

# Exploding Myths About Global Arms Transfers

Robert Mandel

Volume 18, numéro 2, fall 1998

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs18\\_02art03](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs18_02art03)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Mandel, R. (1998). Exploding Myths About Global Arms Transfers. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 18(2), 47–65.

# Exploding Myths About Global Arms Transfers

by *Robert Mandel*

## INTRODUCTION

After the end of the Cold War, many observers breathed a sigh of relief that the winding down of the bipolar ideological rivalry would finally curtail the widespread development and exchange of potentially lethal weapons systems. On the surface, the significantly reduced international demand for arms in the 1990s (as compared to the 1970s and 1980s) seems to have fulfilled their hope. Much to their chagrin, however, excess supply of arms and excess capacity in arms production, combined with the greater visibility of subnational turmoil, has fostered intensified competition by arms producers to penetrate foreign markets. This increasingly multifaceted competition involves a wide variety of weapons systems, from small arms to major high-tech munitions, and of suppliers and recipients, from loosely-organized private groups to powerful national governments. Equally important, the global arms transfer system has become more porous and complex, encompassing tensions and contradictions that substantially impede the formulation of effective national or international weapons policies.

While global arms transfers have recently attracted increased attention, most writing on the subject continues to be atheoretical and descriptive,<sup>1</sup> using either isolated case studies or highly-aggregated statistical analysis to depict changing patterns of exchange. Although this orientation has generally been useful, much existing work seems motivated by a polemical desire to demonstrate conclusively that arms transfers are either a blessing or a curse for international security. Moreover, many seem determined to link the arms transfer discussion to wider agendas about increasing or reducing defense budgets, to basic debates about the morality or immorality of the armaments, or to "guns-versus-butter" analyses about whether arms production and trade drain resources that could be used for better purposes. Rare indeed are balanced and detached conceptual studies of the dynamics of the global arms transfer system that allow us to place the specific emerging post-Cold War realities in a broad illuminating explanatory context.

This study attempts to begin to fill this void by taking a rather iconoclastic theoretical look at the global arms transfer system. After a brief clarification of key concepts and current trends, this article reviews and challenges conventional wisdom about the crucial relationship between arms transfers and international political instability. The stage is then set for a detailed exploration of the central tensions embedded in the global arms transfer system, highlighting the widespread contradictions and faulty expectations surrounding many of these transactions. The piece concludes with a conceptual re-assessment of the weapons trade as an instrument of national security in the post-Cold War world.

Given the recency of the post-Cold War period and the inescapable sketchiness in available evidence on some of the most important types of global arms transfers especially non-governmental and small arms transactions this study's insights are quite

tentative and are designed to crystallize controversies and to generate hypotheses rather than to convey definitive truths. Much of this analysis centers on intentions and expectations of arms suppliers and recipients and the seeming inconsistencies between motives and effects. This focus inherently encompasses considerable ambiguity and imprecision. At least partly for this reason, the exposure here of arms transfer myths relies on logical deductive rather than empirical inductive analysis. This study reviews extensively the relevant arms transfer literature in the course of its investigation in order both to expose and to question these prevailing myths; while in the process it is difficult to avoid any reliance on polemical writings, this study makes every effort to balance the biases introduced by incorporating insights from the full political spectrum of viewpoints on this topic.

A broad historical overview of weapons transfers reveals an endless ebb and flow in the pattern of exchange, varying substantially across time in areas such as intensity of arms production, sophistication of weapons exchanged, level of international demand for arms, and tightness of linkage to foreign policy objectives. Many analysts characterize the current era as a mixture of both continuity and change,<sup>2</sup> while others feel that "a revolution has hit the arms trade" after the end of the Cold War;<sup>3</sup> clearly one cannot view current trends either as a predictable extension of past behavior or as a totally-disconnected departure from what has come before. Regardless of perspective, the ongoing patterns in arms trade are not simple to explain, let alone to monitor or manage.

## BASIC ARMS TRANSFER DEFINITIONS AND TRENDS

In defining global arms transfers, this study chooses to rely upon the meaning established by the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency:<sup>4</sup>

Arms transfers (arms imports and exports) represent the international transfer (under terms of grant, credit, barter, or cash) of military equipment, usually referred to as "conventional," including weapons of war, parts thereof, ammunition, support equipment, and other commodities designed for military use. Among the items included are tactical guided missiles and rockets, military aircraft, naval vessels, armored and non-armored military vehicles, communications and electronic equipment, artillery, infantry weapons, small arms, ammunition, other ordnance, parachutes, and uniforms.

Noteworthy elements of this definition are that it incorporates both arms sales and military assistance (loans or gifts); that it restricts itself to conventional arms, as no international transfers of nuclear weapons have as yet occurred, but encompasses both major high-tech weapons systems and light weaponry; that it includes both components and finished weapons; and that it permits both suppliers and recipients to be governmental or non-governmental (private subnational or transnational) in nature. However, despite its general utility, this notion of arms transfers is not without considerable ambiguity and controversy. For centuries, there have been debates about a precise delineation of what constitutes an armament without definitive resolution (for example, is it the intent of the producer or the application by the user that matters most?).

