

The role of the global arms trade in fuelling conflict

Dr. Samuel Perlo-Freeman, Research Coordinator,
Campaign Against Arms Trade

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The arms trade – brief overview

- Size of international arms trade uncertain due to limited data – probably around \$100 billion per year ([Perlo-Freeman, 2018](#)).
- About 0.5% of total world trade (\$19.5 trillion in 2018), but hugely significant politically and in human terms.
- Most arms production is for use by producer government, not international trade. Major producers (US, China, Russia, UK, France, Germany) buy mostly from domestic industry.
- Financial data on arms trade comes from national sources, highly variable in quality and detail.
- Most comprehensive international source is SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, covering major conventional weapons.
- Trade in Small Arms & Light Weapons (SALW) even murkier due to large number of producers, illicit trade.

The arms trade – brief overview

- Top 10 suppliers 2009-2018 (SIPRI data):
 1. USA 33%
 2. Russia 23.5%
 3. Germany 6.2%
 4. France 6.0%
 5. China 5.3%
 6. UK 4.3%
 7. Spain 3.1%
 8. Israel 2.6%
 9. Italy 2.4%
 10. Netherlands 2.0%
- UK, Israel, rather higher in financial terms (UK about \$10 billion per year, Israel about \$7 billion); Russia relatively lower (about \$15 billion per year, compared to about \$30 billion for US).

Who are the customers?

- Countries seeking to acquire arms have a choice of 'make' or 'buy', or some combination.
- Intermediate options of licensed production, co-production, etc.
- Only a few top arms producers can produce most or all of their own weapons (US, China, Russia, UK, France, Germany, to some extent Italy, Spain, Sweden, Israel). Still trade with each other.
- Most countries produce some arms (e.g. small arms, simple military vehicles and ships), but must buy internationally for more advanced systems
- Middle East & North Africa one of the biggest buyer regions – 41% of all major conventional weapons 2014-18 (SIPRI).
- Other major buyers in Asia Pacific: India, Australia, China, South Korea, Vietnam, Pakistan.

The arms trade and conflict

- Wars can't be fought without weapons! But link between arms trade and conflict is not always straightforward.
- However, empirical studies supports view that arms trade increases the risk of (but doesn't necessarily 'cause') conflict:
 - Craft & Smalldone (2002) find major conventional arms transfers to a country are a significant positive predictor of war in sub-Saharan African countries 1967-1997
 - Pamp et al. (2018), using global data 1949-2013, find that MCW transfers significantly increase the probability of civil war in a country, where other conditions conducive to conflict exist. Use simultaneous equations to deal with endogeneity problem
 - Moore (2012) find that MCW transfers to rebel groups in civil wars lead to conflict escalation and deadlier conflicts, while transfers to governments increase conflict duration.
- Regardless of evidence on causation, role of arms production and trade as an *enabler* of conflict hard to deny.

Small arms and light weapons (SALW)

- Proliferation of SALW seen as major international humanitarian concern, source of armed conflict, criminal violence, etc.
- Much less significant financially than major weapons.
- Far more producers – most countries have at least some SALW production capability. Also ‘craft’ production.
- No systematic data on SALW trade. Large illicit and ‘gray market’ trade.
- Arms may spread through brokerage, trafficking, private sale, theft, etc., as well as state-authorized trade.
- Africa: SALW spread widely due to a) N’djamena arms bazaar in 1980s; flood of surplus arms from Bulgaria in early 1990s; Charles Taylor’s arms trafficking network; Libya collapse in 2011.
- Major focus of UN control efforts, e.g. through ATT.

Arms trade and conflict in the Middle East

- In most current Middle East wars, role of major conventional weapons regains centrality.
- Wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Libya, involve large-scale aerial bombing, supported by artillery, naval blockades, missiles, drones, etc.
- In Yemen, 2/3 of civilian casualties caused by Coalition air strikes.
- Governments of Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, depend on major weapons systems imported from US, Russia, Western Europe.
- Israel has own advanced arms industry, but acquires some systems (especially major combat aircraft, missiles) from US.
- Rebel groups acquire arms through smuggling, capture or purchase of government stocks, supply by foreign backers, craft production (e.g. Houthi drones & missiles).

