

Approaching the \$2 trillion redline

Ho-Chih Lin

January 2016

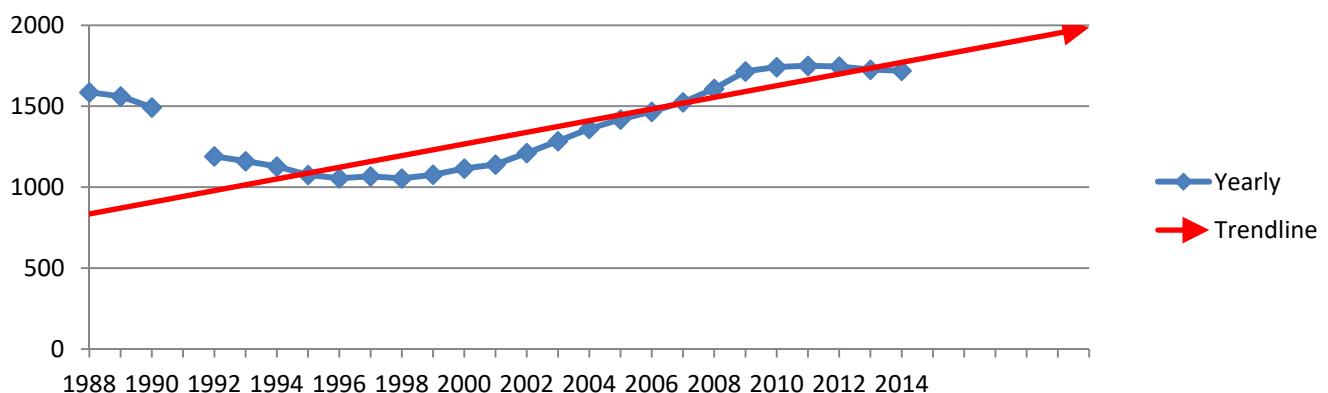
TIPPING POINT NORTH SOUTH

A co-operative that supports and initiates creative, campaign-driven projects that advance the global social justice agenda

THE \$2 TRILLION REDLINE

During the 1980s, the Cold War and the global nuclear arms race propelled total military spending in the world higher than ever before. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the idea of the "peace dividend" got hold and for a short while, it did indeed look like that was where the world was going and that global military spending would gradually normalise to a much lower level, appropriate for a reduced-conflict, non-confrontational, uni-polar world. The two biggest spenders saw the biggest drop in their spending. Russia simply could not afford the Soviet level of spending after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and its economy went from crisis to crisis, further diminishing their ability to spend. In the United States, without any notable enemy and significant military threats to their national security, military spending gradually came down while the economy boomed. It came down to the lowest point in recent history in the middle of the Clinton years. Since the USA is the largest military spending nation by far (accounting more than one thirds), it coincided with the lowest point in global military spending too.

Global Military Expenditure at constant 2011 US\$ billion



All this changed towards the end of the 20th century and most importantly since the beginning of the so-called War on Terror. Ever since, global military spending has increased year on year and even after the global financial crisis and the Great Recession, it has hardly experienced a dip. This fuelled the rise of the military-industrial complex, more profits strengthened their lobbying power and further entrenched their grip on the governments, undermining democracy in the process.

Has our world become safer as the result? NO.

The defence industry, along with the financial industry, are the undisputable stars of 21st century capitalism, in terms of their ability to create profits while making others pay for the mess they leave behind. And there is no end in sight. No matter how much we spend to 'protect' our security at home, it seems as if a new 'security threat' will pop up in some other part of the world every month. As well as the usual suspects of North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Russia, we now have ISIS not just in the Middle East but in the North Africa too. One can

argue, the threat of terrorism, especially in Europe, has increased, not despite of the War on Terror, but because of it.

The more the military expenditure, the more foreign military expeditions undertaken; the longer the military conflicts last, the more profits military contractors make and the more power they have to influence national security and foreign policies. It has become a self-reinforcing feedback cycle. We are in *perpetual war*; the enemies are interchangeable, money is no objection and security is the over-riding concern.

After more than 10 years, we are still fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan; Iraq remains a semi-failed state; Libya has become a failed state; and Syria is becoming a failed state. The stock prices of the military contractors rise and rise every time there is a (hint of) new crisis in a faraway land. And these crisis are used to justify extravagant spending on expensive and high-tech (but often ineffective) weaponry.

We are told that we need the Trident to protect Britain from foreign threats. From whom? Russia? North Korea or ISIS? All of them have been used to justify the renewal of the Trident. However, military experts (for example, the retired US general Colin Powell) have concluded that nuclear weapons are useless in real combats, not to mention the fact that the ultimate decision on the deployment of the 'independent' nuclear deterrent, Trident, rests on the USA. Is it wise to spend more than £100 billion on Trident while cutting conventional arms? If defence of the home islands is the real concern, the choice should be clear. A properly funded conventional force is still the most efficient and effective way to protect territories and provide security.