Recently, the more restrictive issue of what constitutes an arms transfer has also heated up: controversy exists in cases such as where equipment transferred is dual-use or identical to that used for civilian purposes; where technology and components are transferred instead of completed systems; where two countries engage in co-production of weapons systems; and where control over arms changes without their movement, or national location of arms changes without a transfer of control.<sup>5</sup>

The term "global," appearing frequently in this piece (and in the title) to describe the scope of arms transfers, merits further clarification. The intent here is to encompass both national and international levels of analysis, scrutinizing both broad systemic trends and the more particular behavior patterns of arms suppliers and recipients. While admittedly there is some controversial flipping between levels of analysis (some analysts deny that a global arms transfer system even exists), the interplay appears important to highlight the relationship between individual state behavior and international system impact.

To isolate further the distinctive characteristics of global arms transfers, it seems useful to contrast them to first, possession or internal development of arms, and second, exchange of other commodities. With regard to the distinction between arms transfer and arms possession/development, one analyst succinctly contends that reliance on one's own arms sacrifices capability, while reliance on arms transfers sacrifices control.<sup>6</sup> Transfer of arms appears to have a more direct impact on changing the influence/dependence relationship between two states; and, in the end, the weapons trade may often trigger higher threat perceptions in the eyes of neighboring or enemy states due to the assumption of heightened military ties to external powers than would internal arms development. However, with the post-Cold War increases in cross-national co-production arrangements, involving significant sharing of technology and components, the distinction between internal development and external transfer has indeed become quite murky.

With regard to the distinction between transfer of arms and transfer of other commodities, on the level of principle though clearly not of practice weaponry has consistently been an exception to the internationalist ideal of open global exchange. The rationale for this exclusion is the potentially lethal impact of armaments, despite the insistence by weapons merchants that the arms business "is like any other business, with no special moral responsibility."<sup>7</sup> Whatever distinctiveness has existed between exchange of arms and that of other commodities appears to be vanishing in the post-Cold War era: "in the absence of an ideological anchor, Western policy makers drifted toward the view that the armaments sector was more like other parts of the international economy than a separate element of national security."<sup>8</sup> Thus it appears now to be considerably more difficult to isolate conceptually the unique features of global arms transfers.

The post-Cold War environment has focused much interest on recent trends in two crucial areas incorporated within the definition of global arms transfers: whether suppliers and recipients are governmental or non-governmental, and whether the munitions provided are major high-tech weapons systems or small arms. Looking at the nature of arms suppliers and recipients, non-governmental transfers appear to be

increasingly visible in the post-Cold War world. While some have argued that a dramatic proportional increase in non-governmental arms transfers has occurred since 1989, the evidence here is spotty.<sup>9</sup> For example, the record of American commercial arms exports purchases of arms by foreign governments direct from United States manufacturers shows absolutely no pattern of increase from 1986 to 1995.<sup>10</sup> Many analysts feel that now "companies, not nations, own and manage the crown jewels of the global military industrial enterprise;"<sup>11</sup> and that black arms markets are proliferating,<sup>12</sup> in which private smugglers, mercenaries, and terrorists buy and sell weapons for their own diverse covert purposes. Thus regardless of the actual change in the size and frequency of non-governmental arms transfers, they pose a considerable challenge to the traditional "rules-of-the-game" in arms trade originating from the concerns of government security establishments.

Turning to the nature of the weapons transferred, while major expensive high-tech weaponry continues to command most of the international attention, the increased visibility of unconventional low-intensity conflict and the decline of major weapons system sales have combined to highlight the importance of small arms transfers in terms of use and impact on casualties and battlefield outcomes. Although light weapons have been crucial in virtually every war throughout history, and small wars have occurred for quite some time, the removal of "the Cold War overlay" with its focus on bipolar nuclear confrontation has facilitated concern for these less earth-shattering munitions in these less earth-shattering conflicts.<sup>13</sup> With the spiraling cost of advanced weapons systems and diminished sources of subsidized military assistance, in the early 1990s many governments reevaluated their military doctrines in terms of their most likely security threat ethnic conflict and insurgencies and "small arms, ammunition, and light infantry equipment became the weapons of choice rather than the sophisticated major systems many governments had sought in the past."<sup>14</sup> It is impossible with existing monitoring mechanisms to pinpoint the exact changes in volume of small arms transferred over time,<sup>15</sup> despite frequent claims that the trade here has been rising. So even though the extensive use of small arms (and the pervasiveness of internal low-intensity conflict) may be nothing new, these munitions clearly merit special security attention, as at least 30 to 40 countries furnish such small arms, involving numerous independent arms dealers and enormous supply stocks around the world.<sup>16</sup>

## GLOBAL ARMS TRANSFERS AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL INSTABILITY

Of all the implications of global arms transfers, their impact on political stability is the topic of greatest discussion. Stability is of course but one of many important concerns surrounding the weapons trade, and it is not necessarily the one always deserving the highest priority (some object, for example, to its occasional association with the repression of basic human rights); however, it is the yardstick security policy makers turn to first when assessing the global arms transfer system, and it is in many ways at the core of basic protection values.<sup>17</sup> The notion of political stability, most commonly defined as the perpetuation of status quo ruling regimes, is inherently vague and contentious. In the same vein, there appear to be so many methods by which regime destabilization occurs

that it would take a great deal of space to enumerate them comprehensively. The zero-sum security dilemma contributes to the ambiguity here: one analyst <sup>18</sup> points out that although "arms for allies are often perceived as being transferred within the context of creating, or maintaining, a regional balance of power," "one nation's perception of balance may be another nation's 'imbalance'." Parallel to the treatment of arms transfers explained earlier, this study explores the impact on political stability at both the systemic and national levels to consider the widest implications of the weapons trade. While many claims exist depicting a rather straightforward impact of arms transfers on stability, the overall picture appears to involve considerable complexity.

