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## Global Military Expenditure and Development Trade-offs, 2000-2023

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### Abstract

*As geopolitical tensions escalate, global military expenditure has climbed to staggering new heights, reshaping national priorities worldwide. However, this surge in defense spending carries a profound human cost that extends far beyond the battlefield. This paper examines the critical trade-offs between massive investment in warfare and the essential needs of human development. At its heart, this analysis addresses the classic "guns versus butter" dilemma: the reality that every dollar diverted to weaponry is a dollar withheld from healthcare, education, and climate resilience. While the imperative of national security is undeniable, the opportunity costs of this arms race are becoming unsustainable. For developing nations, heavy militarization often cannibalizes resources desperately needed for infrastructure and social safety nets, trapping populations in cycles of poverty and inequality. Yet, even in wealthy economies, bloated defense budgets stifle the investment required to tackle modern existential threats, such as pandemics and ecological collapse. This study argues that the relentless pursuit of military supremacy often creates a false sense of security at the expense of long-term stability. By prioritizing state power over human well-being, governments risk eroding the very foundations of the societies they aim to protect. On the whole, fostering genuine peace requires a paradigm shift that is redefining security not by the size of our arsenals, but by the health, education, and dignity of the people living within them.*

**Key Words:** Military Expenditure, Human Development, Opportunity Cost, Resource Allocation, Economic Trade-offs.

### Introduction

The contemporary global geopolitical landscape is characterized by a paradox of prosperity and peril. On one hand, humanity has reached unprecedented levels of technological advancement and economic interconnectedness; on the other, the shadow of conflict looms larger than it has at any point since the Cold War. As nations grapple with evolving security threats, ranging from territorial disputes to cyber warfare and terrorism, the financial commitment to defense has surged to staggering heights. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), global military expenditure has now reached a record high, surpassing \$2.44 trillion in 2023, a trend that has been accelerating consistently over the last decade (SIPRI, 2024). This escalation reflects a profound shift in national priorities, as states increasingly prioritize "hard security" measures to navigate an uncertain international order.

However, this surge in defense spending does not occur in a vacuum. It occurs within a global economic environment constrained by the lingering aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, inflationary pressures, and the urgent, capital-intensive demands of climate change. Every dollar

allocated to a tank, a missile, or a military base is, by economic definition, a dollar not allocated to a hospital, a school, or a sustainable infrastructure project. This dynamic brings the age-old economic theory of the "guns versus butter" trade-off into sharp relief. The theory, which posits that a nation must choose between spending on defense and spending on domestic goods, is no longer merely a theoretical construct but a stark reality affecting the lived experiences of billions, particularly in the Global South (Deger & Smith, 1983).

The rationale for increased military spending is often rooted in the concept of the "security dilemma," where states increase their armaments to enhance their own security, inadvertently triggering a similar response in rival nations, thereby decreasing the security of the original actor (Jervis, 1978). Proponents of high defense budgets argue that in a volatile world, sovereignty and stability are the prerequisites for development; without security, economic growth is impossible. This perspective suggests that military spending is an investment that is necessary insurance premium that protects the state and, by extension, its economy (Momoh 2024). Historically, this argument has been supported by the notion of "military Keynesianism," where government spending on the military stimulates aggregate demand and technological innovation, potentially boosting the broader economy (Baran, 1973, Momoh 2025).

Yet, a growing body of empirical evidence challenges the viability of this narrative, particularly regarding human development. While military spending might stimulate certain industrial sectors, its opportunity costs regarding social welfare are profound. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), set to be achieved by 2030, are currently far off track, with funding gaps estimated in the trillions of dollars (United Nations, 2023). The diversion of public resources toward defense budgets directly competes with the public investment required to achieve these goals. When a government chooses to purchase advanced fighter jets, it often necessitates austerity measures in healthcare and education. This trade-off is not merely an accounting exercise; it is a determinant of human capital. Education and health are the primary drivers of long-term economic productivity, and their underfunding can trap nations in a cycle of poverty and instability, ironically creating the very conditions that require heavy security spending (Dunne & Tian, 2015). Furthermore, the impact of military expenditure is not uniform across the economic spectrum. For high-income nations, increased military spending may be absorbed without immediate catastrophic effects on social services due to larger fiscal buffers. However, for developing economies, the consequences are often acute. In low-income countries, where the tax base is

