

---

# The shredding of the Mandela Dividend

*By Ari Sitas*

Professor Ari Sitas, the former head of the Sociology Department at the University of Cape Town, is a member of IFAA's Board of Directors. He is also an award-winning writer, dramatist and poet. He was awarded the Order of Mapungubwe in Silver by the Office of the South African Presidency for his excellent contribution to social science scholarship and progressive policy-making.

*ARI SITAS tracks the significant upward trend of militarisation that South Africa, and the world at large, has seen since around the year 2000 and appeals to the Ramaphosa government to resist this hawkish trend. He warns of dire consequences that are already evident with the demise of the Mandela Dividend and its attendant themes of peace-making and reconciliation.*

The "Mandela Dividend" is in tatters. It persists here and there, but its promise has been scoffed at. By pairing "Mandela" with a "Dividend" I mean something simple: that the very idea that the positive consequences of peace and reconciliation would far outweigh enmity.

The year 1994 marked a euphoric moment as the dismantling of the last formal racial autocracy on earth

facilitated a new structure of feeling. It felt as if there was no conflict on this geo-mass between societies and within them that could not be negotiated as well, not even in Ireland, India, Pakistan or Palestine.

Sometime then, the political became personal: as a sociologist I was writing about the Mandela decade and its contradictions; as a peacenik I was arguing for the prospects of reconciliation and re-unification in Cyprus, the importance of a negotiated peace in Bogota, African renewal and development in Addis Ababa and Cairo. Between 1994 and 2000 there were very few serious thinkers in the world who did not visit South Africa or wanted to do so. The formula for success during those moments of euphoria has not been worked out, but it did propel energy beyond the downward curve of its descent. Even Barack Obama could still stand and orate at Mandela's funeral in 2013 that we too must act "on behalf of peace".

The academic and political pathways made such energy flow with ease. After all, didn't the peace dividend enjoy ample credibility, tentatively after the First World War and more stridently after

the Second with the formation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)? Weren't science's superstars, Albert Einstein and Claude Levi-Strauss, major advocates? Wasn't UNESCO's founding preamble scribbled with the conviction that cooperation in science, the circulation of knowledge and cultural integrity would enlighten finally the minds of "men" (in its language) towards a peaceful world? Didn't most of our epistemic communities, the very international associations of our disciplines, emerge out of its mandate? The flow of such an energy was assisted by fashion: wasn't the globalisation idea a kind of Durkheimian utopia, that once we understood our mutuality, our interdependency, once our interconnectivity was grasped, we would be crafting the ethics of our moral cohesion? The thought of an alternative "humanitude" had a robust innings in the Mandela period which culminated in the year 2000 (with his departure from politics as well) with the UN declaring it as the Year of Peace, prefiguring many to follow?

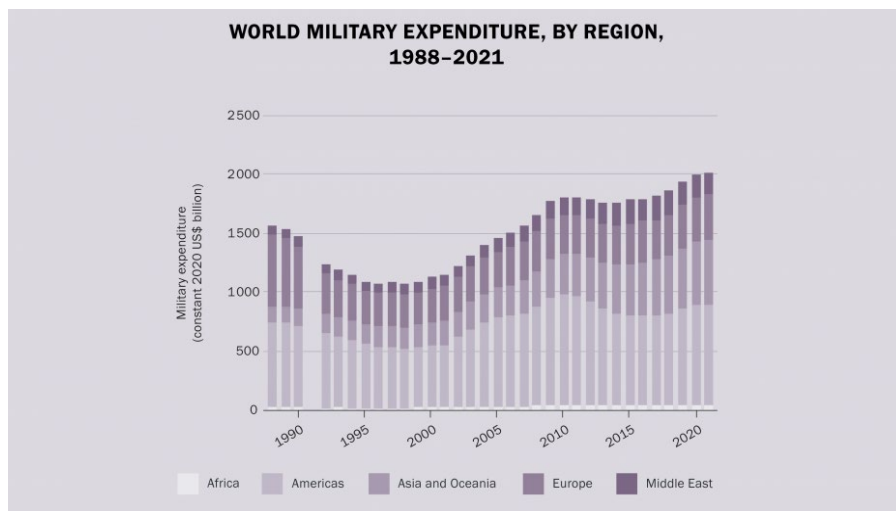
As indicated, the energy carried us (and me) past the 2000s, despite and because of new military adventures.



**Militarisation and military expenditure started ratcheting up since 2000 – even before the Twin Towers, 9/11 and the War on Terror.**

There was, as I argued in “The Ethic of Reconciliation,”<sup>1</sup> a convergence of thinking between the South’s Neo-Gandhians (especially in Africa based on the futility and critique of armed adventurisms), the West’s reflexive thinkers who refused to be their neighbours’ keepers, post-Stalinist socialists and artists of all genres that a new Ethic was possible. The enthusiasm waned. Many of us did not read the graphs properly. Militarisation and military expenditure started ratcheting up since 2000 – even before the Twin Towers, 9/11 and the War on Terror.

