Military-industrial complex

US President Dwight D. Eisenhower brought the term military-industrial complex (MIC) into the lexicon of the twentieth century with his 1961 address. Eisenhower warned:

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.

The concept of MIC is commonly used to refer to policy and monetary relationships between legislators, national armed forces, and the so-called “defence” industry (aka war profiteers). These relationships include political contributions, political approval for expenditure on weapons and war, lobbying to support bureaucracies, and oversight of the industry.

International perspective

Modern MICs rose out of the industrial revolution in Britain, France, and Germany in the 1880s and 1890s. The revolution in transportation (steamships and railroads) made it possible for these nations to make long-distance mobilizations, facilitating the "Age of Imperialism". Arguably, the industrialization of war also fueled tensions. The military potential that was unleashed had horrible consequences in Europe with the beginning of the World War I (WWI), which was a war of attrition fought in trenches, at great humanitarian and economic cost.

At the end of WWI, the majority of countries did not completely demobilized; instead there was a shift toward faster integration of technology into military usage. This resulted in strengthening relationships between the military and private companies, and the establishment of MICs in other nations, including Japan and the United States (US). The period between 1930 and 1939 military spending doubled.

World War II (WWII) saw large proportions of GDP spent on war. In 1943 the Allied total GDP was 2,223 billion international dollars (in 1990 prices). The impact of WWII was profound for participants’ economies, with changes in the public spending and taxation levels of most Western nations. WWII is also synonymous with the advent of advanced weapon technologies, especially nuclear weapons. The political elite in many industrialized countries came to define international reality in predominantly military terms. After WWII, military demands continued to influence the corporate economy, with the Cold War embodying a relentless armaments race between the two superpowers. The period of low-intensity, unconventional conflict, overshadowed by the constant threat of a potential nuclear conflict, allowed an atmosphere to be created where there was a perceived need for constant procurement of military goods and services including large naval, air, and land forces. It was from this environment that the current US MIC was born.
These robust and seemingly inextricable ties between the political, military, and economic establishments led E.P. Thompson to declare in 1982 that the United States (and the Soviet Union) “do not have military-industrial complexes; they are such complexes.” According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) a continuous increase in military spending continues worldwide, with the US military dominating both operationally and monetarily. The total military expenditure in 2011 was 1.74 trillion USD.

American incumbents and “defence” industry donations

The “defence” industry tends to contribute heavily to incumbent members of Congress. While it is not the highest contributor of money to politicians, it is one of the most politically powerful. The sector includes laboratories, universities, and various weapon, aerospace, and electronics companies. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, individuals and political action committees associated with the “defence” sector contributed nearly $24 million to political candidates and committees during the 2008 campaign cycle, split evenly between Democrats and Republicans. While Republicans have been favoured in the past, ultimately contributions are made to whoever is in power. It is believed that during the last two decades, the sector has contributed a total of US$150.8 million, with 57 percent going to Republican candidates.

The Center for Responsive Politics states that the defense sector also has a formidable federal lobbying presence, having spent US$136.5 million in 2009, down from a high of US$150.8 million the previous year. In 2009, more than 1,100 lobbyists represented nearly 400 clients. The amount spent on “defence” lobbying and the number of lobbyists has steadily increased during the last two decades. The sector's biggest companies include Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Dynamics, Northrop Grumman, and Raytheon. Allowing these companies to make donations to politicians means that the weapons manufacturers can secure government “defence” contracts, which are often lucrative. It also means they influence the budget by targeting House and Senate members who sit on the armed forces and appropriations committees overseeing military and “defence” spending. While both Republicans and Democrats recruit reps across the country to guarantee the Pentagon’s billion dollar contracts, it is the taxpayer that underwrites the large weapon manufacturing plants across the country. Many lobbyists, retired service men and women, negotiate billion dollar contracts using insider information they obtained while employed at the Pentagon. The muddy world where defense lobbyists mingle with the military to secure no-bid contracts is in contrast to the prospering of “security and liberty”.

Implications of the MIC for disarmament

The intertwining of the political, military, and economic elite is democratically hypocritical – if not corrupt. This intertwining of investments, which requires always-expanding growth to survive, is not only fundamentally at odds with abolition, but is an anathema to peace and justice. Having taxpayers underwrite military contracts and weapon manufacturing plants not only means that resources are allocated away from healthcare, education and community infrastructure, it also contradictory to the goal of abolition. Civil society must endeavor to getting rid of the weapons, which will require continued challenging of political and economic structures.

For more information on the biggest military corporations, see RCW’s research project on the Dirty Dozen: corporate partners in mass destruction.