

THROUGHOUT THE 1970s IT WAS customary to link the growing militarization of the Third World to steeply rising military expenditures and arms imports. The call for disarmament and development rested on the unchallenged assumption that if military expenditures and arms imports could be reduced, the process of militarization would be reversed. According to the logic of the disarmament lobby, the problem had an obvious and straightforward solution: Third World countries should forego future modernization, reduce military expenditure and channel the resources saved into development projects. In reality, the situation is much more complex.

Since the early 1980s both military expenditures and arms sales in the Third World appear to have

been reduced. But few would argue that the Third World is any less militarized than it was in the 1970s – witness the appalling and costly conflicts in Southern Africa, Central America and South West Asia. Add to this the increasing level of ethnic conflict and continuing economic recession and one is faced with regions of the Third World which appear every bit as underdeveloped and militarized as they were in the 1970s.

countries becomes evident. In Latin America there is a marked downward trend in South America but not Central America. In the Middle East the oil glut and declining export revenues have placed severe constraints on defence activities, except in Iran and Iraq. In Africa the picture is one of gradual decrease, although this aspect is to an extent counter-balanced by the situation in Southern Africa. In South Asia both India and Pakistan have shown no restraint in their continuing arms race, and military expenditure in Sri Lanka is rising steeply, albeit from a very low level. In South East Asia, levels of arms imports appear steady, but possibly on the point of declining.

ECONOMIC RECESSION IS THE MOST convenient and obvious explanation for the current lack of dynamism in the arms trade, but there are other factors to be considered. For example, it may be the case that Third World countries are buying a different type of defence equipment or purchasing in a different way, and that methods of monitoring arms transfers have not been adjusted to account for these changes. Also, it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between requests for civilian and military technology – information technology is a case in point. Moreover, all governments are notoriously bad at releasing reliable, disaggregated statistics on defence expenditures and there is no shortage of opportunities for Third World governments to obscure the eventual use of their purchases or to pay for defence equipment out of civilian budgets. The unfolding drama in the United States concerning arms sales to Iran and the covert funding of the Contras is a shining example of an increasing need to obscure arms transfers in order to circumvent legal restrictions.

Clearly, the overall arms market is in a state of considerable flux. It appears, however, that structural changes are coinciding with genuine economic constraints. Third World countries are, by and large, avoiding the purchase of expensive major weapons systems such as

fighter aircraft. Instead, they are turning their attention to other, less quantifiable areas of the defence sector or simply reducing imports. And as the market for defence equipment continues to slide, it becomes much harder to manage a system of restraint as exporters grow concerned about declining orders. The more general problem for control is that the sale of arms is gradually being replaced by the sale of military technology, and it is, therefore, no longer appropriate to consider the arms trade solely in terms of the transfer of weapons systems. The simple transfer of tanks or guns or aircraft has given way to sales of manufacturing technology and industrial plant.

Economic constraints and new priorities do provide good reasons why the arms trade has changed so much in recent years. But it may also be helpful to consider the combination of circumstances which permitted Third World countries to increase their defence capabilities in the mid-1970s.

During this period the Middle East was the largest regional importer of major weapons – made possible by OPEC and the swift rise in oil prices. In addition, the oil crisis created conditions which led to the availability of credit for non-OPEC states. Thus, a situation arose where all Third World countries were able to increase their defence capabilities.

At the same time, demands for defence modernization programmes had built-up a head of steam. At independence most Third World countries were presented with regional and local security problems and little in the way of a defence capability to meet those threats. The security-defence dilemma was dealt with in different ways. Alliances were forged between military institutions in the Third World, and American policy makers who saw the military as a progressive, modern and anti-communist institution; strengthening these institutions through military aid and credits became a major policy plank. Countries close to the Soviet Union, such as Iraq and Pakistan, manipulated the Cold Warriors in Washington and secured major military aid pack-

WEAPONS FOR THE THIRD WORLD

Most poor countries cannot afford another round of weapons purchases, but their security problems are real and the solutions are not obvious.

BY CHRIS SMITH

The latest update from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) on the arms trade indicates that the market for arms exports to the Third World is indeed stagnant; the five year moving averages indicate a slight decline since 1982. On closer inspection it appears, however, that if the five major importers, Iraq, India, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, are excluded from the calculation, the full extent of the decline in other Third World