

Théophile Galloy - 15 February 2022

Arming Ukraine, Understanding the Benefits and Risks of Arms Transfers

On 19 January 2022, the U.S. state department declared that it had allowed the United Kingdom, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to transfer NLAW, Javelin, and Stinger missiles to the Ukrainian army¹. At the time of writing, Ukraine has been fighting a war against pro-Russian separatist in Donbas and Crimea since February 2014 and has been observing a Russian military buildup on its borders throughout 2021. Due to the threat imposed by armored vehicles in this conflict, Ukraine has been requesting supplies of anti-material equipment, among which were missiles and drones. Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones had already made their way into Ukrainian arsenals and have already successfully been used against tanks^{2 3}. It is still impossible to know if, or to what extent, those arms will prove useful in repelling the threat, however it is safe to say that those weapon transfers are politically significant.

This paper intends to look at how international relations understand such weapon transfers, how they are militarily and politically motivated, the inherent risk of those policies, and how all of this applies to the Ukrainian crisis. This paper does not seek to make a judgement on the efficiency this policy will have in Ukraine compared to diplomatic channels, however it does make a case for a more forward-thinking applications of such transfers.

The power of weapons, tipping the balance of power

We will first look at why weapons appeal to states, the role they play in the realization of power, and how they affect contest outcomes and foreign policy goals.

The usefulness of weapons is obvious and nonetheless quite interesting. For political theorist Thomas C. Schelling, weapons have the underrated property of being able to *hurt*. With weapons, one gains the power to harm, to destroy. Pain is measurable, and has no real value, its only purpose is influencing be-

havior. “To be coercive, violence has to be anticipated. And it has to be avoidable by accommodation. The power to hurt is bargaining power”⁴. This power cannot be understated. On the balance of power, weapons are heavy metal weights.

Following a realist system, if a state’s survival in the international arena depends on its power, then weapons are tools of self-preservation. Possession of weapons allows for the production of violence, or the potential to cause serious grievances, both of which are quantifiable and valuable. To protect themselves, states have a natural need to acquire arms, distribute them to allies, and prohibit their distribution to rivals. According to Keith Krause, states desire weapons for wealth, power, and the pursuit of victory in war⁵.

War is where the capacity for grievance is realized, and survival is tested. In essence war is a contest, a zero-sum game, where opponents try to outbid each other on their capacity to inflict pain, and to tolerate it. Once an opponent proves incapable of outbidding or committing, war is lost. Game theorists model those war contests in what are called “contest functions”. These models can help illustrate how the perceived cost of war, the resolve of contestants, and their perceived chances of winning a given prize will define their motivation for war, peace, or a negotiated settlement⁶.

In such contests between belligerents, transferring weapons to one party will affect the outcome. A contestant that gains more power to hurt is not guaranteed to win, but will be able to inflict more pain, will have more resolve, and may incur less costs. The opponent is conversely more likely to lose and to pay a larger cost for war. This means a negotiated settlement will be more favorable for the arms recipient. Obviously, this model is very basic and makes several assumptions, but the simplicity allows us to see how adding weapons into a contest can change the result and affect foreign policy.

* **Théophile Galloy** graduated from CIFE’s Master in Advanced European and International Studies - Mediterranean Studies in 2019. His previous research focused on the role of railways in Middle Eastern state-building. He is a former information management consultant for the World Food Programme.

It bares mentioning that in war weapon quantity or quality do not matter as much as having the *right* weapon, the *right way* of maximizing pain. If natural selection is the process by which the most adapted survives, the same can hold true for weapons. In Isandhlwana on 22 January 1879, Zulu warriors armed with spears crushed a modernly equipped British army in a conventional battle. This means weapons do not play the same universal role and must be analyzed as a contest factor on a case-by-case basis.

Applied to our introductory situation, the missiles received by Ukraine are relatively cheap compared to the potential damage they could cause to Russia's expensive armored equipment, which makes such weapons strategically significant in this contest. This could theoretically increase the cost of fighting of Russia to the point that a negotiated solution will be more favorable to Ukraine now that its power to hurt is increased. This also means Russia's optimal moment to strike is before the arms are transferred.

