



PMAC | PRINCE MAHIDOL
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PS2.4

GEOPOLITICS, ARMS RACE AND HUMANITY

| BACKGROUND

Geopolitics, Arms Race, and Humanity

The world is facing a polycrisis with several challenging crises at the same time, wars and conflicts, climate change, environmental destruction, resulting in huge impact on people's and the planet's health. These crises are interlinked and therefore need common, synergistic solutions, involving both commercial, social and geopolitical determinants of health. The average level of global peace has been declining for eleven of the past fourteen years with huge implications for humanity.

Two billion people, or a quarter of the world's population, live in conflict-affected areas, according to the UN, but there are many more impacted. "In 2022, fatalities from organized violence increased by a staggering 97%, compared to the previous year, making 2022 the deadliest year since the Rwandan genocide in 1994." [1]

An estimated 89 million people are displaced due to conflict, violence and violations of human rights, and experience loss of family, physical and mental injuries, psychological trauma, and pushed towards the poverty line. Forced displacement often affects the most vulnerable who already severely disadvantaged. [2]

In 2022, 46.9 billion USD was spent to provide humanitarian assistance to over 406.6 million people. [3] 75-90% of the humanitarian burden is due to conflict and war, and political instability. At the same time, we have a race for more weapons. 2022 saw at least 600 billion USD weapons trade and an incredible 2,240 billion USD total military expenditure 50 times the amount given in humanitarian aid. [4]

The World Bank identifies conflict countries and fragile states based on the number of conflict-related deaths per year in absolute numbers (>250) and in relation to their population (>2 per 100,000 inhabitants). [5] It uses two different data sources (The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)), which in turn obtains information from health personnel, researchers, and authorities. For a country to be classified, both data sources must show that deaths are above the threshold value. Acute, short-term events are not considered towards classification. Over 20 countries are now classified as conflict countries.

Fragility is defined as "a systemic condition or situation characterized by an extremely low level of institutional and governance capacity which significantly impedes the state's ability to function effectively, maintain peace and foster economic and social development". [5]

The evolution of arms race

The concept of the arms race is used to describe a competitive and escalating accumulation of military weapons and technologies between rival nations or groups of nations. The classic model of the arms race was the naval sphere between Britain and Germany before World War I, with a competition in terms of both numbers and power of battleships (the so-called Dreadnoughts). The second classic arms race was the nuclear competition between the USA and the USSR during the period of Cold War (1947-1991).

Both sides engaged in a relentless arms production, particularly in the development of nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and strategic bombers. During the Cold War, the two superpowers also produced chemical and biological weapons in abundance.

In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on military modernization using emerging technologies which includes advancements in cyber warfare, autonomous weapons, hypersonic missiles, and space-based capabilities. Major powers are

increasingly investing in research and development to maintain strategic superiority.

On the other side, there is a long record of efforts towards disarmament through Treaties. The record of success is mixed. There were numerous failures of arms embargoes imposed by the UN. The illicit arms trade, thrives in regions experiencing conflict or instability, continues to undermine disarmament efforts.

Several examples of failed efforts on disarmament demonstrate the complexities and challenges involved in achieving successful disarmament and preventing arms proliferation. They highlight the difficulties in ensuring compliance with international agreements, preventing the acquisition of weapons by non-state actors, and addressing the motivations and incentives for countries to engage in arms races.

Geopolitics, war, and its impact on health

Global health is strongly influenced by geopolitics and international relations. Health inequalities and inequities are driven by social determinants such as poverty, conflict, urbanization, industrialization which are impacted by geopolitical factors. To achieve better outcomes of global health policies, it is important to understand and address these factors. Geopolitical determinants are related to governments, geographies, policies, and the interests of countries and the relationship between them[6].

COVID-19 pandemic has shown how closely local or national health is linked to global health. However, often policy makers, especially in resource constrained countries, have either insufficient understanding of geopolitical determinants of health or are unable to address them adequately towards their advantage. While over the years, conceptual understanding of social determinants of health has grown, geopolitical determinants have not received enough attention by the health community. Good understanding of geopolitical aspects facilitates advocacy and action on achievement of health goals such as universal health coverage and health security.

War and conflict have a dramatic impact on health and development: violent injuries, disease outbreaks, increased malnutrition, psychological trauma, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as the destruction of health services and health systems. War and conflict affect the social determinants of health, such as education, income, living conditions, upbringing, work and death. Seven out of 10 countries, with the world's highest maternal mortality and infant mortality rates (according to the World Bank), are categorized as fragile and conflict-affected countries. A majority of cases of epidemic diseases (cholera, measles and meningitis) are recorded in conflict and fragile states.

Figure text: The impact of conflict on humanity.

