

Problems of NATO

Jeremy Corbyn MP

Figures produced recently by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) show that military expenditure in 2012 put the United States at 39 per cent of the whole world, followed by China on 9.5, Russia 5.2, Britain 3.5, Japan 3.4, and the next 10 countries at 21.2 per cent. The remainder of the world, namely over 175 countries, made up 18.2 per cent.

World military spending has now reached \$1.7 trillion with the US and Russia supplying over half the world's arms exports. The US makes 29 per cent of the world's shipments followed by Russia with 27 per cent. Britain is fourth in the top ten with arms exports totalling \$4bn. In the context of the crisis in the Ukraine there have been many demands for increased expenditure as a way of resolving the issue.

While no one can endorse any country invading another, and any Russian military occupation of the Ukraine cannot be condoned, it does appear as though the government of the Ukraine and Western Europe have virtually accepted Crimea's transfer to Russia. One hopes that there will be attention paid to the situation facing minorities in Crimea, such as the Tatars, as much as protection of minorities in Ukraine.

However, in the wider context, we have to see the current crisis as the culmination of 20 years of a relentless NATO expansion eastwards, and increasingly bellicose statements from the retiring NATO secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who seems to have no sense of irony in his condemnation of Russia's behaviour in central Europe while, at the same time, he has happily presided over NATO activities

The author is Member of Parliament for Islington North and Vice-Chair of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

in Afghanistan and its colonial adventures all over the Middle East and north Africa, particularly in supporting the bombing campaign in Libya and the French intervention in Mali.

On the back of the Ukraine crisis, NATO and Rasmussen seem to be just as opportunist as the US was after 11 September 2001. Bush used the crisis of 2001 to vastly increase US arms expenditure and promote bases all across the world. NATO is now trying to develop permanent bases all over eastern Europe, including Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, and are mounting enormous military exercises with surveillance aircraft and war games all along the border with Russia. While William Hague claimed that there was no intention of Ukraine joining NATO, the formalities of membership make little difference to the reality that the new government in Kiev, having accepted a massive and highly conditional loan, is now part of the whole NATO military structure.

Whilst the US is happy to send troops all over the region, including a deployment of 600 to the Mihail Kogalniceanu base in Romania, European countries, especially Germany, are extremely wary of doing anything that would increase tensions with Russia. At the end of the Cold War in 1990/1, NATO was essentially a redundant force. As the Warsaw Pact rapidly dissolved itself, NATO should have done the same, and disputes and issues in Europe could and should have been resolved through the peaceful Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. An interesting combination of military think tanks, the NATO high command, and global arms suppliers kept the spirit of NATO and its Cold War background alive. The 2010 Lisbon NATO summit, and later the Chicago summit of 2012, expanded the Alliance's operational area and gave unto itself a global role, while at the same time establishing a formal link with the European Union.

This formal link requires all NATO members to meet a high minimum level of arms expenditure and preparedness to supply troops and equipment to any conflict that NATO requires, and this has dragged many unwillingly into Afghanistan as well as the danger of other potential conflicts.

Another trend is that NATO member states increasingly do not require large numbers of armed personnel, but very expensive and sophisticated military equipment, in order to defend the economic interests of the West. Thus, the obscenity of remote-controlled drones being launched from Norfolk or Kansas against unarmed villages in Pakistan or Afghanistan has become the West's favoured form of warfare.

In Britain, the debate about our role in the world is often confused with delusions of imperial grandeur and a strange supposition that influence only comes from military expenditure. In August 2013, Parliament surprisingly

voted not to intervene militarily in Syria. This brought about a welcome round of negotiations between the US and Russia, as well as an agreement on nuclear processing with Iran. Sadly, the crisis in the Ukraine has once again put the hawks in the driving seat. The essential thing now is to halt further NATO expansion, and promote bilateral talks with Russia that will reduce military expenditure and bases on both sides of the borders.

For the Labour Movement in Britain, there is an important debate to be had. Blair disgracefully led the last government into war in Afghanistan and Iraq and fulfilled the traditional British post-World War Two position of always supporting the US in foreign policy and military matters. The next government will be faced with the decision on Trident, with the opportunity not to renew it and thus be able to redirect £100bn into something eminently more useful than nuclear weapons. This is not an issue to be avoided, but to be confronted because of austerity and the strange sense of priorities of some who believe that spending £100bn on the vanity project of new nuclear weapons is more important than schools, hospitals, houses and railways.

However, when one looks back at the history of post-war foreign policy, on 22 January 1948 in the House of Commons, Ernie Bevin set out his vision of the West, and Europe, saying:

‘Europe has extended its influence throughout the world and we have to look further afield. In the first place we turn our eyes to Africa, where great responsibilities are shared with us by South Africa, France, Belgium and Portugal, and equally to all overseas territories, especially South East Asia with which the Dutch are closely concerned.’

Bevin showed no touch of irony when, in 1948, South Africa had just embarked on its course of apartheid and Britain was involved in suppressing colonial freedom movements, and had just collaborated with the Dutch in suppressing the Indonesian independence movement which grew rapidly at the end of the Second World War.

Eleven months later, Bevin was back in Parliament, once again discussing collective defence by ‘the West’ against the Soviet Union. Bevin told Parliament that

‘in accordance with the development of this idea of regional understanding and collective security we’ve had extensive discussions between the five powers. In the end we agreed to inform the United States government that we’re in favour of the North Atlantic pact.’

Bevin then went on to describe how the putative NATO might work. A very short time later, US troops were back in Europe, having departed at

the end of the Second World War.

There is more than a taint of double standards and hypocrisy in Western European and US concerns over the Ukraine. Obama, recently visiting Saudi Arabia, seems incapable of registering the abhorrence many have for the Kingdom's human rights record, and at the same time says nothing about the activities of the far-right in Ukraine and the discrimination and abuse that is now happening against Roma people and other minorities. We need to work with socialists in Ukraine, as well as others, to promote justice and human rights. NATO expansion is not - any more than Russian militarism - going to achieve either of those aims.

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NATO – No thanks!

'... I regarded NATO as being a rather dangerous military alliance that might well involve Europe in another war at more or less the wish of the United States. I could quite well see the American anti-communist view pushing NATO into a cold war first, and then into an active war ... I can't think of any good reason why Ireland should join NATO, then or now. NATO is a dangerous military alliance and I have noticed that there is a great deal of hesitancy among many of the NATO countries. I am very glad that we didn't join and that we didn't spend vast sums of money on quite unnecessary armament.'

Seán MacBride was his country's Foreign Minister in 1949, when Ireland rejected an invitation from the US Ambassador to participate in the formation of the North Atlantic Alliance. He reflected on Ireland's landmark refusal in his book, *That Day's Struggle: A Memoir 1904-1951*, edited by Caitriona Lawlor, Currach Press, Dublin, 2005.