Arms trade and conflict in the Middle East

- Diversion of arms a major problem in Middle East and elsewhere. Blurred boundary between legal, illegal arms trade.
- Iraq: ISIS captured large quantities of arms from fleeing government forces, including arms supplied by USA and others.
- Yemen: Houthi rebels inherited large quantities of arms from former Yemeni government forces. Saudi and UAE provide foreign-supplied arms to a variety of militia, which may in turn be sold onward.
- Syria: Constant fighting, merging, reforming of rebel groups mean foreign-supplied arms may end up with anyone.
- Libya: Collapse of Gaddafi regime caused wide dispersion of arms through north & west Africa, Middle East. UAE have supplied western-supplied arms to forces of renegade general Haftar.

Arming the Yemen war

- Death toll in Yemen war has reached 100,000, including 11,000 civilians killed in attacks targeting them (Yemen Data project).
- World's worst humanitarian crisis caused by combination of war, partial blockade by Coalition.
- Coalition members principle suppliers:
 - Saudi Arabia: USA, UK (also France)
 - UAE: USA, France (also Italy, Sweden)
 - Bahrain: USA, UK
 - Egypt: France, USA, Russia
 - Jordan: USA, Netherlands
 - Kuwait: USA, Italy (delivery pending)
 - Sudan: Russia, China
- See Perlo-Freeman “Who is arming the Yemen war (and is anyone planning to stop)?”, [updated](#) March 2019.

Arming the Yemen war

- Houthi rebels have received some arms deliveries from Iran.
- But main sources of arms include: arms from former government forces; arms from pro-Saleh forces; domestic craft production (including from smuggled components).
- “Official” government forces of President Hadi have received arms from Saudi, UAE.
- Saudi & UAE have also armed a wide range of “pro-government” militia, including forces linked to Al Qaeda and ISIS.
- UAE in particular have armed separatist forces in Southern Yemen, including Southern Transitional Council; part of anti-Houthi coalition, but now fighting against Hadi forces.
- Thousands of Sudanese troops in Sudan paid for and partly armed by Saudi Arabia, including Janjaweed militia, mercenaries, child soldiers, especially from Darfur.

Failure of international arms control

- Arms Trade Treaty signed in 2013 was supposedly intended to prevent supply of arms used to violate human rights and IHL.
- EU Common Position on arms exports includes legally binding ban on supply of arms where there is a “clear risk” that they might be used to commit serious violations of IHL.
- However, signatories have continued to provide arms to conflict situations where severe IHL violations ongoing, e.g. Yemen.
- Myth: “It’s all about the money”. Arms exports an insignificant share of national GDP even for major arms producers.
- Even in Russia, arms about 4.4% of exports. Around \$15 billion per year, compared to \$191 billion hydrocarbon exports.
- Need to look elsewhere for motivations for arms exports: 1) Geopolitical interests; 2) Maintaining domestic arms industry; 3) Dominance of militaristic thinking and interests.

Motivations for arms exports: geopolitics

- During Cold War, USA and Soviet Union armed allies and proxies. Security relationships and geopolitics still important motivation.
- Varying motivations for US exports:
 - USA arms Gulf states as means of ensuring status quo in major oil-producing regions.
 - USA arms Israel due to domestic political reasons.
 - War on Terror led to increase in arms sales, military aid to countries willing to support US goals.
 - Widespread belief among defense establishment that US dominance of arms sales gives substantial leverage. This is challenged, e.g. by [Thrall & Dorminey \(2018\)](#).
- Russia deeply committed to survival of Assad regime in Syria, due to naval base on Mediterranean, desire to counter US influence.
- Arms trade significant component of Russia-China relationship: an area where Russia still has technology that China needs.

Motivations for arms exports

- Export dependence of domestic arms industries.
- Most countries seek to create and maintain at least some domestic arms production capabilities.
- Virtually no country can produce fully independently, but can produce some systems, support and maintain foreign-supplied equipment, engage in collaborative production.
- But creating and maintaining a major arms industry is very complex and expensive; demand from domestic armed forces rarely sufficient. (US and possibly China excepted).
- Hence, high dependence on arms exports to maintain production capabilities.
- Russia, UK, France, Italy, Sweden etc. could not sustain e.g. major combat aircraft production without exports.

Motivations for arms exports

- Dominance of militaristic thinking and interests.
- Equation of security with military security: belief that military power is key to global status.
- Likewise, winning major arms export contracts seen as key both to maintaining strong industry and to demonstrating success on international stage.
- Arms export efforts strongly supported by top political leaders, even royalty, out of proportion to economic value.
- Ministries of Defence deeply entwined with arms industry through collaboration on arms programs, “revolving door” between government/military and industry, secondments, etc.
- Prevalence of “Groupthink” whereby interests of arms industry and desirability of arms exports goes largely unchallenged.

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