In terms of the type of arms suppliers and recipients, conventional wisdom seems to suggest that government-to-government exchanges are more likely to associate with maintaining status quo regimes in power, where they help to resist internal and external threats, than are exchanges involving non-governmental groups, where they could more easily end up in the hands of undesired parties, such as anti-regime internal forces or transnational subversive groups. The logic here rests on the assumption that these non-governmental recipients and suppliers have either a non-status quo orientation (terrorists or revolutionaries), an inability to control tightly the flow of arms, or a lack of political concern about arms diffusion (multinational business). Many studies <sup>19</sup> generally argue that non-governmental arms transfers seem more dangerous; and more specific claims <sup>20</sup> have emerged that the globalization of the arms industry in the hands of non-governmental business appears "potentially more destabilizing" than traditional government-to-government arms sales. However, a close examination of this relationship reveals considerable murkiness: neither private commercial nor private political/ideological arms traders seem consistently to match government arms transfers in volume and overall impact on lives lost and wars fueled;<sup>21</sup> the destabilizing "boomerang effect," in which supplier states eventually end up inadvertently arming their own enemies, seems just as likely for governmental as non-governmental arms transfers;<sup>22</sup> and arms transfers between two non-governmental groups may often be less destabilizing than governmental transfers because of the more restrictive scope of interests and activity involved.<sup>23</sup>

In terms of the type of arms exchanged, a prevailing view appears to be that the post-Cold War setting makes small arms more destabilizing than major conventional weaponry. The general rationale is that large state-of-the-art high-tech arms are often so unsuited to the needs of modern low-intensity conflict that soldiers do not use them much on the battlefield; there is an implicit implication here that this kind of munition seems more likely in the current era to foster a stabilizing image of defensive deterrence, while in contrast small arms appear to be more likely to be used for offensive purposes in actual combat situations. It seems to many that the sense of restraint associated with major weapons, whether due to economic cost, complexity of operation, or potential for overwhelming retaliation, is considerably greater than that associated with light weapons.

Supporting this general logic are the empirical claims that the vast preponderance of recent violent conflicts "are being fought almost entirely with small and light armaments, mostly the cheapest and least advanced kinds;"<sup>24</sup> that "the weapons used in today's low-



intensity (though often high-casualty) wars and insurgencies, from Bosnia and Azerbaijan to Angola and Kashmir, often depend on technologies developed in the second world war or earlier;<sup>25</sup> and thus that "it is the trade in small and light weapons that poses the most immediate threat to human well-being and international stability."<sup>26</sup> However, just because small arms generate more killing does not necessarily mean that they cause more instability,<sup>27</sup> as disruption of the political status quo is not simply a direct function of battle deaths. Moreover, in response to those who argue that the post-Cold War setting has accentuated the destabilizing impact of small arms, it is important to realize that "small and light arms were always the primary weapons used by subnational forces:"<sup>28</sup> for example, in Afghanistan, the flood of American light weapons into the country fostered instability both during and after the Cold War;<sup>29</sup> and the massive small arms shipments from the United States, South Africa, and the former Soviet Union to Angola dating back to 1974 have continually produced a violent stalemate.<sup>30</sup> Thus here too it appears to be difficult to identify a uniquely consistent pattern in the post-Cold War environment linking the type of armament to the level of stability.

A related elusive quest is the attempt to link global arms transfers with two common correlates of instability: conflict and arms races. While noBODY argues that arms constitute the root cause of conflict (instead characterizing them as a trigger), a common view here is that the greater the volume of global arms transfers, the greater the potential for the eruption of violent conflict.<sup>31</sup> However, there is convincing evidence that the general relationship between arms transfers and warfare is not at all clear-cut, as such transactions have little impact on the outbreak of violence or the outcome of hostility and instead often simply prolong and intensify the fighting.<sup>32</sup> The decreased frequency of full-scale traditional warfare, the indeterminacy of war outcomes, and the continuing challenges to deterrence doctrine in the post-Cold War era all serve to reduce the likelihood of greater clarity emerging in the relationship between arms transfers and conflict.

Turning to arms races, arms transfers have often fueled this uncontrolled cross-national competition in weapons acquisition, "as the difficulty in distinguishing between offensive and defensive military preparations started an action-reaction cycle of arms purchases in the absence of any necessary intention on either side to start a war."<sup>33</sup> However, the evidence linking arms transfers to arms races is just as inconclusive as that linking arms transfers to conflict, for arms acquisition does not invariably produce arms races, and of course arms races do not inevitably lead to instability.<sup>34</sup> Whether arms transfers lead to arms races appears to depend at least in part on the presence of long-standing patterns of intense regional or global competition, the purchasing power of the states in question, and the scale of aspirations of competing states. Ultimately, evaluating the connection between arms transfers and either arms races or conflict rests upon basic assumptions about deterrence, with the proliferation of conventional weapons in some minds creating a restraining fear of retaliation and in other minds creating an escalating yearning for aggression.

