

For recipients, importing arms makes it unnecessary to invest in expensive arms industries of one's own. For many developing countries, arms transfers are the easiest way to gain access to the advanced technology of the developed arms exporters. Sometimes this technology can be used in non-military ways. Furthermore, developed suppliers will often build infrastructure — such as roads, ports, airstrips and bridges — for developing recipients so they can use the weapons they have bought. This, too, benefits the civilian economy.

What is bad about the arms trade?

Although there are benefits to the arms trade, there are also many drawbacks.

Security drawbacks

For the recipient, acquiring arms does not always increase security. The supplier's weapons may not be suited to the terrain, climate or skills of the recipient. The supplier may learn important details about the recipient's armed forces that could be used against it in a war. In addition, acquiring arms can put the recipient out of balance with neighbouring countries and lead to a regional arms race. This, in turn, can make war more likely. This is a big drawback of the arms trade for the international community.

There are security drawbacks for suppliers as well. As was mentioned earlier, the supplier's arms could someday be used against it. As well, suppliers may be drawn into recipient's wars.

For all parties, the build-up of traded arms can make wars more deadly and make them last longer.

Political drawbacks

The recipient may have to change some of its policies to suit the supplier.

The arms trade can encourage the militarization of the recipient — that is, it can enhance the position of the military in society, giving it priority over civilian needs. Highly militarized societies are more likely to have repressive governments and human rights abuses.

The arms trade can lead to the presence of many foreigners in the recipient country (e.g., building infrastructure, providing training or technical support). This can cause strains in the recipient society.

Military drawbacks

Filling foreign orders can leave the supplier short of weapons for its own armed forces. In addition, the weapons produced may be designed to suit the export market and not the supplier's forces.

The recipient can become dependent on the supplier for spare parts, ammunition and technical services.

Economic drawbacks

The supplier may become dependent on the international arms market which is highly competitive and unstable.

For the recipient, buying arms can lead to large debt loads. The weapons also absorb resources that could otherwise go to social and economic development.

Controlling the arms trade

Since there are both benefits and drawbacks to the arms trade, the question to ask is not "what can we do to stop the arms trade?" Rather, it is "what can we do to limit the bad effects of the arms trade while preserving the good ones?"

Some controls on the arms trade already exist. Most countries have policies restricting the export of arms from their territories. Canada, for example, has very strict controls on its arms exports. We generally don't export arms to:

- countries that pose a threat to Canada and its allies;
- countries involved in or likely to soon be in a war;
- countries under Security Council sanctions; and
- countries whose governments have a persistent record of serious violations of human rights, unless it can be shown that there is no reasonable risk that the goods might be used against the civilian population.

Canada is not a major arms exporter. We account for less than one percent of the global arms trade.

Even though countries have their own controls, there is currently no international treaty or mechanism for the widespread control of conventional arms transfers.

Earlier this year, Canada proposed several measures to reduce the bad effects of the arms trade. We suggested that there should be a meeting of the major arms exporters, at which they could agree to pay more attention to the potentially harmful effects of their arms transfers, and to consult on situations where large or unusual build-ups of arms seem to be developing.

We also called for countries to make the arms trade more transparent, by exchanging information about their arms transfers. Right now, not much information is available about the arms trade. Reliable information about arms imports could prevent countries from overestimating the amount of arms their neighbours are receiving and could thus slow down arms races based on misperception. In this sense, transparency would build confidence, as discussed in "Focus" in *Disarmament Bulletin 12* (Winter 1989/90). In addition, increased public knowledge about arms transfers might stop suppliers and recipients from carrying out some transfers because they fear a bad reaction. Transparency measures could also create a base of information for further study and control of the arms trade. Canada recently published a report of its arms exports, to promote transparency.

Canada has also called for the countries that signed the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (discussed in "Focus" in *Disarmament Bulletin 15*) not to send the arms they don't need because of disarmament in Europe to regions of tension or war.

Obstacles to controlling the arms trade

The arms trade is not easy to control. Many recipients are suspicious of attempts to restrain arms exports. They argue that arms transfer controls make it harder for them to defend themselves