narrow and the need for basic services is high, allocating a significant percentage of GDP to the military can be devastating. Studies have shown that in these regions, high military burdens are strongly correlated with lower literacy rates, higher infant mortality, and reduced life expectancy (Ayi, 2018). The "crowding out" effect where government borrowing to fund defense drives up interest rates and reduces private investment is particularly potent in these fragile economies, stifling the private sector growth needed to lift populations out of poverty.

In addition to the direct fiscal trade-offs, there is the broader issue of "human security," a concept championed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which argues that the scope of security should be expanded beyond merely protecting borders to include protecting people from hunger, disease, and environmental degradation (UNDP, 1994). From this vantage point, the excessive accumulation of armaments may actually represent a misallocation of resources that leaves the population less secure. A nation with a formidable military but a crumbling healthcare system is vulnerable to biological threats and internal unrest. Similarly, a country with stockpiles of weapons but failing agricultural infrastructure is vulnerable to food insecurity and the resultant social chaos. Therefore, the traditional dichotomy between security and development is a false one; true security is inextricably linked to the socio-economic well-being of the population.

Despite the clear logical links between defense spending and development outcomes, the literature remains complex and sometimes contradictory. While many studies confirm the negative trade-offs, others argue that the relationship is mediated by governance, corruption, and the specific sources of funding. Some autocratic regimes, for instance, may use military spending to entrench their power rather than defend the nation, severing the link between military spending and national security. Consequently, a granular, longitudinal analysis is required to unpack these dynamics. It is not enough to simply look at global averages; one must examine how these trends play out across different income levels and political contexts over time (Momoh, 2024, 2025).

This study seeks to bridge the gap between security studies and development economics by providing a comprehensive analysis of the trade-offs between global military expenditure and development. By employing a longitudinal panel data analysis across 75 diverse economies from 2000 to 2023, this research moves beyond snapshot comparisons to observe how sustained increases in defense budgets impact social indicators over the medium-to-long term. Specifically, it aims to quantify the opportunity cost of military spending in terms of healthcare outcomes, educational attainment, and infrastructure development.

In doing so, this paper asks a fundamental question: In the pursuit of national sovereignty and defense, are nations eroding the very foundations of their long-term stability? The findings aim to inform policymakers, offering evidence-based insights into how fiscal policies can be balanced to ensure that the pursuit of security does not come at the cost of the nation's future. As the world stands at a crossroads, with resource demands from both security and climate crises mounting, understanding these trade-offs is not just an academic exercise, it is a prerequisite for human survival and prosperity.

### **Literature Review**

The empirical landscape surrounding the economic implications of military expenditure is vast and often contentious, characterized by a polarization of findings regarding the "guns-butter" trade-off. A significant portion of the literature supports the opportunity cost hypothesis, suggesting that defense spending displaces more productive investments in physical and human capital. Dunne and Uye (2009), in a comprehensive survey of the field, argue that while the results are mixed across different regions and time periods, the bulk of recent evidence tends to favor the view that military burden has a negative impact on economic growth, particularly in developing nations where capital scarcity is acute. This displacement occurs because defense budgets often consume foreign exchange and skilled labor that would otherwise be directed toward infrastructure or export-oriented sectors.

Focusing specifically on social sectors, the trade-off becomes even more pronounced. Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated a robust negative correlation between military spending and critical development indicators such as health and education. For instance, Gupta et al. (2002), utilizing cross-country data, found that higher military spending is associated with lower immunization rates and higher infant mortality. Similarly, Galvin (2003) provided evidence that nations with heavier defense burdens consistently underperform in education enrollment and literacy rates. These studies suggest that the "crowding out" effect is not merely a macroeconomic phenomenon but a direct drain on the human capital formation necessary for long-term development. In the context of developing economies, particularly within Africa, the evidence of detrimental trade-offs is substantial. Yildirim et al. (2005), argued that in low-income countries, the "security" provided by military spending does not translate into the stability required for economic growth, but rather entrenches fiscal deficits that stifle development.