In any case, when examining the overall post-Cold War record of global arms transfers, the actual direct impact thus far on international political stability (as contrasted to sheer

death and destruction) appears to be relatively modest. Even considering some of the most extreme cases, the scope of the influence on outcomes appears to be quite limited: for Middle Eastern nations, some of the most volatile importers of international weaponry, the impact of arms sales on stability has been "only marginal;"<sup>35</sup> and for China, one of the most volatile exporters of munitions, the transfer of Chinese weaponry abroad "generally has not lead to any military destabilization of these regions."<sup>36</sup> Thus the frequent emotional claims about arms transfers causing massive instability need to be taken with a grain of salt.

## TENSIONS WITHIN THE GLOBAL ARMS TRANSFER SYSTEM

The post-Cold War arms transfer system contains some crucial and under-scrutinized contradictions. These include first, inconsistencies between policy makers' statements and actions regarding global arms transfers, where a kind of "stick-in-the-mud" irrationality prevents these officials from confronting and reconciling the contradictions involved;<sup>37</sup> and second, gaps between long-standing supplier-recipient expectations about global arms transfers and the actual functions that these transactions perform, where cognitive consistency prevents officials from adjusting to a new set of realities.<sup>38</sup> Identifying the specific resulting tensions helps to frame theoretically an explanatory analysis of the dysfunctional prevailing global arms transfer system. Figure 1 provides a somewhat simplified picture of these crucial arms transfer tensions, with the purpose of highlighting overarching distinctions rather than suggesting clearly bifurcated "either-or" patterns.

The first cluster of tensions encompasses the rhetoric of restraint juxtaposed to the reality of expansiveness. In particular, governments of major power arms-exporting states frequently voice the urgent need for increased arms control of the international flow of conventional weapons while at the same time actively promoting overt and covert foreign sales of domestic weapons systems (based on both a desire to protect the health of domestic arms industries and a fear that "if we don't sell arms abroad someone else will"). Supplier states want to avoid escalating regional arms races and arming political enemies, and at the same time to avoid ignoring the defense of friendly countries and the needs of the domestic military-industrial infrastructure.<sup>39</sup> However, this balancing act can sometimes appear hypocritical. In the United States, for example, "the two years from the outbreak of the Gulf War through the summer of 1992 were marked by a perverse pattern in which virtually every public statement by the Bush administration in favor of curbing arms transfers was immediately and decisively contradicted in practice."<sup>40</sup> During the next American administration, President Clinton issued a Conventional Arms Transfer Policy for the United States on 17 February 1995 that "paid lip service to the idea of restraint, but, for the first time, explicitly supported arms exports as a way to shore up U.S. military industrial interests."<sup>41</sup> "Clinton's directive on arms sales, unlike those issued by Presidents Bush and Reagan, includes 'maintaining the defense industrial base' as a key justification for approving an arms sale," undermining in the process the desire to restrict the proliferation of conventional arms.<sup>42</sup> As a result, the credibility of conventional arms control initiatives by major powers has eroded; as former Assistant Secretary of Defense Laurence Korb notes, "it is a frightening trend that undermines our



moral authority in the New World Order" and makes it "very hard for us to tell other people the Russians, the Chinese, the French not to sell arms, when we are there peddling and fighting to control the market."<sup>43</sup> A confused and distorted signaling system thus emerges, in which onlookers may question both the sincerity and the credibility behind calls for reduced conventional arms traffic by world leaders.

A related tension concerns the rhetoric of order standing in sharp contrast to the reality of chaos in the global arms transfer system. Arms supplier states frequently justify arms exports by claiming that their coherent weapons transfer policies usually direct arms to legitimate governments of friendly countries for status quo purposes. However, in reality, due in part to the porous global arms transfer system and the multiplicity of non-governmental arms suppliers, the weapons may in an anarchic manner (directly or indirectly) end up in the wrong hands under the control of enemies, repressive dictators, or private revolutionary and terrorist groups determined to disrupt international stability. Embedded in this inconsistency is the inherent friction between armaments promoting the resolution of disputes by violent force in the hands of a minority, and democracy, aspiring to promote the resolution of disputes through peaceful expression of the general will of the majority. As one analyst remarks,<sup>44</sup> the justification for arms transfers usually revolves around the idealistic and altruistic motives of promoting security, stability and peace, when in reality they result more from a pragmatic emphasis on "economic advantage and political expediency." A classic example of the chaotic outcomes here was the American sale of weapons to Iran in the mid-1980s, justified by the lofty goal of winning the release of American hostages, with the funds received being used to buy weapons for the contras in Nicaragua. The indirect effect of these actions was to arm an aggressive anti-American Islamic Fundamentalist regime in the Middle East and to provide more weapons to the drug barons in Central America.<sup>45</sup> An ambiguous signaling system is quite evident here, in which it is confusing to onlookers whether national supplier state governments have maintained full control of weapons emanating from their countries and, if they have done so, whether the governments are becoming indifferent to where the arms transfers end up, what they are used for and who employs them.