Through this example we see how weapon transfers can give a state the tools to increase its power and chances of survival. This situation also demonstrates how weapons affect war outcomes, and therefore that weapon transfers are a useful foreign policy tool for actors wishing to influence international relations.

The history and political importance of weapon transfers

As we demonstrated, weapons are critical tools of statecraft, and supplying (or removing access to) weapons is an effective foreign policy tool for any actor wishing to alter the stakes of a conflict. However, the fact that those vital tools of statecraft are subject to transfers implies that the capacity to acquire weapons are not available equally to all states. So why must weapons be traded? And how do those transfers play into international relations and foreign policy?

The oldest references to an international arms market are in the bronze age. At that time weapons were mainly made of bronze, an alloy of tin and copper. Both metals were spread geographically around the Mediterranean and Asia, and almost never naturally present in the same area. This means a primitive global trade for strategic resources had to emerge for historical arms production⁷ ⁸. In the Old

Testament book of Ezekiel, Chapter 27, the city of Tyr is presented as a Mediterranean trade hub, where tin, copper and war horses are traded freely. This introduces us to a clear fact that still holds true with modern weapons: the raw materials for arms manufacturing were never distributed equally, thus creating comparative advantages that made trade of weapons necessary.

The technology for weapons manufacturing was also never distributed equally. Krause divides weapon producing capacities of states in 4 tiers that appear in any historical epoch. Tier 1 having the means to use and maintain weapons, Tier 2 for those with the means to reproduce weapons, Tier 3 for those with the means to adapt or refine weapons, and Tier 4 for states that can invent new weapons. Each being rarer than the former, and states will compete on gathering the resources to increase their position on the tier list⁹. This affects the direction of supply and demand on the market, as Tier 1 will be more interested in acquiring arms and arms training from Tiers 2, 3 & 4; Tier 2 will require arms and raw materials supplied by Tiers 2 & 3; and Tier 3 states will have more demand for weapons technology supplied by Tier 4. For Krause, the uneven repartition of weapon production capacities makes weapons a strategic commodity that states have a logical interest in controlling and restricting¹⁰. And we can find historical evidence of weapon trade restrictions as far back as 3rd century Byzantium, where people exporting iron, weapons or salt to enemies could be sentenced to death¹¹. Inversely we also can find many examples of states willing to pay a high price for weapons technology, like Italian city states who in the Middle Ages were looking to hire engineers capable of producing canons¹².

In our introductory example, we explained how Ukraine wanted to acquire modern missiles it had no means of producing. For the UK and the Baltic states to transfer those weapons, US trade restrictions had to be lifted. This demonstrates how the uneven weapons manufacturing capacities affects international power dynamics, where lower tiered actors will depend on the goodwill of other actors to acquire the weapons necessary for their survival. History provides many examples of how this imbalance drives foreign policy.

During the first world war, the UK supplied Arab tribes with weapons and explosives that allowed the

nationalist forces to defeat the Ottoman Empire¹³. France similarly supplied weapons to Zionist groups against the UK which eventually led to the end of the British mandate on Israel¹⁴. In both cases, the supplier transferred weapons to reduce the power of a geopolitical rival, and to gain influence over the victorious beneficiary. This technique was also very prevalent during the Cold War, with both the US and USSR covertly supplying arms to states and non-state proxies in South America, Africa, and Asia. The most infamous examples would be the \$2 billion of weapon aid supplied by the US to the mujahedeen fighting the soviets in Afghanistan throughout the 1980's¹⁵. Most notable of which being the 800 Stinger, 80 Tow, and 160 MILAN missile launchers which destroyed +400 Soviet aircrafts and contributed to the ultimate departure of USSR troops from Afghanistan. And although the actual extent of the missiles' contribution is debated, the Reagan administration's policy was clearly to increase soviet war costs and reduce resolve and perceived chances of victory¹⁶. This example partially mirrors the situation in Ukraine, and although we can make no predictions, we can at least understand the pre-existing logic behind the policies that still drive today's weapon transfers.