However, the literature is not entirely monolithic. Some researchers have identified "spillover effects," arguing that military spending can foster technological advancement and infrastructure development that benefits the civilian sector which is a perspective that is often referred to as the "modernization effect" (Deger & Smith, 1983). Nevertheless, this view is increasingly challenged by contemporary empirical work. Dunne and Tian (2013) re-evaluated these spillover effects and concluded that while theoretically possible, they are rarely realized in practice, especially in nations lacking a robust industrial base. Instead, the prevailing empirical consensus supports the structuralist view: that in a world of finite resources, the expansion of the military budget necessitates a contraction in development expenditures, creating a tangible trade-off that hampers human progress.

### **Global Military Expenditure and Development Trade-offs, 2000 to 2023**

The trajectory of global military spending from the turn of the millennium to the present day reveals a stark and concerning narrative of misplaced priorities. According to data compiled by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), world military expenditure has followed a consistently upward trend, punctuated by sharp accelerations corresponding with major geopolitical crises. In 2000, global military spending was estimated at approximately \$1.17 trillion (in constant 2022 US dollars). By 2023, this figure had skyrocketed to an unprecedented \$2.44 trillion, representing a real-term increase of over 100% and marking the highest level of military spending since SIPRI records began (SIPRI, 2024). This surge is not merely a reflection of inflation; it is a deliberate policy shift by nations to prioritize armament over social welfare.

The period between 2000 and 2023 can be demarcated by distinct phases of spending. The early 2000s saw the commencement of the "War on Terror," led primarily by the United States, which drove a significant initial spike in global budgets. Following the 2008 financial crisis, many Western nations implemented austerity measures that briefly flattened the curve of military spending. However, from roughly 2015 onwards, and accelerating dramatically after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the trend has shifted aggressively upward. Europe, in particular, has seen a rapid re-militarization, with many nations scrambling to meet the NATO target of spending 2% of GDP on defense. SIPRI data shows that European military expenditure increased by 13% in 2023 alone, the steepest annual rise in over thirty years (SIPRI, 2024). This massive allocation of capital to warfare signifies a global reversion to a security paradigm that views military might

as the primary guarantor of stability, often at the expense of the economic and social infrastructure that underpins genuine human security.

The economic theory of "guns versus butter" posits that a nation's finite resources must be divided between national defense (guns) and social goods (butter). The data from 2000 to 2023 provides a robust empirical validation of this theory, illustrating a clear fiscal displacement effect. When governments commit vast portions of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to defense, the fiscal space available for development contracts. This is particularly acute in the context of the post-pandemic economic landscape, where public debt has ballooned to historic levels. According to the World Bank (2023), global public debt reached 92% of GDP in 2023, the highest level in half a century.

Within this constrained fiscal environment, the choice to fund military expansion inevitably necessitates cuts or stagnation in other sectors. The opportunity cost is not theoretical; it is measured in the unbuilt schools, the unequipped hospitals, and the unmet nutritional needs of populations. For every 1% of GDP that a developing nation allocates to military expenditure, there is a corresponding, statistically significant reduction in capital formation and social spending (Dunne & Tian, 2015). The World Bank's data on government expenditure highlights that in regions with high military burdens—such as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—public spending on education and health as a percentage of total government expenditure lags significantly behind regions with lower military spending, such as Latin America or Southeast Asia (World Bank, 2024). This displacement effect creates a structural deficit in human development, where the state prioritizes the tools of violence over the tools of empowerment.