Look at the graphs of our Swedish friends– there is a global reduction in military expenditure between 1993 and 2000. But the upward trend from 2000 onwards reaches an unprecedented ascent even before the latest armament rush following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. It seems from a tentative reading of media sources it will be doubling soon. The graph that follows, constructed by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), was accompanied by its announcement that by 2022 world military expenditure would pass the \$2 trillion mark for the first time.



World military expenditure, by region, 1988–2021 (SIPRI 25 April 2022)

Former US president Bill Clinton had already hinted at such increases in 1994 even though he oversaw a serious reduction during his first term of office. By 1999, he was submitting to Congress a sum that foretold the new escalation. The War on Terror thereafter accelerated the trend.

It was disquieting to observe the coincidence of two world historic trends that tore at the Dividend’s weave. One would have expected that Mikhail Gorbachev’s Perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union would have created a “thaw” around what he and US president at that time Ronald Reagan agreed on demilitarisation and nuclear disarmament. The 1994 “Enlargement of NATO” plan, however sanitised by Clinton, was a forward-looking plan far beyond exploding Arab people in the fictive landscape of an archipelago of weapons of mass destruction. It had another Dividend: the rates of profitability by the military-industrial complex in the R&D of beyond Star Wars technologies, their manufacture and sale would be enormous. Unlike bombs they would rise, not drop.

The second was the emergence of new economic dynamisms in the world system and the unwanted arrival of China, then India as world players.

South Africa, and indeed most of Africa, was caught in these currents and counter-currents. Already by 2003, Brazil, India and South Africa found themselves leading the voice of developing societies that stymied the agreements at the World Trade Organization’s fifth Ministerial Conference held in Cancun, Mexico in 2003. What started as a panacea for Western interests hit a wall. Brazil, India and South Africa were not ready to play a one goalpost soccer game. The Lula-Singh-Mbeki axle turned a different wheel and has gone far enough to join China and Russia to morph from the India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) forum to Brazil, Russia and China (BRIC) in 2009 and BRICS in 2013 when South Africa was added. There was a new current pushing towards a polycentric world system away from USA dominance. The complications unleashed were plenty but they need not detain us here.

The catastrophic index was helped upwards.

In this peculiar phase, “anomalic” in one of our studies, Russia came to be reconstructed as NATO’s Other. Ever since Putin took the reins of the Bear and started on a non-compliance path, the construction of him and his nation-state ►►

“

**... military escalation is a catastrophic one. It joins economic turbulence, ecosystems destruction and health crises as a source of a grand disruption and systemic failure.**

as a “folk devil” was underway. Alas, not only did the definition stick but the volatile leader was more than ready to receive such a mantle. His response to attempts to cement an anti-Russia bloc in Europe magnified hostilities.

We can spin the narrative in any direction to suit any power elite anywhere. The media have taken on such a role with gusto. The problem at the heart of all this is the waning of US hegemony (not power) – a waning that started with the Clinton years, magnified through George Bush’s, gained a breath of fresh air with Barack Obama (although he did drone-bomb more than most) and lost its bearings in Donald Trump’s era. By then US power blocs were not concerned with putting human rights and public virtue on the agenda but instead were helping to undermine by any means the Bolivarian currents in the Americas, trying to alter the drift into multipolarity, shake out China by force or fiat, arm Eastern Europe, displace BRICS and ratchet up arms sales.



Source: Wikimedia Commons

So here we are, the trend of military escalation is a catastrophic one. It joins economic turbulence, ecosystems destruction and health crises as a source of a grand disruption and systemic failure.

My plea to Ramaphosa’s administration is to remain weak by bucking the trend. It must not be dragged into this hawkish trend. It must re-look at the Dividend seriously. As a nation-state the administration must make a point that we do not have enemies (our enemies are within) even though we do have strange friends. The belief in the plausibility of peace was our marker of difference

– it prompted us to bury our nuclear arsenal and recognise the primacy of sovereignty and the priority of peace on this continent. What we need is not new imperial chains but post-imperial pathways, we do not need religious or cultural polarisations but we also need to revisit the 2000 moment when Thabo Mbeki took the reins and seriously investigate what went wrong. The Mandela Dividend might be in tatters but its logic still holds.

ENDNOTES

1 Sitas, A. 2011. Beyond the Mandela decade: The ethic of reconciliation, *Current Sociology*, Vol 59, 5. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392111408666> NA