

Focus: On the Arms Trade

Focus is designed primarily for secondary school students. We welcome your comments and suggestions for future topics.

The Gulf War has made a lot of countries stop and think twice about the arms they are selling around the world. Many of the weapons used by Iraq during the War were supplied by the five permanent members of the Security Council — China, France, the UK, the US and the USSR — three of which fought in the coalition against Iraq. This shows one of the dangers of the arms trade for suppliers: that the arms you supply might one day be used against you. But there are other dangers of the arms trade for suppliers, recipients and the international community as a whole. This is why Canada has proposed that there should be more controls on the arms trade.

What is the arms trade?

There is no one, accepted definition of the arms trade. We can, however, say this about it.

1. The arms trade involves conventional weapons and other conventional military equipment (such as bullets, guns, tanks, and submarines), not weapons of mass destruction (such as nuclear, chemical and biological weapons).

2. The arms trade also involves components of conventional weapons and military equipment, as well as services and knowledge directly related to the production or operation of conventional weapons. This means, for example, that an American instructor training fighter pilots in Saudi Arabia would be considered part of the arms trade.

3. The arms trade involves weapons designed to be used by regular or irregular (such as rebel) military forces. This means that guns bought for hunting or collecting are not considered part of the arms trade.

4. Trade takes place when control over the equipment, services or knowledge is transferred to a recipient that is not a national of the supplier

country. The recipient is usually — but not always — located outside the supplier country. For example, it is not considered trade when the Department of National Defence sends weapons from Canada to Canadian forces in Germany. It would, however, be considered trade if DND bought weapons for those forces from a German company.

5. Trade can be between governments, companies, groups or individuals.

How big is the arms trade?

The arms trade is hard to measure. Most countries don't publish statistics about how many arms they supply or receive. The countries that do publish statistics don't all use the same standards of measurement or define arms in the same way. Measures of the arms trade usually include only weapons and components, not services and knowledge.

It is estimated that the value of arms traded in 1988 was US\$49 billion. This is less than in previous years. The size of the arms trade rose throughout the 1960s and 1970s, reaching a peak in the mid-1980s. Although the size of the trade has dropped off since then, more sophisticated weapons are being traded.

The leading exporters (or suppliers) of arms are the USSR, the US, France, the UK, China and West Germany. These six countries alone accounted for almost 90 percent of the major weapons exported between 1985 and 1989.

The leading arms importers (or recipients) are India, Iraq, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt, Czechoslovakia, North Korea, Spain, Turkey, Poland and Afghanistan. These 12 countries accounted for over 50 percent of the major weapons imported between 1985 and 1989.

The arms trade is thus fairly concentrated, with a small number of countries accounting for a large percentage of the trade.

What is good about the arms trade?

People sometimes talk about the arms trade as if it were an entirely bad practice. However, there are some benefits to the trade — at least for suppliers and recipients — otherwise they wouldn't engage in it. There are also benefits for the international community.

Security benefits

For recipients, buying weapons can increase a country's security by making the country more able to deter and defend against attack. Under Article 51 of the UN Charter, every state has the right to defend itself if an armed attack occurs. So every state also has the right to acquire the means necessary for such self-defence.

For suppliers, providing arms to a country may substitute for the supplier having to send its own forces to help defend allies, or may mean it can send less forces.

For the international community, the arms trade can make war less likely by helping to ensure there is a stable balance of forces among countries in a region.

Political benefits

For suppliers and recipients, arms transfers help to cement good relations among friends and allies.

Military benefits

Arms transfers help to promote the standardization of equipment between suppliers and recipients, making it easier for allies to share parts and cooperate in training.

Participating in the arms trade makes it easier for suppliers to maintain an arms-producing industry to supply their own armed forces.

Economic benefits

For suppliers, the arms trade creates jobs and provides a source of cash. In addition, it reduces the costs of producing weapons for one's own armed forces.