States with weapons manufacturing capabilities therefore have a clear advantage from exploiting their power. Depending on the interpretation of the UN Charter¹⁷, this solution is either illegal, or not, so there is nothing stopping foreign powers to keep using this foreign policy strategy¹⁸. Through weapon transfers, the beneficiary increases their potential for grievances and chances of winning and lowers the costs of fighting. As for the benefactor, they gain influence and potential deniability, avoid high direct conflict costs (in some case even makes a profit), and successfully disrupt rival state stability, interests, and influence. However, as we will see, this policy presents significant drawbacks.

The risks of weapon transfers

Even though weapon transfers appear as convenient and logical foreign policy tools, supplying belligerent states with weapons presents significant risks.

When transferring arms according to policy, the expectation is that the recipient will use the weapon in accordance with the goals and interests of the supplier's policy. However, this expectation can fail, and

with tools of violence, the consequences can be dire. Arms tend to mainly be transferred and used in situations of instability, such as war, where the central government of a state is at its weakest. In the absence of a strong central government, a country's rule of law may be lost and the potential for grievances is increased¹⁹, groups (ethnic, criminal, terrorist...) may then seek arms to pursue offensive or defensive interests. In 1990's Ukraine, following the fall of the Soviet Union, an estimated \$32 billion in arms were stolen from stockpiles and re-sold abroad²⁰. In the spring of 1997, civil unrest in Albania led to looting of military depots, and more than half a million stolen weapons and explosives. Many of those weapons then found themselves arming insurgent groups in Macedonia and Kosovo²¹.

Misused arms can go on to contribute to regional and global instability by supporting human rights abuses, criminal activities, or terrorism. According to an ICRC report, the increased availability of small arms in the hands of non-state actors, who are not bound by the rules of warfare and international humanitarian law, disproportionately creates civilian casualties, and creates a dangerous environment for aid workers²². Available literature is clear on the role of small arms in terrorism, civil war, criminal activities, and global insecurity. It is critical to understand that the illegal gun market is supplied by the legal market. Corrupt government officials, weapon vendors, or unscrupulous gun owners will fuel the black market with previously legal products. The existence of a well-supplied black market is facilitated in countries with weak government and facing internal violence²³.

As for modern military technology, any hardware that cannot be used or maintained, or any surplus, would be better off sold as black-market merchandise. Stolen military hardware can be profitable, as black-market arms sales avoid regulations and taxation²⁴. Conventional weapons can also have a strong intelligence value for any foreign power interested in studying or reverse engineering military technology. In 2005 US defense investigators intercepted stolen F-14 fighter-jet parts heading for Iran. Since then, the Pentagon has been systematically destroying retired fighter jets²⁵. More recently the weapons depots that were raided by Taliban in Afghanistan will probably also see some equipment, like Blackhawk helicopters, sold to the highest bidder, for the benefit of Taliban cash reserves²⁶.

We can then surmise that the same thing could happen in Ukraine. The current instability could allow some weapons and technology to get lost or stolen, and may find their way into hostile hands, who could turn them against those they were meant to protect. This is what happened with over half of the missile launchers sent in the 1980's to Afghanistan. Most were sold on the black market, given to Iran, lost, or used in future wars and terrorist attacks all over the world²⁷.

Beyond the significant issue of increased unrestricted arms circulation, weapon transfers present the additional drawback of not precluding retaliation against the delivering party. Even if the transfer occurs in covert operations, the rival party may still figure out the origin of the aid, which could upset future relations. In the case of 1980's Afghanistan, the US and Pakistan initially were reluctant to supply Stinger missiles, fearing both regional and global repercussion, such as soviet invasion of Pakistan, arms transfers to anti-American militias in south America, the stingers falling into enemy hands, or the breakdown of nascent peace negotiations in Afghanistan²⁸. Referring back to our introductory example, the German government has, up to now, refused to supply Ukraine with any defensive weapons, claiming this could lead to the breakdown of a preferable diplomatic process²⁹. It must also be pointed out that the former US restrictions on arms transfers to Ukraine were motivated by a similar policy of non-escalation, and to avoid having the technology fall into enemy hands³⁰.