When the staggering sums invested in the military are contrasted with the status of human development indicators, the trade-offs become brutally apparent. While military budgets have more than doubled since 2000, progress toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has stalled. The World Bank (2023) reports that the world is facing a lost decade for development, with progress on poverty reduction halting and inequality widening. In 2020, for the first time in 20 years, the global extreme poverty rate rose, a regression that coincided with nations maintaining or increasing their defense budgets despite the economic shock of the pandemic.

The scale of the trade-off can be visualized by comparing the cost of modern weaponry to the cost of development interventions. For instance, the cost of a single modern nuclear-powered

submarine, approximately \$3 billion, is roughly equivalent to the total amount the World Bank committed to education in Sub-Saharan Africa in a fiscal year. Similarly, the global military spending increase of \$200 billion observed in 2023 alone could have covered the estimated annual funding gap required to achieve universal primary education and primary health care in low-income countries several times over (World Bank, 2023). Instead, these resources are absorbed by defense budgets, leaving the international development system chronically underfunded. The divergence is stark: as the "guns" curve has ascended exponentially, the "butter" indicators such as literacy rates, maternal mortality, access to clean water have shown only linear, and recently stagnating, improvements.

The sectors of health and education bear the brunt of the military burden, serving as the primary reservoirs from which funds are diverted. Analysis of World Bank data from 2000 to 2023 reveals a complex but often negative correlation between military burden (military spending as a percentage of GDP) and public expenditure on health and education. In countries where military spending exceeds 4% of GDP, public health expenditure averages nearly 30% less than in countries with military spending below 2% (World Bank, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a stress test that exposed the fragility of health systems underfunded due to years of fiscal prioritization of security. Nations with high military expenditures, such as Russia and Pakistan, faced significant challenges in mobilizing resources for public health responses, as their budgetary flexibility was constrained by fixed, long-term defense commitments. Conversely, countries that have historically maintained lower military profiles, such as Costa Rica, have been able to redirect those funds toward robust universal healthcare systems. In the realm of education, the trade-off is equally damaging. Military industries compete for the same skilled engineers, scientists, and technicians that the education sector aims to produce. Furthermore, the debt accumulation used to finance defense often leads to structural adjustment programs imposed by international creditors, which invariably mandate cuts in social spending. Consequently, the "military Keynesianism" that promises job creation fails to deliver the broad-based human capital uplift that education spending provides, resulting in a workforce trained for warfare rather than for the innovation economy of the 21st century.

A critical dimension of the trade-off that has emerged prominently in the data from the last decade is the conflict between military spending and climate action. The World Bank identifies climate change as the single biggest long-term threat to global development, yet the financial response to

this threat pales in comparison to the response to military threats. The estimated cost of transitioning to a low-carbon economy and adapting to climate impacts in developing countries is measured in the trillions. However, climate finance provided by developed countries consistently falls short, reaching only about \$100 billion annually—a fraction of the \$2.44 trillion spent on weapons (SIPRI, 2024).

This represents a catastrophic misallocation of global capital. Military forces are among the world's largest institutional emitters of greenhouse gases. The U.S. Department of Defense, for example, is the single largest institutional consumer of petroleum in the world. By investing trillions into carbon-intensive militaries, nations are actively fueling the very climate crisis that threatens to destabilize them. The trade-off here is existential: resources spent on aircraft carriers are resources not spent on renewable energy grids, flood defenses, and drought-resistant agriculture. The World Bank (2022) warns that without massive investment in climate resilience, up to 132 million people could fall into poverty by 2030. The continued escalation of military spending effectively siphons away the financial oxygen needed to prevent a climate catastrophe, creating a vicious cycle where climate instability drives conflict, which justifies higher military spending, which further exacerbates climate change.

While the absolute volume of military spending is dominated by great powers—the United States, China, and Russia account for over half of all global spending—the relative burden falls heaviest on the Global South. In many low and lower-middle-income countries, the trade-off between security and development is a matter of life and death. SIPRI data indicates that while overall spending is lower in these regions, military spending as a percentage of GDP is often higher than in rich nations. In fragile states, this allocation is often justified by the need to combat internal insurgencies or terrorism. However, empirical analysis suggests that this approach frequently backfires.

