

Economy & Security Politics

In February 2025, fighters from the M23 rebel group in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) captured Goma, a major city in the east of the country. This city is vital for trade of tantalum – a metal that is essential for the functioning of each smartphone. This is only one striking example of how global economy and security politics are interconnected. War and armed conflict impact economy and development; and economic development or economic factors can initiate, drive, and sustain conflict – or help ending it. How exactly these factors impact security politics depends heavily on the context – and, thus, varies with the level on which conflict takes place.

On the international level, i.e. between states, global trends of economic and security politics play a role. In the past, experts and policy-makers agreed that closer economic relations caused by globalisation would lead to less conflicts between states. Today, this so-called assumption of “economic peace” is increasingly questioned: Policy-makers realise that globalisation was unjust and created dependencies which are used by some states to harm others – and that, generally speaking, connections between economies did not prevent states from leading wars, as in the case of Russia that had economic relations with Europe. Consequently, states today are increasingly pursuing a policy of “economic security” – limiting dependencies to states they have friendly relations with or sanctioning opponents, e.g. through imposing new tariffs. One consequence of this is that economic relations in the world have become more fragmented – which might, in the long run, make the world more insecure, especially if states pursue so-called trade wars.

On regional and local levels, economy and security are also neatly connected. One such connection exists between economic development and conflict.

If people’s (basic) needs – such as nutrition, water, or space to live on or in – are not met, this might create dissatisfaction or lead to conflict over these resources. In Central Africa, a lack of fertile land for example often leads to conflicts between herders and farmers competing for this land. Due to climate change, these conflicts will probably increase in the future.

On a regional or local level, another connection between economy and security politics exists through access to local (natural) resources. Dispute over access to them, as e.g. over water, might be a reason to initiate armed conflict. Also, revenues created by selling these resources might be used to sustain a conflict by financing e.g. weapons or personnel, as happened in Sierra Leone in the 1990s with the help of diamond mining. And often, there are actors who profit from armed conflict and thus have an interest in sustaining it, e.g. arms dealers or manufacturers.

Because of these diverse connections between economics and conflicts, economic considerations need to play a greater role in peace policies: Peacebuilding e.g. needs to transform war economies and include shared resource management to be sustainable, and transparency initiatives in supply chains could make embargos on certain resources from conflict areas more efficient.

Future political action, be it at the EU, the UN, or the Munich Security Conference, will need to address questions such as:

- How can the impact of global economic relations on local conflicts be reduced?
- How can root causes for increasing economic securitisation on the international level be addressed, such as unfair international finance institutions?

Important specialist terminology

Globalisation is the growing interdependence of the world’s economies, cultures, and populations, brought about by cross-border trade in goods and services, technology, and flows of investment, people, and information.

A trade war is a conflict that is led by economic means, for example import restrictions and punitive tariffs; the term “war” is misleading as normally, no military violence is involved.

War economies are local economic systems designed primarily for the conduct of conflict activities.