by 15%. These cuts to aid are expected to provide over £10bn for defence between 2025 and 2028, a decision the foreign secretary defended on the grounds that national security is the first duty of government.

The last statement is true, but it frames protection narrowly, presenting the withdrawal of health and development resources as itself a form of protection. It also runs against the facts of where the aid goes. Thirteen of the UK's top twenty bilateral aid recipients are fragile or conflict affected states.

In the Sahel in Africa, climate change is among the biggest drivers of conflict. Temperatures in the region are rising about 50% faster than the global average, over 80% of the territory is affected by desertification, and Lake Chad, long a lifeline of the region's economy, has lost almost 90% of its surface area since the 1960s. The shrinking has contributed to displacement, to clashes between herders and farmers, and to exploitation by insurgent groups, among them Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda affiliates operating across the region.

There is evidence that warming increases the likelihood of violence. African data from 1997 to 2014

show that a 1°C rise in temperature was associated with a 54% increase in the probability of conflict between farmers and herders where the two share land for their livelihoods. Even countries affected by climate change as severely as these, however, have prioritised military spending. For example, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, among the poorest countries in the world, together allocated \$2.4bn to their armed forces in 2024. Niger and Mali each now direct around 15% of government spending to the military, and Burkina Faso around 13%, placing all three among the twenty highest shares in the world. Niger's military spending rose 56% between 2022 and 2024, and Chad's rose 43% in 2024 alone, reaching 3.0% of gross domestic product. These increases in military spending occur in contexts where far more investment is needed for climate adaptation.

Prioritising military funding can impose costs to population health, often through "crowding out" health expenditure. Analysis based on data from 197 countries between 2000 and 2013 showed that a 1% increase in military spending was associated with a 0.62% decrease in health expenditure. The magnitude of this crowding out was even greater in low and middle income countries, where a 1% increase in military spending was associated with a 0.96% drop in health spending. Another study also notes that the crowding out effect of military spending is more immediate for the health system than other social sectors such as education.

We have previously argued that the arms industry should be analysed as a commercial determinant of health, and the dynamics we describe here operate as a reinforcing loop. Climate stress erodes livelihoods and eroded livelihoods contribute to conflict over resources. Conflict in turn justifies increased military spending and such spending diverts funds away from measures that could interrupt such a cycle. Wealthier governments may not be directly involved in these conflicts. However, by supplying the arms that sustain such conflicts while cutting aid to the affected states, they help create the conditions for the instability.

The finance that could break this loop is unfortunately falling short. COP29 (the 29th United Nations Climate Change conference) set a climate finance floor of \$300bn a year by 2035 against an identified need of \$1.3tn, and the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and rescission of its international climate finance commitments leave countries at the forefront of climate change in a difficult position as they attempt to adapt.

True security must look different. Trade offs between military and social spending should be weighed for their health and climate implications, with the aim of making the opportunity cost visible whenever such decisions are made. As climate adaptation increasingly becomes part of security policy, governments, both donors and recipients alike, should allocate a share of their security funding to adaptation, especially in climate-vulnerable regions such as the Sahel. Governments will continue to invoke their first duty, that of protection, and they should. Protection, however, cannot mean protection from aggression alone. It must extend to protection from the effects of climate change, protection for health, and protection for the environment.

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