The most expensive weapons in history, the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) jets, is another object study in the wilful waste of taxpayers' money. Since the JSF programme started in 2001, not a single plane manufactured is combat-ready yet - they are currently actually more dangerous to the pilots that fly them than to the enemies they will face. It is now estimated that it will eventually cost USA \$1.5 trillion in total. 100000000000, yes, that is 1 followed by 12 zeros, for a flying machine that can't win a dogfight against a 30-year-old F-16; with an engine that might self-explode; that will be grounded by a lightning storm; with a helmet so complex, it effectively makes the pilot unable to see and make sense of his surroundings; and by the way, it cannot be operated without the individual-tailored helmet. The justification for this expensive system is to maintain the overwhelming air supremacy of the USA and allies. However, is it worthwhile to do it at any cost? And worst of all, that overwhelming supremacy may not last for long. The USA estimated that China would not be able to produce a stealth fighter by 2020 but China revealed one in 2011 that looked remarkably similar to the F-35 while missing some of its most criticised features. In the hope that one single type of fighter jet (F-35) can satisfy all different requirements of US armed forces (Army, Navy, Air Force, the Marines) with modifications (F-35A, F-35B, F-35C), the US government allowed Lockheed Martin to produce a fighter jet that excels at nothing and is mediocre in all areas of combat abilities while milking huge profits for Lockheed in the process. The financial and political costs already invested in the project are so high that the F-35 programme is now "too big to kill."

By the mid 1990's, the two world wars and the Cold War had pushed global military spending to the \$1 trillion mark. And as of today, in 2016, we are now dangerously approaching the \$2 trillion mark.

Can we realistically expect \$2 trillion will make the world safer?

The world is already uncertain and unstable; in the \$2 trillion territory, it is simply dangerous: The USA is losing the dominant supremacy and we are entering the brave new multi-polar world. With the advancement of remote warfare and so many high-tech weaponry in the hands of the arm-chair politicians, the likelihood of confrontations between world powers turning into violent aggression is high. Conflicts will also likely become more common since political reservations about conducting foreign military expeditions will be reduced thanks to the technology and ever reduced risk to the aggressor.

The doubling of military spending - since the Clinton level (\$1 trillion mark) has not made our world more peaceful. We should make it a priority to get spending back to the Clinton level as soon as possible in order to prevent crossing the \$2 trillion redline. The USA's excessive military spending has already encouraged Russia and especially China to massively increase their military spending in recent years. The emerging regional powers and resource-rich countries have also taken advantage of their new found wealth during the boom years to significantly increase their spending. Within the EU, despite austerity, major powers have more or less maintained their level of pre-recession spending. All signs point to the inevitability of crossing this \$2 trillion redline. Only the financial crisis of 2007-2008 in the USA slowed down the march towards it. This is why we should not be complacent. Unless we make a real effort to reduce the military spending of the top spenders, especially the USA, it is almost certain the pace will pick up again in the near future. Without civil society's efforts, only another prolonged global recession will likely prevent the crossing of the \$2 trillion mark - we certainly cannot wait for a disaster to solve the problem of another disaster.

And then there is the **real** threat to humanity, climate change. Ever growing military spending will do nothing to prevent the consequences of climate change. Rather, the Pentagon and the West are 'militarising climate change.' They regard the worst of climate change as inevitable and the best we can do is to mitigate it (with military means). For example, rather than supporting efforts to reduce climate change itself, and therefore the human impact of it, they are planning on ways to handle 'climate refugees' while providing security to their home regions? Military contractors are eagerly anticipating the ensuing chaos after climate change-related catastrophes; in their own words, there is big money to be made to 'manage' the climate change.

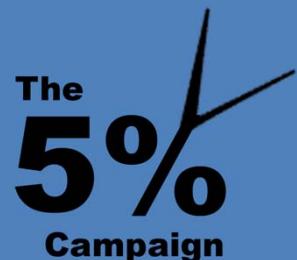
National budgeting is an exercise of weighing up national priorities. The emphasis on climate change mitigation/management rather than prevention encourages spending on military, rather than, say, the green economy. Effectively, the more money we put into military, the less we allocate to reduce and prevent the underlying drivers of climate change. And moreover, militaries are themselves one of the major greenhouse gas emitters, if not the worst. The fact may be that by the time we cross the \$2 trillion reline, it may be too late for us to prevent runaway climate change.

The \$2 trillion redline and the 'Clinton levels' are the Five Percent Campaign's two landmarks. We want to do all we can to avoid reaching the \$2 trillion mark, by – in the first place, heading back to the Clinton level. At that point, we implement mechanisms which maintain the cuts and more, drive spending down.

The need is urgent and the vested interests more powerful than ever – all the more reason to push for a reversal in this new arms race. The time to do it is now.

Approaching the \$2 trillion redline is one of Tipping Point North South's *Five Percent Proposal* series of reports and briefings.

The Five Percent project is funded by Polden-Puckham Charitable Foundation and is a project of Tipping Point North South, a 'for the benefit of community' co-operative, supporting and initiating creative, campaign-driven projects that advance the global social justice agenda.



 @_5percent

 facebook.com/thefivepercentcampaign/

 thefivepercentcampaign.org

 tippingpointnorthsouth.org