One tension receiving quite a bit of publicity is the gap between security and profit, reflecting friction between the goals of public good and private gain. A widespread expectation still seems to persist within supplier states that arms transfers fulfill the traditional public national security goals of enhancing military deterrence and stabilizing alliances, while in contrast the emerging role of these weapons exchanges appears to be more oriented toward attaining private economic profits for producers, employment for citizenry and global market penetration. Frederic Pearson<sup>46</sup> generally confirms that the usual justifications for arms exports include homeland defense, demonstration of benefits from association with supplier states, creation of favorable power balances, and compliance by recipient states. Natalie Goldring<sup>47</sup> more specifically contends that foreign policy makers continue to "delude themselves" in claiming that the security rationale for global arms transfers is still paramount. In contrast, there appears to be a growing dominance of commercial motives for these transactions, harkening back to the pattern of the 1920s,<sup>48</sup> as concerns such as the availability of hard currency or the possession of a sound credit rating have become more central in determining the pattern

of global arms transfers.<sup>49</sup> Recent examples of this pattern are the tendencies within both Russia and China to use arms sales as a primary means to earn hard currency;<sup>50</sup> and the tendency within Great Britain for the rhetoric of "strategic interests" to be "less convincing these days than it was during the cold war," with British arms exports designed "simply to maximise its exporters' profits, and hang the consequences."<sup>51</sup> Within the United States, Secretary of Defense William Perry has explained that weapons transfers are not really a strategic issue, because no coalition of Third World powers armed with conventional weapons could possibly present a threat to the United States, and has tacitly supported the "economics first" American governmental approach to arms sales.<sup>52</sup> The confused signaling surrounding these public good private gain tensions revolves around onlookers' uncertainty about what exactly arms exports communicate about supplier states' security priorities when these transfers seem to be quite disconnected from defense planning.

In a political clash between autonomy and dependence, a common expectation within recipient states seems to persist that arms transfers carry with them strong political support from supplier state governments, reminiscent of the patron-client relationships so widespread during the Cold War bipolar system, and consequently enhance governmental control and power particularly within weak recipient nations. In contrast, the actual function of these transfers appears to be more in the direction of maintaining or increasing dependence by recipient upon suppliers, reflecting especially the need for military training, specialized components and spare weapons parts. Traditionally, arms transfers have been "elements of the larger struggle of new states to assert their sovereignty;"<sup>53</sup> however, while in principle arms transfers enhance the military capabilities of recipient countries, the dependence created by these transactions by recipients upon suppliers in some ways clouds the net impact on the global distribution of power<sup>54</sup> and on the autonomy of recipient states. Despite the increased ability of many states to produce their own arms, the global arms trade today remains dependency-generating.<sup>55</sup> In some cases, recipient states' desire for (or expectation of) external support seems to outweigh any fear they may have of external dependence. For example, in the Middle East the continued presence of American training teams accompanying arms transfers "may well do more for the respective countries' feeling of security than the actual equipment" transferred.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, in this vain expectation of heightened autonomy through weapons acquisition, recipient states often look to arms transfers as potential "global equalizers" that help to give them greater political clout in international relations; in reality, "the diffusion of military technology and techniques is not smooth or linear, and the system remains highly stratified."<sup>57</sup> So in this area the muddled signaling centers around whether onlookers should interpret acquisition of arms from abroad as a political step toward empowerment or enslavement.

A related gap for recipient states exists between the expectation of external military hegemony and the reality of internal military vulnerability. A common expectation within recipient states is still that acquiring arms serves to enhance external military dominance (particularly over neighbors), even when the weapons are increasingly needed (particularly in non-industrialized states) for internal security purposes. The expectation

of regional influence and hegemony continues to be very much in the forefront of the minds of arms-receiving states:

states that wish to assume a higher regional or global profile often assume that military prowess is the means of advancement, irrespective of whether or not the weapons are acquired to meet a definable threat in a militarily appropriate fashion.<sup>58</sup>

Onlookers' interpretation of arms acquisition often indirectly serves to reinforce this viewpoint, as in the Middle East, for example, where a state may purchase weapons from abroad to suppress internal dissent, "yet the security dilemma may drive its neighbors inevitably to interpret this as a possible threat."<sup>59</sup> A frequently faulty image of offensive strength and of externally-oriented motivation for weapons acquisition is behind this tension, ignoring the significant obstacles in a porous international system to maintaining a long-term decisive external military advantage through conventional arms imports. This misguided expectation seems to relate to an overemphasis on interstate conflict "as the primary explanation for arms acquisitions and military buildups," excluding internal concerns, such as securing a national regime against domestic threat.<sup>60</sup>

Embedded in this set of assumptions is the belief that arms acquisitions, particularly of expensive major weapons systems, increases military capability and offensive threat in such a way as to ensure victory in external warfare. This premise is especially contentious because (as mentioned earlier) most post-Cold War conflicts do not involve extensive use on the battlefield of these major weapons systems. One analyst generally asserts that "there is little danger that most of the major weapons filling the world's arsenals will ever be used" and that "it is hard to imagine a recent international arms deal that has had an appreciable effect on regional stability, that has made war seem more likely or potentially more deadly."<sup>61</sup> Another argues with specific reference to arms in the Middle East that "the level of training and technical sophistication required to operate them makes their usefulness debatable" in external warfare.<sup>62</sup> Overall, the signaling confusion here for onlookers interpreting arms transfers is how to discern whether these transactions suggest a military mindset of offensive, external intimidation or of defensive, internal desperation.