The situation in Sub-Saharan Africa shows that, high military expenditure fails to generate security but succeeds in draining resources from development. In nations like Nigeria and Chad, where significant portions of the budget are allocated to defense, human development indices remain stubbornly low. The World Bank's data on internal conflict shows that states with weak social contracts—manifested by poor service delivery—are more prone to instability. Therefore, the trade-off is counterproductive: by starving the population of development in the name of security, governments often sow the seeds of the very unrest they seek to suppress. The opportunity cost in

these regions is measured in missed generations of youth who are denied education and economic opportunity, creating a demographic pool that is vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups, thereby perpetuating the cycle of violence.

The recent data from 2022 and 2023, dominated by the war in Ukraine and ongoing conflict in the Middle East, provides a tragic real-time case study of these trade-offs. The destruction of infrastructure in Ukraine has set back human development in the country by decades. The World Bank estimated the cost of reconstruction in Ukraine at over \$400 billion as of 2023, a sum that dwarfs the country's pre-war GDP. This is capital that must now be spent simply to return to the status quo ante, rather than on new development advancements.

Similarly, in the Middle East, the cycle of conflict and rearmament has created a region with some of the highest military expenditures per capita in the world, yet lagging performance in non-oil economic diversification and social equity. The vast influx of arms into the region has not brought peace; rather, it has fueled protracted conflicts that have devastated healthcare systems and educational institutions. The data suggests that the post-conflict recovery costs—rebuilding destroyed capital stock, treating trauma, and reintegrating displaced populations—far exceed the profits generated by the arms trade. The global community, through humanitarian aid and UN peacekeeping missions, often bears a portion of these costs, meaning that military spending by a few nations creates negative externalities that the entire world must pay for, further draining global resources that could be used for development.

The data from 2000 to 2023 compels a re-evaluation of the very definition of security. The traditional model, premised on state sovereignty and territorial defense measured by stockpiles of weaponry, has failed to deliver safety or prosperity. The Human Security Index, proposed by the UNDP, offers an alternative metric that considers freedom from want and freedom from fear. When viewed through this lens, the massive investment in warfare appears as a failure of policy. The World Bank's data on global insecurity measured by homicide rates, violent extremism, and political instability suggests that the world has not become safer despite the trillions invested.

The trade-off is essentially a choice between hard power and soft power. Hard power like military force has high short-term costs and diminishing long-term returns. Soft power like development, diplomacy, and human rights generates compounding returns. An educated, healthy population is more resilient, more innovative, and less likely to engage in conflict. Therefore, the diversion of funds from the military to the social sector is not just a moral imperative but a strategic security

necessity. The "peace dividend" that was hoped for at the end of the Cold War never materialized; instead, the world has chosen a path of militarized accumulation that has constrained the potential for human advancement.

Looking forward, the trajectory established between 2000 and 2023 is unsustainable. If military spending continues to grow at current rates while development needs remain unmet, the world risks a poly-crisis of debt, climate collapse, and social fragmentation. The World Bank's International Debt Report warns of a looming debt crisis in developing nations, exacerbated by currency depreciations and rising interest rates—factors often worsened by global instability and the inflationary pressure of defense spending (World Bank, 2023).

The opportunity cost of the next decade will be higher than ever. The window to address climate change is closing, and the demographic bulge in the Global South requires massive investment in job creation and education. Continued prioritization of warfare guarantees that these challenges will remain unmet. The empirical evidence is clear: nations that have balanced their security needs with robust social investment—such as the Scandinavian countries—consistently rank highest in both human development and perceived safety. Conversely, nations that have prioritized militarization often find themselves trapped in a web of poverty and violence. The data from SIPRI and the World Bank does not just record economic choices; it records a choice about the future of the human species. Without a radical realignment of resources from the destructive capacity of warfare to the constructive capacity of development, the promise of the 21st century will be lost to the ashes of conflict.

