What does real security mean? Lessons coronavirus has taught us.

This week marks the non-opening of the world’s largest arms fair – Eurosatory - in Paris. Despite the impressive array of fabulously rich backers who look forward to this biennial showcase for the latest and most sophisticated offerings in death and destruction, the salon has been cancelled. Even the avid support of the French government, plus the world’s largest arms companies and their enthusiastic national governments, not to mention the manifold ancillary enterprises which piggy-back on the sale of weapons, could not withstand the risk of coronavirus spreading among the 58,000 visitors and nearly 6,000 international exhibitors. If arms sales know no borders, then neither does a pandemic virus.

Yes to security – but whose?

This cancellation is particularly ironic, given that massively expensive weapons production and trade are supposedly justified by their contribution to our security. However, when the immediate threat arrived in the form of a deadly virus, its rapid spread faced little opposition since most governments were so unprepared. Why, you might ask, since a pandemic had already been predicted a decade ago and much more recently by several epidemiologists? But governments ignored the warnings because they were fixated on delivering a different sort of security – one predicated on the availability of highly sophisticated weaponry. By spending huge amounts of money on so-called defence, those in power were certain that they could keep us safe from attack by unspecified enemies.

Covid-19, Covid-19, the invisible enemy that weapons can’t kill

Certainly, no one imagined that the world’s most powerful economies could be so easily dismantled without a shot being fired and by so intangible an opponent. Hardly any foresaw that it was a robust and well-funded health service – and not state-of-the-art fighter jets - that would be essential to deal effectively with the terrible fallout. After all, they reasoned, there could be no real urgency or reason to ensure the provision of adequate health facilities needed to deal with a pandemic. Crucial emergency hospital beds or decent grade hospital equipment seemed too far-fetched a demand compared with the immediacy of listening to the arms lobbyists. Far more urgent was the goal of supporting weapons production and ensuring its prosperity. So defence budgets flourished at the expense of health. As we know, the death toll in France exceeded 29,000 on 8th June - the same day that Eurosatory was supposed to open its doors to welcome the world’s arms dealers.

Covid-19: what does real security look like?

Try to imagine what the outcome could have been if even a part of the ‘defence’ budget had been spent on the health sector? How many doctors and nurses could have been trained for the price of only ONE €97M Dassault Rafale fighter jet? How many extra essential items of equipment, emergency hospital beds, etc. could have been purchased? How much more could have been done to ensure better conditions in care homes (maisons de repos) so that fewer elderly people died before their time? What if some of the defence research budget had been spent on researching the family of coronaviruses, perhaps enabling a vaccine to have been developed early on and lives – not to mention the economy - saved? Ask the domestic abuse victims of the covid-19 lockdowns if they would prefer more spending on armaments to safe shelters that would provide a refuge from a violent home?
A price worth paying?
In the end, how many French citizens, especially the relatives of those who died unnecessarily because of inadequate provision or care, feel that spending on weapons was a worthwhile sacrifice? We need to ask: against what and whom were the armaments supposed to be defending us? Yet hardly has the first wave of covid-19 started to recede than the arms lobby is again agitating for increased expenditure, especially for the European Defence Fund in which France is a major player.

Covid-19 and economic recovery: why focus on arms production?
There has been so much propaganda about how the arms industry is essential to employment creation that hardly anyone questions its validity. Yet few governments are willing to say just how many jobs the industry actually provides. Why is this? If the arms industry really were a major employer and contributor to a nation’s Cross Domestic Product (CDP) as is claimed, should governments not be delighted to share the news with the electorate? Apparently not. Data are shrouded in secrecy, usually on the grounds of ‘national security’. Around 300,000 are employed in the aeronautics industry and ancillary services, but this figure includes the dominant civil aviation sector. So how are we to believe, much less verify, the dubious claim that defence is a big employer?

Nonetheless, the French Defence Ministry has just announced a new €15 BN support package for the aerospace industry. Otherwise, he says, 100,000 jobs would be lost. How much of that total is destined for armaments is hidden but the government has also announced that they will bring forward existing orders for military equipment.

Creating employment in other sectors
As countries gradually emerge from lockdown, the biggest economic challenge facing governments is how to deal with unemployment. In the absence of reliable data proving that the arms industry is a major employer, it’s hard to justify huge subsidies if the goal is to maximise employment. Experts will tell you that economies dependent on a few large enterprises concentrated in limited sectors can be a recipe for disaster when it comes to fast economic recovery, largely because an economy based on smaller companies tends to be more flexible, adaptable and responsive - and to create more new jobs.

Is continuously subsidising arms production the best way to a healthy economy?
Generally speaking, perpetually subsidising any large industry leads to an inefficient distribution of resources. The influential arms lobby has been demanding huge government subsidies to ensure continuing employment. But why favour unwieldy arms companies which can’t adapt readily to a post-covid-19 world? If maximising employment as fast as possible is the goal, there are other much more socially useful industries which could flourish with lower initial financial support from government. Although EU competition rules forbid subsidies for national industries, defence remains an expensive exception. In the longer run, an economy which has a significant proportion of small and medium-sized companies would be more likely to survive economic chaos without the constant need for huge government subsidies. It’s always remarkable that those who trumpet the benefits of a free market economy are mute when challenged on welfare payments for the defence industry.
What is real security?
How many unnecessary coronavirus-type deaths will it take for us to understand that our real security CANNOT and MUST NOT depend solely on an arsenal of weapons? When will we acknowledge that when faced with the most devastating real threat in recent history, we were all but helpless? Ensuring real security necessitates including a range of life-enhancing policies. No government is so powerful that it can afford to continuously ignore the true needs of its people: social welfare, healthcare, economic stability, employment, climate justice. But we can't achieve these goals without diverting funds from bloated 'defence' budgets, which ultimately proved powerless against an unexpected tiny silent killer.
WHY EURO SATORY SHOULD BE CLOSED FOR GOOD AND FOR THE GOOD OF THE WORLD

