

Editorial

Global Tinderbox

Between 2002 and 2016, the top 100 weapons manufacturers and ‘military service’ companies logged 38% growth in global sales. In 2016, these sales – excluding Chinese companies – amounted to \$375 billion, turning \$60 billion profit. Between 1998 and 2011, the Pentagon’s budget grew in real terms by 91% while defence industry profits quadrupled.

In the 1970s, investment in the ‘information technology’ sector stood at \$17 billion. By 2017, investment in this sector exceeded \$700 billion. In the same year, Apple’s market capitalisation stood at \$730 billion, Google stood at \$581 billion, and Microsoft stood at \$497 billion. Meanwhile, Exxon Mobile – the highest placed ‘industrial’ company – had a market capitalisation of \$344 billion. By comparison, the arms manufacturer Lockheed Martin had a capitalisation of around \$321 billion and Rolls-Royce \$21 billion at the end of 2017.

Whilst the United States and other countries continue to purchase – and use – vast quantities of ‘conventional’ weaponry, the extraordinary figures quoted above occurred alongside the unleashing of a ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’, powered by significant leaps in capability in computing, robotics, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, ‘autonomous’ vehicles and the rest. Ever greater sums are being spent on military and policing applications of the ‘fruits’ of this ‘Revolution’. So much so, that the sociologist William I. Robinson identifies a trend towards what he terms ‘militarised accumulation’ as a ‘major source of state-organised profit-making’.

If this trend endures – as it surely will, unless arrested by concerted political action – then not only will ‘battlefields’ of the future look like a science fiction dystopia, but the processes that presently blur the lines between ‘wartime’ and ‘peacetime’ will surely accelerate. At what point will a large-scale computer hacking operation spill over into a ‘hot’ war? How much surveillance, how many drones, how many robotic weapons can be deployed before critical mass is reached? How many things must go wrong – and in what sequence – before these embodiments of what Mike Cooley terms our ‘delinquent genius’ might bring an end to us all?

There is already a technological ‘arms race’ and with each new drone, autonomous field gun, hack or military satellite, this race intensifies. Any such intensification will drastically increase the risks of wide-scale military confrontation, including the prospect of nuclear war.

How should such risks be addressed? An important step is to understand the scope of the problem and the present realities of how these technologies have already been deployed. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament’s *Future Wars* conference in London in November 2018 was an important step in equipping the peace movement with an understanding of the scope and reality. *Future Wars* also addressed some of the horrors that look set to present themselves in the not so distant future. We publish papers from this timely conference in this issue of *The Spokesman*.

The alarm has been sounded, but what are we to do? How can society ensure that artificial intelligence, for example, is put to work for human good, rather than making war? How to harness the miracles of robotic technology to improve, rather than destroy, our planet? How can we guarantee that nanotechnology and biotechnology are put to work for the preservation and not the eradication of life? In answering these questions, we should utilise the work already under way to develop ideas about socially useful production and defence diversification. These are just some of the very pressing questions we now must face.

President Trump’s declared intention to withdraw the United States from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, reciprocated by President Putin, pitches the world towards new and more imminent dangers. The heightened tensions between the United States and Russia have been widely characterised as evidence of a new ‘Cold War’. Michael Klare of the Arms Control Association worries that, in fact, the situation is much worse than this: we face a ‘new global tinderbox’, where the merest spark could see us engulfed in flames. We must all work to prevent such an outcome.