Arms Trade

The trade in arms incorporates the sale of new arms such as mines, tanks, guns, bombs and so forth, the components to make such arms, the transfer of older, used or reconditioned arms, and the cross-border movement of other security related items. It is unique in terms of international business; it consists of transnational companies that are treasured as national assets, receiving the political and financial support, and the custom, of governments. The trade is notoriously secretive; it is no surprise that countries might want to hide or even exaggerate their stocks of arms. The absence of regulations or lax controls on the arms trade and inadequate controls on arms transfers have led to widespread availability and misuse of weapons. However, recent attempts by the United Nations (UN) to address such problems have led to the controversial Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which entered into force December 2014 following years of debate (Lustgarten, 2015). At the time of writing, 72 states have ratified the treaty, and a further 59 states have signed but not ratified it (http://www.un.org/disarmament/ATT/). The process of negotiating the ATT necessarily brought together all UN member states with the aim of producing binding standards and controls for export of weapons from one state to another. As such, these controls can be seen to be discriminatory as one state can determine whether or not an arms export should come about and therefore potentially deny another state the weapons it wants to buy (Bromley et al, 2012).

For the majority of the 20th century, arms companies were essentially national assets manufacturing weapons systems and arms to meet domestic need. They were bound up with the defence ambitions of the host country, were often state owned and inseparable from the countries own armed forces. The majority of overseas arms transfers and sales were to strategic partners drawn along Cold War lines. The political implications and worries over national security and secrecy prevented cross border research and manufacture. The end of the Cold War in the 1980s and the collapse of the USSR in 1991 changed the arms trade. Worldwide military expenditure fell, with a slight increase with Western nations re-arming during the Gulf War tensions in the 1990s. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (http://www.sipri.org), which records the volume of military imports of major conventional weapons, estimated that arms imports dropped by between a quarter and a third at that time. Alongside the drop in imports, governments detached themselves from state arms companies and reduced spending on research. No longer connected to governments, and with a generalised globalisation of trade, arms companies began developing into multi-national companies and competing in what had developed into an international trade. Yet arms manufacturers necessarily remain in close collusion with states. Their products are still seen as national assets. Moreover, their customers are governments of other states, and states continue to use their arms industries as a diplomatic tool in international relations, granting arms deals with other nations as part of wider agreements.

The United States is by far the world’s biggest arms exporter, responsible for around 40% of the licit global trade – estimated to be worth around $60billion a year (Feinstein, 2011). Other countries with sizeable industries include China, France, Germany and the United Kingdom. Although the major arms companies are located in a few countries, buyers exist all over the world, often countries with poor human rights records. According to Oxfam, only 52 countries regulate their arms brokers, and most of these do not maintain criminal sanctions for illegal sales (https://www.oxfam.org/en/campaigns/conflict/controlarms).

Virtually all illicit arms transfers are small arms. Despite the general downward trend of the arms trade since the end of the Cold War, there is no such trend in the international transfer of small arms and light weapons (Kinsella, 2014). The use of small arms contribute to the employment of child soldiers - small arms and light weapons are inexpensive, simple, durable and portable. Zweife (2012) argues that they can easily be recycled from one conflict to another, can be sold on by former soldiers, looted from stockpiles and are attractive to innovative entrepreneurs looking for a profitable trade with lax controls. Despite the ATT, the trade in small arms will probably remain difficult to control.

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Readings

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