We can then see how arms transfers policies present significant risks for the supplier, the beneficiary, and for global security. A single weapon is cheap and can cause very expensive damage.

Conclusion

Weapon transfers are likely to prove effective in shaping international relations, though the significant risks involved means states must look beyond the direct expected results of their policies. Weapon transfers have costly and semi-predictable indirect consequences as they find themselves in the hands of secondary or tertiary users. It ultimately boils down to a risk/benefit calculation for policy makers. Though the topic is military in nature, the political nature of arms means that context, culture, individual interests, and many other factors may prove deciding.

In the case of Ukraine, policy makers involved on this crisis must imperatively consider those possibilities and do the utmost to limit those risks through long term engagement, intelligence work, and more forward-thinking policy making. Deciders enabling the weapon transfers, whether they be military, intelligence, businesses, or civil servants, must be held responsible for the long-term outcomes of their involvement. Looking at historical cases can also inform policymakers of the pitfalls to avoid and may lead to more rational weapon transfers.

References:

- 1 Andrea Shalal, 20 January 2022, "[US clears Baltic state to send US-made weapons to Ukraine](#)" Reuters. Last visited 27 January 2022
- 2 Al Monitor, 27 October 2021 "[Ukraine uses Turkish drone for first time against pro-Russian Forces](#)" Al-Monitor. Last visited 27 January 2022
- 3 Selcan Hacaoglu and Marc Champion, 3 December 2021 "[Ukraine angers Russia by buying Turkish drones and wants to get its hands on more](#)" Bloomberg. Last visited 27 January 2022
- 4 Thomas C. Schelling, 1966, *Arms and Influence*, USA, Yale University, p1-2
- 5 Keith Krause, 1992, *Arms of the State: Patterns of Military Production and Trade*, UK, Cambridge University Press
- 6 William Spaniel, 2012, "[Game Theory 101: The Rationality of War](#)" CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. Chapter 2.
- 7 Earle et al., May 2015, "[The Political Economy and Metal Trade in Bronze Age Europe: Understanding Regional Variability in Terms of Comparative Advantages and Articulations](#)" in *European Journal of Archeology*
- 8 Tom Metcalfe, 29 September 2019, "[Bronze age tin from Israeli shipwrecks was mined in Britain](#)", *Chemistry World*, Last visited 13 December 2021
- 9 26 Greg Myre & Scott Newman, 21 August 2021 "[How Valuable Are The U.S. Weapons The Taliban Just Captured?](#)", NPR, last visited 12 December 2021.
- 10 Keith Krause, 1992, *Arms of the State: Patterns of Military Production and Trade*, UK, Cambridge University Press
- 11 Angeliki E. Laiou, 2004, *Monopoly and Privileged Free Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean (8 th -14 th century)*, Paris, Editions de la Sorbonne

- 12 Angelo Angelucci, 1862, *Delle artiglierie da fuoco italiane, memorie storiche con documenti inedita*, Torino, Tipografia editrice G. cassone e comp, P17
- 13 14 James Barr, 2011, *A Line in the Sand*, UK, Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
- 15 18 19 20 23 24 25 Rachel Stohl & Suzette Grillo, 2009, *The International Arms Trade*, UK, Polity Press
- 16 27 28 Kuperman, A. J. , 1999. “*The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan*”. *Political Science Quarterly*, 114(2), 219–263.
- 17 United Nations Charter, Chapter VII, available at <https://legal.un.org/repertory/art39.shtml>
- 21 Center for Peace and Disarmament Education & Saferworld, December 2005, “*Turning the Page: Small arms and light weapons in Albania*” Last visited 13 December 2021
- 22 International Committee of the Red Cross, 1999, *Arms availability and the situation of civilians in armed conflict*, ICRC publication ref 0734
- 29 Nikolaus J. Kurmayer and Oliver Noyan, 18 January 2022 “*Germany continues blocking arms export to Ukraine due to new foreign peace policy*” Euractiv.com. Last visited 27 January 2022
- 30 Ken Dilanian, 22 November 2019, “*Former CIA Director: We worried arming Ukraine would hand technology to Russian spies*”. NBC News. Last visited 27 January 2022