In 2022, there were close to 2,000 attacks on health workers and health facilities, of which 232 health workers were killed, close to 300 were kidnapped and as many were arrested.[7] Doctors Without Borders and other organizations are often delayed in treating patients due to state and non-state armed groups.

Health, a basic human right, ought to be prioritized by governments by investing more in health and development than military expenditure and arms race. Advocates for prevention for war and promotion of peace through health have long advocated for reduction of expenditure on weapons and more on health.

Health for peace has long been argued as one of the potential interventions to promote and achieve peace in conflict affected settings. Health with its neutral status, as proponents highlight, can bridge opposite sides to promote dialogue, cooperate to serve humanity, and gradually encourage peaceful coexistence.[8] Experiences of health as bridge for peace in Latin America and in WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region have been documented. As peace becomes more elusive in increasing number of countries making delivery of health care difficult and increasing suffering of humanity, advocates of health for peace are calling for a renewed effort to use health platforms, mechanisms and opportunities to promote and sustain peace.[9] [10]

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[8] World Health Organization, 2023. Global Health and Peace Initiative (GHPI): Fifth Draft of the Roadmap. Available at: [v5---ghpi-roadmap.pdf \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/publications-detail/ghpi-roadmap)

[9] The Lancet Commission on peaceful societies through health equity and gender equality, 2023. Available at: [The Lancet Commission on peaceful societies through health equity and gender equality \(thelancet.com\)](https://www.thelancet.com/commission/peaceful-societies)

[10] The Lancet Commission on Syria: Health in Conflict, 2017. Available at: [Syria: Health in Conflict \(thelancet.com\)](https://www.thelancet.com/commission/syria)

| OBJECTIVES

Objectives of the session:

1. To better understand the impact of geopolitical determinants, including war and conflict, on health;
2. To analyze effectiveness and failures of strategies, policies and interventions, which minimize geopolitical tensions and the importance for health;
3. To discuss evidence and call for action on health as a bridge for peace in an era of polycrises.
4. To explore the relation of the arms industry and public institutions/governments; the use of legal determinants of health



Panelist

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Reza Majdzadeh is a Professor of Global Health at the University of Essex's School of Health and Social Care. With a decades-long career, he has been deeply involved in teaching, rigorous research, and practical work in global health. His strong commitment to advancing research is evident in his extensive publication record, which includes more than 350 peer-reviewed papers in leading international journals.

Reza's broad research portfolio encompasses critical areas within Global Health, addressing issues such as equity, Universal Health Coverage, strengthening health systems and generating and applying evidence. His profound expertise in these areas allows him to provide a comprehensive and multidisciplinary perspective to tackle the complex challenges that shape the global health landscape.

One significant chapter in his distinguished career is his substantial role as the head of Iran's National Institute of Health Research. In this capacity, Reza played a vital role in closely monitoring the country's health system, particularly during a period marked by the impact of economic sanctions. Building upon his extensive experience in researching and publishing on the health implications of imposed sanctions, he is determined to expand the scope of his research to discover solutions that can better protect global health when faced with the turbulent shocks caused by geopolitics and conflicts. A significant portion of his publications focuses on the effects of sanctions and, in particular, on solutions that enhance the resilience of health systems in the face of sanctions.

Reza Majdzadeh recognizes that the critical issues of our time extend beyond the boundaries of traditional academic fields. He ardently advocates for multidisciplinary solutions, as he believes they are essential to our understanding of the intricate interplay between geopolitics, sanctions, and the preservation of public health.

In his current role, Reza is well-positioned to contribute significantly to our collective knowledge of these crucial dynamics. Notable among his essential articles in this field are:

Health system to response to economic sanctions: global evidence and lessons learned from Iran. *Global Health. Global Health*. 2022 Dec 29;18(1):107. doi: 10.1186/s12992-022-00901-w.

Economic Sanctions Affecting Household Food and Nutrition Security and Policies to Cope With Them: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, 2023 doi:10.34172/ijhpm.2023.7362.

The human cost of economic sanctions and strategies for building health system resilience: A scoping review of studies in Iran. *Int J Health Plann Manage*. 2023 Sep;38(5):1142-1160. doi: 10.1002/hpm.3651.

Health must be a top priority in the Iran nuclear deal. *Lancet*. 2021 May 29;397(10289):2047-2048. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(21)01108-9.

The harsh effects of sanctions on Iranian health. *Lancet*. 2019 Aug 10;394(10197):468-469. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(19)31763-5.

Iran's research needs to be more noticed. *Lancet*. 2017 Feb 4;389(10068):503-504. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(17)30234-9.

Economic sanctions strangle Iranians' health, not just drug supply. *Lancet*. 2013 May 11;381(9878):1626. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(13)61024-7.