Finally, unrealistic psychological expectations appear to surround the relationship between arms transfers and anticipation of global status. Reflecting uncertain tensions between prestige and anonymity in an anarchic international system, a frequent expectation among arms recipients is the continuing association of weapons acquisition with a heightened image of international respect. Far less tangible than the previously-discussed recipient expectations of either political support or military dominance, this idea of using armaments as a quick and sometimes dirty way of ratcheting oneself up the international status pecking order has long been evident in international relations. In this quest for psychological recognition, it is not uncommon for states to purchase expensive missiles simply to impress neighbors<sup>63</sup> or major high-tech weapons systems simply as a means for governments to placate their military establishments and for these establishments to enhance their image of power.<sup>64</sup> It is increasingly clear the many recipient states generally still believe that "the quantity and quality of arms that a state

possesses become a symbol of both its strength and status."<sup>65</sup> However, expecting arms acquisition to enhance prestige in the post-Cold War environment appears to be largely unrealistic due to the nature of the global arms market. Given the universal recognition that international arms transfers have been a buyers' market for some time, arms sales are frequently a function of price rather than of quality. For example, Chinese weapons systems have been big sellers largely because they are cheap and available,<sup>66</sup> and it does not seem that obtaining such shoddy and outmoded arms even in large quantities would serve as a major image enhancement for recipient states. Indeed, even aside from the numerous small and light weapons exchanged that have not seemed to transform dramatically national reputations, many military transfers today do not consist of potentially prestige-escalating finished weapons systems but rather of components or technology imports that permit recipient nations to manufacture arms themselves or facilitate the enhancement of existing weapons designs at lower cost.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, increasing prestige usually seems to rely on one's ability to obtain weaponry that others (particularly within the region) cannot acquire, a condition that appears to be elusive in the current highly competitive and porous global arms market. The signaling confusion here revolves around questions of when and how transfers of weapons that may be unusable or unimpressive communicate international prestige for recipient nations.

These six clusters of arms transfer tensions have deep interwoven origins. Figure 2 tentatively outlines the stages of development of these tensions during the post-Cold War era. This diagram makes no assumption that there is a fixed linear progression among these stages, but rather provides a simplified overview of interrelated processes, which one could admittedly group in a number of ways, to highlight explanatory linkages. The conceptual starting point for these tensions is a set of three fundamental security transformations resulting from the end of the Cold War: increasingly visible erosion of the nation-state, enhancement of regional interdependence, and proliferation of unconventional low-intensity conflict.<sup>68</sup> From these parsimonious roots the complex web of arms transfer tensions described in this section has developed in particularly troubling ways.

## CONCLUSION

From the preceding discussion of the linkages between global arms transfers and political instability and of the tensions associated with these weapons transactions, some notable theoretical dilemmas emerge. Most importantly, a surprisingly large gap seems to exist between what foreign policy makers state or expect is going on and the actual role arms transfers play in the post-Cold War international system. While much of this problem seems to result from the inertia of Cold War bipolar thinking, the remainder of the difficulty appears to involve an unwillingness (and a lack of incentives to become willing) among policy makers to grapple with the complex contradictions deeply embedded within their weapons transfer policies and practices. Little doubt exists that "states' perceptions of the role of arms production and arms trade in guaranteeing wealth, power, and victory in warfare has changed" in response to differing historical

transformations;<sup>69</sup> but the adaptation to the post-Cold War predicament appears to be both inadequate and inappropriate.

With regard to the transfer of major weaponry among governments, the most traditional and high-profile international arms transactions, imagery seems to be taking undue precedence over functionality. These transactions appear to be aimed today for recipient states more as a means of symbolic signaling than as a means of actually enhancing military performance on the battlefield. Aaron Karp<sup>70</sup> asserts that these major arms transfers remain important "as symbols of national power and international commitments;" Goldring<sup>71</sup> contends that "their symbolic value is much more important than their combat value;" and Raymond Bonner<sup>72</sup> more specifically argues that they "seem to be more symbols of independence and modernity than rigorously-reasoned elements of an overall defense plan." An example is Central European nations purchasing American weapons systems on the assumption that these arms "pave the way for NATO membership."

However, this widely-shared symbolism associated with major governmental arms transfers seems generally to be misguided, incorporating overblown assumptions about symbolic payoffs from these transactions: in the anarchic post-Cold War context, arms transfers rarely generate enhanced images of power, commitment, independence, respect or modernity. The pervasiveness of this faulty arms recipient logic appears ominous, given the high probability of frustration resulting from dashed expectations surrounding major governmental arms transfers.

With regard to transfers involving small and light armaments and non-governmental groups, the lowest profile weapons transactions, functionality seems to be taking undue precedence over imagery. Because actual battlefield performance and economic gain are considered so much more important than any symbolic signaling, arms suppliers appear to have indiscriminate distribution policies, ignoring in the process the cumulative impact that a series of non-governmental or small arms transfers can have on influence and alliance relationships within a region. This downplaying of the macro-political impact of these low-profile transactions is facilitated by the difficulty of obtaining reliable information about their patterns across time or areas. The result is that policy makers assume that light weapons transfers "possess little political or strategic significance,"<sup>73</sup> and that non-governmental arms transfers do not merit much attention in attempts to restrain the international flow of munitions.<sup>74</sup> However, the logic here appears to be faulty because it overlooks among other issues the tendency of arms exports generally to have a speedier and more certain psychological impact on enemies and friends than any tangible military or economic effects of the transactions.<sup>75</sup> In today's international environment, ripe with ethnic conflict and challenges to state sovereignty, the "privatization of security and violence"<sup>76</sup> seems to be playing a more crucial role in determining important global strategic perceptions. Without a redirecting of attention here toward the image implications of non-governmental and small arms transfer policies, the current trends in arms supplier behavior seem likely to become more dangerous and disruptive.

