

# Finding Common Ground Against the Border-Military-Industrial Complex

By Nick Buxton

In February 2023, Biden announced that his administration would accelerate deportations and mobilise ‘record resources’ to secure the US border. In the same month, he prepared the largest Pentagon budget in history — \$853 billion.

Despite huge polarization and gridlock on Capitol Hill, there are two arenas where the Democrats and Republicans more often agree — military spending and borders. The latter may come as a surprise. Certainly Biden’s rhetoric (and that of the Democrats) has been different to the hateful racism of Trump, but his administration has largely continued Trump’s exclusionary border and migration policy. This is a long-term trend. Border and military spending have consistently risen under both Democrat and Republican administrations. The budgets of the US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and Immigration Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE) have increased by more than 6,000 percent since 1980. US military spending today is more than the next nine largest country spenders (including China and Russia) combined.

So why is the approach of both parties so similar on both borders and the military? In part, it shows the effectiveness of the politics of fear in mobilizing public sentiment against external and internal threats. But it is also responding to an industry, which has proved highly successful in lobbying for more spending and contracts, and that pushes for policies that constantly escalate militarization. The power of the arms industry on Capitol Hill is well known. But it is similarly true of the border industry. In the run-up to the 2020 election, the 15 leading border industry corporations contributed as much to Democrats as Republicans (totalling \$26 million) — and in the wake of Biden’s election have continued to win lucrative contracts.

In fact, the two industries are increasingly merged. More than half of the leading border industry corporations are weapons manufacturers: Boeing, Elbit Systems, General Atomics, General Dynamics, Leidos, Lockheed Martin, L3Harris, and Northrop Grumman. All of these firms have set up divisions to provide border technology, are actively lobbying for contracts, taking advantage of the way migration control is increasingly militarized. The subsidiary of Israeli arms firm Elbit for example, has built over 50 major surveillance

towers along the US-Mexico border; General Atomics provides CBP with many of its drones, many of which were also deployed in Afghanistan.

The militarization of US borderlands has meant that the experience of a migrant crossing the desert in Arizona is increasingly similar to that of a villager in a US-engaged conflict overseas such as Afghanistan or Somalia. Both are innocent victims crossing a battleground — treated as a threat, surveilled by the latest corporate technology, watched by militarized state agencies and in danger of losing their life.

This is the long-term impact of the military-industrial-complex on US democratic life. It has not only led to a powerful industry, subsidized by taxpayer money. It has perhaps more disturbingly entrenched a militarized response to every crisis — from conflicts overseas to migration to climate change. Most of these crises can not be resolved through militarism — indeed it is most likely to exacerbate the problem. The US, for example, spends 11 times as much on border militarization, and about 30 times as much on the military as it does to providing the climate finance to the poorest countries that could help people cope with climate disasters. In neither case do these resources tackle underlying causes of conflict or migration; they merely seek to control or arm the US against the consequences.

This is a self-defeating and immoral approach that will compound the injustice of the climate crisis. However, it also threatens the fabric of US democracy as weapons that were once trained outside are increasingly turned inwards. As we move into a world of greater insecurity due to geopolitical tensions, the climate crisis, and deepening inequality, we need urgently to change direction. We need politics that address the causes of our systemic problems, not its consequences. The first step is to bring our movements together and realize that the struggle for democracy, migrant justice and peace are all connected.

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