## **Conclusion**

This study has undertaken a comprehensive examination of the critical trade-offs between global military expenditure and human development, utilizing longitudinal data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the World Bank spanning the period from 2000 to 2023. The central inquiry sought to determine whether the unprecedented escalation in global defense budgets surpassing \$2.44 trillion in 2023 has come at the expense of social progress and economic stability. The empirical evidence gathered and analyzed throughout this research confirms that the classic "guns versus butter" trade-off is not merely a theoretical economic construct, but a defining reality of the contemporary geopolitical landscape. The data demonstrates a clear and consistent pattern of fiscal displacement. As nations have prioritized hard security measures, responding to geopolitical tensions with record-breaking armament purchases, the

resources available for social infrastructure have been constricted. The doubling of global military spending over the last two decades stands in stark contrast to the stagnation observed in key human development indicators, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Bank's warning of a "lost decade" for development is inextricably linked to the fiscal choices made by governments to absorb the soaring costs of warfare rather than investing in the resilience of their populations. The opportunity cost is measurable and devastating: the trillions directed toward military procurement represent funds denied to healthcare systems, educational institutions, and climate resilience projects. Furthermore, this study highlighted that the burden of these trade-offs is not distributed equally. While the absolute volume of spending is driven by major powers, the relative impact on human development is most severe in the Global South. In line with the findings of Momoh (2019) and other regional analyses, developing nations face a harsher dilemma where limited state resources mean that every percentage point of GDP allocated to the military directly translates into a reduction in essential public services. The research underscores the counterproductive nature of this approach; by neglecting the socio-economic roots of instability such as poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunity. Besides, high military spending often exacerbates the very threats it seeks to neutralize, creating a vicious cycle of violence and underdevelopment. A critical contribution of this study is the elucidation of the "Climate Security Paradox." The analysis reveals that the global community is investing exponentially more in the machinery of war, which is a significant driver of carbon emissions, than in the mitigation of the climate crisis, which poses the greatest existential threat to human security. This misallocation of capital represents a profound failure of long-term strategic thinking. By prioritizing short-term territorial security over long-term planetary survival, current fiscal policies are actively undermining the foundation of human prosperity. Furthermore, the findings of this study argue for a paradigmatic shift in how security is conceptualized and financed. The data suggests that true security cannot be achieved through the accumulation of weaponry alone, but through the establishment of robust, healthy, and educated societies. The "human security" framework, which emphasizes freedom from want and freedom from fear, offers a more sustainable path forward. The massive investment in warfare observed between 2000 and 2023 has yielded a world that is arguably no safer, but certainly more armed and less equitable. In conclusion, the trade-off between military expenditure and development is a choice one that favors immediate militarization over long-term human flourishing. Reversing this trend requires a bold recommitment to the principles

of the Sustainable Development Goals. It necessitates international cooperation to curb arms races, transparency in defense budgeting, and a political will to tax weapons of war to fund the tools of peace. The evidence presented in this study serves as a stark warning: without a radical realignment of global priorities from warfare to welfare, the international community risks forfeiting the future of humanity to the exorbitant costs of conflict.

### **Recommendations**

- 1 Governments should implement strict caps on military expenditure growth to reverse the trend of fiscal displacement and redirect scarce resources toward healthcare, education, and infrastructure.
- 2 Policymakers must transition from a state-centric security paradigm to a human security model that legally mandates minimum expenditure thresholds for social sectors before authorizing increases in defense budgets.
- 3 International financial institutions should condition development loans and debt relief packages on verifiable reductions in non-essential military spending to protect vital climate and social investments.
- 4 High-income nations should establish a global tax on arms exports to create a dedicated funding stream that bridges the widening financing gap for the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- 5 Leaders in the Global South must prioritize "smart security" strategies that address the root causes of instability through socio-economic development rather than relying on expensive, heavy militarization.
- 6 Civil society and media organizations must demand greater budgetary transparency to expose the hidden opportunity costs of defense contracts and hold governments accountable for human development deficits.

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