Thus a peculiar mix of forces have caused global arms transfers to have meanings and impacts quite distinct from those commonly associated with them. Supplier states export weapons on the pretext of promoting national security goals, whereas in reality their anarchic arms transfer policies largely promote jobs-and-profit goals and foster a highly uncertain impact on national and international stability. Recipient states import weapons on the pretext of increasing their political-military prestige, strength, autonomy and resolve, whereas in reality these arms do not dramatically improve their status, independence or ability to win in warfare. Rather than being the stable currency of international relations, as they are often called, arms transfers have become a sign of fragility within the current international system. The apparent divorce of conventional arms transactions from core national security policy with the accompanying distorting mythology and imbalances between functionality and imagery concerns appears for the moment at least to strip this fundamental international relations instrument of its necessary role in the coherent reconstruction of global security.

What, then, are the implications of these tensions associated with global arms transfers? From a theoretical standpoint, these apparent inconsistencies make it both difficult and dangerous to provide definitive explanations or predictions pertaining to current patterns, and instead seem to demand a more textured and contingent mode of analysis (existing contradictions may resolve themselves in multiple directions). It is possible, of course, that security policy makers are fully aware of the tensions identified here and are intentionally exploiting and perpetuating prevailing myths in order to cloak their actual weapons transaction behavior; but the link between the apparent hypocrisy and the fluid post-Cold War environment suggests that the transfer patterns are likely to change over time as the parameters of the emerging system and the evolving rules of the game become more fixed and widely understood. From a policy standpoint, the tensions identified here appear to identify major areas of dysfunction that call for frontal confrontational reconsideration in order to achieve more coherence in security doctrine. Frank discussion of the tradeoffs and costs and benefits associated with arms transfers and their impact on national interest seems imperative. In the end, scholars, government officials and even the public at large would benefit from more skepticism about the mythology of weapons trafficking, and from renewed efforts to comprehend and cope with a more complex and changeable arms transfer picture.

### Figure 1: Tensions Embedded in the Global Arms Transfer System

	Rhetoric/Expectation	Reality
<i>Supplier States</i>	RESTRAINT	EXPANSIVENESS
	ORDER	CHAOS
	SECURITY	PROFIT
<i>Recipient States</i>	AUTONOMY	DEPENDENCE
	HEGEMONY	VULNERABILITY
	PRESTIGE	ANONYMITY

---

### Figure 2: Origins of Global Arms Transfer Tensions



## Endnotes

Author's Note: I wish to thank the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, the Defense Security Assistance Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the British American Security Information Council, and the Institute for Research on Small Arms for their assistance on this article.

1. Stephanie G. Neuman and Robert E. Harkavy, eds., *Arms Transfers in the Modern World* (New York: Praeger, 1980), p. vii; and Keith Krause, *Arms and the State: Patterns of Military Production and Trade* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 9.
2. Frederic S. Pearson, *The Global Spread of Arms* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), pp. 95-96; and Stephanie G. Neuman, "The Arms Trade, Military Assistance, and Recent Wars: Change and Continuity," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 541 (September 1995), p. 74.
3. Aaron Karp, "The Arms Trade Revolution: The Major Impact of Small Arms," *The Washington Quarterly*, 17 (Autumn 1994), p. 65.
4. U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1995* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1996), p. 183.
5. Christian Catrina, "Major Directions of Research in the Arms Trade," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 535 (September 1994), p. 192.
6. Gerald L. Sorokin, "Arms, Alliances, and Security Tradeoffs in Enduring Rivalries," *International Studies Quarterly*, 38 (September 1994), p. 424.
7. Anthony Sampson, *The Arms Bazaar* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), pp. 329, 340.
8. William W. Keller, *Arm in Arm: The Political Economy of the Global Arms Trade* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), p. 97.
9. Interview with Natalie Goldring, Deputy Director of the British American Security Information Council, Washington, DC, 31 July 1996; interview with Joseph Smaldone, Chief, Weapons and Technology Control Division, United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Washington, DC, 24 July 1996; and correspondence from Lucy Mathiak, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 30 July 1996.
10. United States Department of Defense Security Assistance Agency, *Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Construction Sales and Military Assistance Facts* (Washington, DC: Financial Policy Division Comptroller, Defense Security Assistance Agency, 1996), pp. 54-55.
11. Keller, *Arm in Arm*, pp. 9-10.