PART 2

The interconnectedness of issues.
If there's one lesson we've learned - or should have learned - from this pandemic, it is that no problem can be analysed, much less solved, without understanding its context. We've seen how excessive spending on defence at the expense of health has brought tragic outcomes during the covid-19 crisis. Experts are now warning us that failure to respect the environment, coupled with creeping encroachment on the natural world, has increased our vulnerability to new viruses and is exacerbating the climate emergency. Although the link between spending on defence and climate emergency is not as immediately obvious as the one between defence and health, they are nonetheless closely linked. Military and arms budgets are also major factors in influencing both the rate and severity of climate change. Unless we treat them both as closely linked issues, we won't be able to resolve - or even mitigate - our climate crisis. However, since such immense complex problems can hardly be adequately covered in such a short article, we can only point here to some of the issues involved.

Who are the major polluters?
Research has shown that the defence industry is highly polluting - for example, a 2019 study by US-based Brown University showed that the Pentagon alone accounted for more pollution than Portugal. This is not a uniquely American result. Every country with a large defence industry produces significant carbon emissions. However, now that environmental concerns have become relatively widespread among most OECD members, the defence industry is trying to greenwash its credentials. Every major arms company is desperately looking to lower its carbon footprint in order to appease any would-be critics.

What next?
Merriam-Webster defines the Military-industrial Complex as: "an informal alliance of the military and related government departments with defense industries that is held to influence government policy".
Both the military and the arms industry are well aware that they need to improve their dubious reputation when it comes to environmental degradation. To do this, they've decided to go for greenwashing: the race is now on to develop the next generation of new eco-friendly weapons. But beware of glaring contradictions where competing policies cancel one another out.

Contradiction A
Consider this scenario: a large share of European and US weapons sales go to the Middle East where tension run high and vicious conflicts look interminable. The argument goes like this: we in the West have to sell weapons to human rights-abusing countries like Saudi Arabia and its allies because we're dependent on OPEC oil - which is, of course, responsible for pollution. So whilst we're eagerly selling to the source countries providing our pollutants, we're simultaneously proclaiming loudly our commitment to producing new caring (and highly profitable) eco-friendly weapons.

Contradiction B
Countries often buy weapons because they're intending to go to war or are already embroiled in conflicts. But wars - even those using 'lower-carbon footprint' fighter jets - cause enormous destruction of infrastructure (even without considering the ensuing deaths and economic mayhem). The aftermath of conflicts need a huge amount of scarce resources for rebuilding once a truce is reached. The need for steel and concrete for road and building construction in a post-war situation is enormous and guarantees more pollution. But then whoever said war was eco-friendly?
SIPRI (THE STOCKHOLM PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE) NOTED IN ITS 2020 REPORT THAT MILITARY SPENDING INCREASED BY THE LARGEST AMOUNT IN A DECADE, AMOUNTING TO $1,917 BN DURING 2019 – THAT'S A STAGGERING $1,917,000,000,000!!

Circular arguments

We already know that worsening climate conditions will inevitably cause conflicts between groups competing for scarce resources, especially for land and water. As desertification spreads in the global south and subsistence agriculture becomes all but impossible, fierce struggles will become increasingly frequent. Conflicts create refugees desperately looking for a means of subsistence and survival. Many Western governments are cynically preparing for what they fear will be a ‘tidal wave of refugees’ by investing in more weaponry, be it military boats, arms and/or or strengthened armies, to keep these escapees out at all costs. Yet diverting the same ‘defence’ spending to combat climate degradation could mitigate its most disastrous effects and ensure that fewer people not need to flee.

Who are the winners and losers in this push for ‘security’?

SIPRI (the Stockholm Peace Research Institute) noted in its 2020 report that military spending increased by the largest amount in a decade, amounting to $1,917 BN during 2019 – that's a staggering $1,917,000,000,000!! That's approximately $253 for every single person alive on this planet. Including those starving on less than $1 a day. So precisely who has benefited from the enormous world expenditure on weapons? Not the citizens of weapons-producing countries who were the supposed beneficiaries of large defence budgets, as the worldwide covid-19 experience has shown. Not the victims of war dying in their hundreds of thousands not only from bombs and other weapons, but also from famine and war-induced illnesses (not even mentioning covid-19) because their dictator-governments spent their national budgets on armaments rather than healthcare or supporting agriculture. Deaths in Yemen alone are estimated at more than 100,000, not including the estimated 85,000 who have died from war-related famine.

That leaves the arms producers and sellers. They are the only ones left as the real beneficiaries – the actual winners - who have cleverly managed to garner billions of euros in subsidies, billions of euros in sales, as well as illegal backhanders, all gained whilst peddling death in the guise of ‘SECURITY’. And that's why Eurosatory should never open its doors again.