

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The World Peace Foundation, an operating foundation affiliated solely with the Fletcher School at Tufts University, aims to provide intellectual leadership on issues of peace, justice and security. We believe that innovative research and teaching are critical to the challenges of making peace around the world, and should go hand-in-hand with advocacy and practical engagement with the toughest issues. To respond to organized violence today, we not only need new instruments and tools—we need a new vision of peace. Our challenge is to reinvent peace.

Dr. Samuel Perlo-Freeman is a Research Coordinator at Campaign Against Arms Trade UK, focusing on UK military spending and arms exports. He is a Fellow at the World Peace Foundation and led the project to create the Compendium of Arms Trade Corruption. He was Senior Researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute from 2007 to 2016, working on SIPRI's databases on military expenditure, the arms industry, and the arms trade. He holds PhDs in Mathematics and Economics, and is author of numerous publications on military expenditure, the arms industry and trade, defence and peace economics, development economics, and mathematics.

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Business as Usual: How major weapons exporters arm the world's conflicts

Defense Industries, Foreign Policy and Armed Conflict

SAM PERLO-FREEMAN

The harmful impact of arms transfers on conflict has been well-documented by campaigners, humanitarian NGOs, and the United Nations.¹ Further, researchers have found evidence that arms transfers to a state increase the likelihood of conflict breaking out; and, once begun, render conflicts longer and more deadly.

Recognizing these detrimental impacts, in recent decades, policymakers committed to a range of measures designed to control arms exports. These controls were especially focused on limiting sales when conflicts involve patterns of human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law. In subsequent years, there have been heated debates about whether sales should proceed in a number of particular instances, but there is no comprehensive assessment of the overall impact of policies designed to limit arms sales to countries involved in conflicts.

This research provides the first global analysis of how conflict in, or involving, a recipient state, impacts exporters' willingness supply arms. It analyses the top eleven global arms suppliers over the ten-year period 2009-2018.² Listed in order by the volume of major conventional weapons transfers, these global sales leaders are: the United States, Russia, Germany, France, China, the United Kingdom, Spain, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, and Ukraine. These countries assert widely varying formal policies regarding arms exports, but the empirical record is, for the most part, remarkably similar.

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1 See for example Cato Institute, *Risky Business: The Role of Arms Sales in U.S. Foreign Policy* (March 2018); Amnesty International, *Blood at the Crossroads: Making the Case for a Global Arms Trade Treaty* (2008); Oxfam Policy & Practice, *Africa's Missing Billions: International Arms Flows and the Cost of Conflict* (October 2007); David Southall, and Bernadette O'Hare, 'Empty Arms: The Effect of the Arms Trade on Mothers and Children,' *British Medical Journal* Vol. 325 No. 7378 (December 2002), pp. 1457–1461.; *Small arms and light weapons: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN SC Report S/2019/1011 (December 2019)

2 The methodologies are: First, a direct juxtaposition of arms sales and conflict data (from the SIPRI), that revealed numerous examples of major arms producers continuing to provide arms supplies to recipients engaged in major armed conflicts. Second, statistical regression analysis for each exporter between 1990-2018, controlled for a range of relevant demand and supply factors.

Key Findings

- 1** **There is very little evidence that war or armed conflict leads to restraint in arms transfers by major exporters, regardless of whether their stated policies suggest they should.** All major arms exporters supplied substantial volumes of arms to at least some of the wars of the current century.
- 2** **There are no clear cases where the outbreak of war was accompanied by a halt in arms sales by a major exporter.** In cases where exporters did not supply arms to a war, the recipient(s) tended to be smaller, poorer countries where demand for arms is lower ('low stakes' cases), even in wartime. Clearly political factors also prevail in some cases, for example where the supplier and recipient had a hostile relationship, or where the recipient had been regarded by (western) suppliers as a 'pariah' long before the outbreak of war (e.g. Iran and Syria).
- 3** There are some differences among the eleven top arms exporters covered in this report: Russia supplied arms to the greatest number of wars; and Ukraine, the smallest of the exporters, was a significant conflict supplier in relation to its overall level of exports. **Even so, the difference between these countries and the US and western European suppliers, was relatively minor.**
- 4** For some exporters (Russia, France, Israel, Spain, and the Netherlands), **conflict appears to be associated with a higher probability of transfers.** For the other seven, it made no significant difference either way.
- 5** Rather than conflict, **demand factors** – levels of GDP and military spending, and the overall level of arms acquisitions by a particular country – **were key determinants of whether a given exporter would supply arms to that country.**
- 6** **US and European exporters sometimes displayed a pattern of selective, 'low stakes' restraint,** including cases where they imposed arms embargoes in direct response to conflict or repression. These tended to be cases where opportunities for sales were in any case limited.
- 7** **An established arms supply relationship was one of the most powerful determinants of whether arms transfers would occur** in the future between a supplier and recipient, regardless of the recipient's conflict status at any particular moment in time.

In summary, **there is little or no evidence that participation in war or armed conflict made it less likely for a country to receive arms from any of the major exporters.** The lack of arms supplies to a conflict party appears, in the great majority of cases, to be more likely the result of limited demand, or political factors that are much broader than, and often predate, the conflict. Thus, exporters have generally exercised restraint only in 'low stakes' cases where there was limited potential for sales in any case.

This report is part of a series of reports in the World Peace Foundation research program, "Defense Industries, Foreign Policy and Armed Conflict," which is funded the Carnegie Corporation of New York. It does not attempt to answer questions about *why* arms were transferred to countries where conflicts were taking place despite some exporters' clearly-stated policies against exporting arms that are likely to exacerbate conflict or to lead to violations of IHL. Detailed analysis of this question will be left to the next stage of the project, involving case studies of the US, UK, and France. These case studies will analyze factors that may influence arms export decision-making processes, including relationships between governments and defense industrial interests, public opinion, and foreign policy considerations.

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