12. Aaron Karp, "The Rise of Black and Gray Markets," *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science*, 535 (September 1994), pp. 174-89; "The Covert Arms Trade: The Second Oldest Profession," *Economist*, 330 (12 February 1994), pp. 21-23; and R. T. Naylor, "The Structure and Operation of the Modern Arms Black Market," in Jeffrey Boutwell, Michael T. Klare, and Laura W. Reed, eds., *Lethal Commerce: The Global Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons* (Cambridge, MA: Committee on International Security Studies of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1995), pp. 44-57.
13. Interview with Virginia Ezell, President, Institute for Research on Small Arms, Alexandria, VA, 24 July 1996; and interview with Natalie Goldring.
14. Neuman, "The Arms Trade," p. 53.
15. Boutwell, Klare, and Reed, eds., *Lethal Commerce*, p. 5.
16. Institute for National Strategic Studies, *Strategic Assessment 1995: U.S. Security Challenges in Transition* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1996), chap. 11.
17. Robert Mandel, "What Are We Protecting?," *Armed Forces & Society*, 22 (Spring 1996), pp. 335-55.
18. Andrew J. Pierre, *The Global Politics of Arms Sales* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 20.
19. For example, Pearson, *The Global Spread of Arms*, pp. 60-68.
20. Richard A. Bitzinger, "The Globalization of the Arms Industry," *International Security*, 16 (Fall 1994), pp. 190-91.
21. Correspondence from Lucy Mathiak.
22. William D. Hartung, *And Weapons for All* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), p. 2.
23. Interview with Natalie Goldring.
24. Aaron Karp, "Arming Ethnic Conflict," *Arms Control Today*, 23 (September 1993), p. 8.
25. Karp, "The Covert Arms Trade," p. 21.
26. Karp, "The Arms Trade Revolution," p. 65.
27. Interview with Natalie Goldring.

28. Neuman, "The Arms Trade," p. 53.
29. Chris Smith, "Light Weapons and Ethnic Conflict in South Asia," in Boutwell, Klare, and Reed, eds., *Lethal Commerce*, p. 75.
30. Lucy Mathiak, "Light Weapons and Internal Conflict in Angola," in Boutwell, Klare, and Reed, eds., *Lethal Commerce*, 91.
31. Hartung, *And Weapons for All*, pp. 1-20.
32. Michael Brzoska and Frederic S. Pearson, *Arms and Warfare* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), p. 213.
33. Krause, *Arms and the State*, p. 195.
34. Brzoska and Pearson, *Arms and Warfare*, pp. 4-5.
35. Robert G. Neumann, "Conventional Arms Exports and Stability in the Middle East," *Journal of International Affairs*, 49 (Summer 1995), p. 189.
36. Richard A. Bitzinger, "Arms to Go: Chinese Arms Sales to the Third World," *International Security*, 17 (Fall 1992), p. 107.
37. Robert Mandel, *Irrationality in International Confrontation* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1987), pp. 4-6.
38. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), chap. 4.
39. Institute for National Strategic Studies, *Strategic Assessment 1995*, chap. 11.
40. Hartung, *And Weapons for All*, p. 146.
41. Keller, *Arm in Arm*, p. 11.
42. David Isenberg, "We Arm the World," *Washington Post* (18 February 1996), p. C5.
43. Charles M. Sennett, "Armed for Profit: The Selling of US Weapons," *Boston Globe* (11 February 1996), p. B2.
44. Michael T. Klare, *American Arms Supermarket* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1984), p. 27.
45. "The Covert Arms Trade," p. 23.
46. Pearson, *The Global Spread of Arms*, pp. 53-54.

47. Interview with Natalie Goldring.
48. Robert E. Harkavy, "The Changing International System and the Arms Trade," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 535 (September 1994), p. 25.
49. Pearson, *The Global Spread of Arms*, p. 13.
50. Neumann, "Conventional Arms Exports," 185; and Bitzinger, "Arms to Go," p. 86.
51. Andrzej Krause, "Arms Sales to Anyone," *New Statesman & Society*, 7 (18 February 1994), p. 4.
52. Hartung, *And Weapons for All*, pp. 288-89.
53. Krause, *Arms and the State*, p. 195.
54. Christian Catrina, *Arms Transfers and Dependence* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1988), pp. 352-54.
55. Pearson, *The Global Spread of Arms*, p. 106.
56. Neumann, "Conventional Arms Exports," p. 195.
57. Krause, *Arms and the State*, p. 206.
58. *Ibid.*, pp. 196-97.
59. Keith Krause, "Middle Eastern Arms Recipients in the Post-Cold War World," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 535 (September 1994), p. 90.
60. *Ibid.*, pp. 75, 88-89.
61. Karp, "The Arms Trade Revolution," p. 68.
62. Neumann, "Conventional Arms Exports," pp. 194.
63. Karp, "The Covert Arms Trade," p. 21.
64. Interview with Virginia Ezell.
65. Pierre, *The Global Politics of Arms Sales*, p. 131.
66. Bitzinger, "Arms to Go," p. 91.

67. Pearson, *The Global Spread of Arms*, p. 21; and Michael T. Klare, "The Next Great Arms Race," *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (Summer 1993): 137.
68. Robert Mandel, *The Changing Face of National Security: A Conceptual Analysis* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994), p. 3.
69. Krause, *Arms and the State*, p. 1.
70. Karp, "The Arms Trade Revolution," p. 68.
71. Interview with Natalie Goldring.
72. Raymond Bonner, "Central Europe is Newest Arena for Arms Race," *New York Times*, 15 July 1996, pp. 1, 5.
73. Edward J. Laurance, "Addressing the Negative Consequences of Light Weapons Trafficking: Opportunities for Transparency and Restraint," in Boutwell, Klare, and Reed, eds., *Lethal Commerce*, p. 144.
74. Aaron Karp, "Small Arms The New Major Weapons," in Boutwell, Klare, and Reed, eds., *Lethal Commerce*, p. 20.
75. Pearson, *The Global Spread of Arms*, pp. 103-04.
76. Michael T. Klare, "The Global Trade in Light Weapons and the International System in the Post-Cold War Era," in Boutwell, Klare, and Reed, eds., *Lethal Commerce*, p. 40.