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| The American enterprise institute |
| International Arms Transfers |
| A Literature Review |
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| A review of the most cited studies on international arms transfers and their consequences. |

**Intro:**

International arms transfers have been one of the most critical aspects of international politics since the end of WWII when they were employed by the US and the USSR to influence the regional stability of Third World countries. Today, the United States is the largest exporter of arms in the world (SIRPI 2014), and President Obama has made it clear that he intends to continue using arms transfers as a way to achieve his foreign policy goals. However, it is important for us to gain a better understanding of the full impact of international arms transfers on recipient countries so that we can more closely examine the efficacy of our programs and reduce the negative externalities of arms transfers that so often befall the citizens of the recipient countries. Most existing literature on arms transfers falls into one of two categories: (1) How arms transfers affect state and regional stability (2) how superpowers (US & USSR) use arms transfers to influence smaller countries. This literature review will provide an overview of the existing literature and suggest unexplored avenues for original research.

1. **Stability vs. Instability:**

Many studies on the effects of arms transfers on stability contradict each other; some suggest that arms transfers dampen conflict and reduce the probability of coups (Wang 1998; Bobrow et al. 1973; Schrodt 1983) while other studies show that have shown that arms transfers catalyze conflicts, increase the probability of coups, and increase the length of military rule (Sanjian 1999; Wang 1998; Sherwin 1983; Schrodt 1983; Kiefer 1988). This makes it clear that conclusions about the effects of international arms transfers are not generalizable, which makes sense because there are so many country level political, sociological, and behavioral factors that cannot be easily modeled using empirical frameworks.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Empirical studies that focus on this Stability vs. Instability question have found that arms transfers are only “material causes” for instability, in that they provide the means for conflicts to be propagated. The “efficient causes” of conflict, on the other hand, are those factors that motivate state behavior, and they are likely to be found at the level of the state, not at the level of the international system. Furthermore, studies show that it is the characteristics of local actors—their preference orderings, power positions, and internal politics—that form the basis of a truly causal explanation of any instance of stability or instability, not arms transfers.

1. **Superpower Influence:**

A significant portion of the research dealing with international arms transfers focus on how superpowers (US, USSR, and China) can use arms transfers to influence smaller countries. Like the Stability vs. Instability literature, the results of many studies seems to conflict suggesting that the results of each any particular study are not generalizable. However, studies that do find that superpowers can influence smaller countries by using arms transfers stipulate that the smaller country must be dependent on only one superpower for the majority of its weapons imports and have limited capacity for arms production. Furthermore, studies show that it is unlikely that arms transfers make small countries pawns in a larger power struggle between superpowers; rather, it seems that the additional weapons only serve to solidify the distribution of power within a country or region and sometimes catalyze conflicts instead of actually *causing* the conflict themselves.

1. **Critiques of Existing Literature & Possible Avenues for Original Analysis**:

There is a surprising dearth of empirical research on the relationship between arms transfers and conflict. Even more surprising is the apparent lack of any disagreement on the subject. Everyone in the field recognizes that international politics are complicated and that results are not generalizable across countries. This widespread agreement that arms transfers can have a range of effects ensures that no single study or result is subjected to any sort of intense scrutiny that a result dealing with a more controversial study would. I believe this lack of controversy is directly responsible for the lack of literature on the subject and the lack of innovative questions being asked. However, it is also worth noting that the nature of the data makes it somewhat difficult to draw ironclad conclusions. First, the most readily available and reliable data on arms transfers deals specifically with the trade in “conventional weapons systems[[2]](#footnote-2).” However, of the 49 major conflicts that broke out between 1990 and 1998, light weapons were the only arms used in 46, and we continue to see this trend of the dominance of light weapons in major conflicts around the world today. Furthermore, since experts are sure that some nontrivial proportion of the light arms trade is unaccounted for since it takes place on the black market, so it is hard to make definitive statements about the relationship between the trade of light arms and conflict. Below are some suggestions that I think would make decent research questions for a paper on arms transfers:

1. Update the existing literature using data on new conflicts, superpowers (China), and previously unavailable data on the trade in light arms. You won’t be breaking any new ground here, but this kind of analysis might be more meaningful than a study of conventional arms since those aren’t actually used very often.
2. Look at how arms transfers affect the economies of the countries that are importing them. Often times the importers are developing nations that are prioritizing military strength over infrastructural investments. Could be a straightforward but interesting analysis of how arms transfers affect the welfare of citizens in these importing countries.
3. Analyze the relationship between the trade in light arms and human rights violations/terrorism in developing countries. These are two dependent variables that you do not see at all in the literature (at least not the economic literature) and would be especially relevant to the security conversations we are having today.

In conclusion, the conversation concerning arms trade is fairly stagnant since everyone understands that results are not generalizable and everyone is using the same data/empirical framework. However, this does not rule out the existence of an interesting research question.

1. This means that any study you do on the effects of arms transfers on the stability of a region will need to be focused specifically on supplier-client pairs of countries (i.e. How U.S. exports affected the Arab-Israeli conflict since the end of WWII). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Conventional Weapons Systems: aircraft, air defense systems, artillery, armored vehicles, engines, sensors, missiles, naval weapons, satellite, and ships. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)