

Is “arms trade” immoral?

By peace_student@hotmail.com

Arms trade has been a big debate in international society. In relation to conflict, arms trade is criticised in the field of humanitarian operations and development assistance. One of the main concerns in the debate is its morality. This essay will revolve around the debate of arms trade from the various points of view to understand how arms trade is considered by different sectors.

The arms market in the world is enormous. According to *the Military Balance* (IISS 2003), the total value of arms deliveries in 2001 was US\$21.3billions. The main suppliers are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, China, and other politically influential states. The largest supplier states are the US with 45% of market share, secondly the UK 18.8%, and thirdly Russia 16.9%.

In general, arms trade includes any types of weapons from conventional arms (e.g. combat tanks and missiles) to small arms defined as ‘weapons that an individual can carry’ (Menon.2001), such as handguns, machineguns, rifles, and anti-personnel mines. This essay mainly focuses on the trade of small arms for the reason that unlike conventional arms, they are easy to be stolen, concealed and operated by civilians. Moreover, ‘small arms have been called ‘weapons of mass destruction’ because they have been primary weapons used in killings of thousands of people in conflicts’ (Wezeman 2003). Therefore, it is worth particularly focusing on the trade of small arms.

The background of the debate on arms trade is that a growing number of humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have pointed out that small arms contribute to conflict and are obstacles to development. Humanitarian NGOs have claimed that the proliferation of small arms in conflict and post-conflict areas has direct and indirect effects on people in the process of both conflict resolution and development. Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) points out that small arms are potential that refugees and internally-displace persons will be involved in unintentional/intentional injury and death. Moreover, they prevent people from access to public goods and community cohesion throughout development process (Griffiths 2003). Amnesty International also reports that '59.2% of the world's small arms are privately owned and they play a key role in perpetuating abuse of international human rights and international law' (Amnesty 2003). Therefore, small arms are today regarded as obstacles to humanitarian operations and development (Griffiths 2003). In addition, Western arms industry is facing a strong critique against its trade mechanism. It is that 'arms trade involves networking in the world'. 'Profit of the trade flow back to the West, but transaction does not come under EU territorial jurisdiction' (Duffield 2002:200). Such a mechanism of arms trade has also been a ground for the critique.

While critiques mentioned above are reasonable, there are also plausible justifications for arms trade which advocate buyer states/rebels, supplier governments, and arms industry. First, states have a right to self-defence by importing arms from abroad. States also need to modernise their military for their defence. It can be said that these are one part of sovereignty. Second, for supplier government, arms transfer through the market is one of their foreign policies. In terms of foreign strategy, arms transfer creates ties

between states. For example, arms transfer from the US to Israel strengthens the relationships between them. In reality, such military relations are one of the most important foreign policies of governments. Finally, arms industry can generate jobs to people in a country and advance technology. Especially, governments and arms industry shares two common interests. First, it is that governments prefer to maintain a sufficient or surplus national security capacity by combining consumption and export of arms. On the other hand, in order to support itself, the industry prefers further market outside the country whose domestic demand is low. Second, it is the advancement of technology. While governments are generally concerned to minimum quality of military equipment applied to the standard of international society, the industry pursues further technology for the market interest (Buzan 1991:353-5).

It is also worth noting the international regime of arms trade in order to comprehend how international society, especially the UN, regards the trade. In 1998, the UNSC adopted a resolution that considered small arms and light weapons as an important cause of conflict (UNSC 1998). Other UN agencies also show concerns with small arms. For instance, UNDP clearly shows their concern with small arms as an obstacle to sustainable development (UNDP 2003), and UNICEF claims the fact that light and simple-structure small arms turn young children into soldiers (UNICEF 2003). Under such a circumstance, the UN has established some international frame works related to arms trade. The most representative is *Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and light Weapons in All Its Aspect* (UN 2001). However, this framework aims to *illicit* trade, not to prohibit all the arms trade. In one sense, it has legitimised *legal* arms trade. Moreover, the framework cannot always cover

issues of small arms for the reason of features of small arms which are easily stolen and elude monitoring (Rana 1995:5). Hence, the international framework is not always effective to prevent the proliferation of small arms.

From the pacifist's point of view, 'arms trade is equal to kill people indirectly.' Moreover, they will think that supplier states and arms industry 'benefit from death of others' (WCC 1993:22). On the other hand, realists may view that arms trade is a part of market system that composes the world system. This contrast of the two different appraisals may imply the very core of the debate.

Here I quote Singer's idea (1991:13-5), fundamentally based on utilitarianism which considers all interests of all, that tries to find people's common interests regardless of the universality of morality. From his point of view, the prohibition of arms trade can be interpreted as common interest of people, including both suppliers and buyers, in the North and the South. In this context, arms trade can be *immoral* because arms trade results in wrong consequences that bring about insecurity to every actor involved in the trade as already mentioned above. This is, of course, on assumption that supplier actors realise what is caused by arms trade, such as flow of refugees as a result of instability in the South. In fact, it can be said that such a perspective is found in today's international community. Duffield (2002:22-43) suggests the recent merger of human security and development which is so-called 'global governance'. Applying his idea to the small arms debate, there is a possibility that the prevention of the arms proliferation will be regarded as common interest of every actor both in the North and South. This is because arms supply that has been regarded by advocates as the *good* will change its sense of

value in the context of global governance. In addition, being pragmatic as utilitarianism and taking account of various aspects of arms trade examined so far, it emerges that the question '*Is arms trade immoral?*' itself is not appropriate for small arms issues, since it can be said that a bilateral character of arms trade, as a factor of *security* and *insecurity*. It is not a moral issue but rather a conventional security dilemma between adversaries. In reality, debaters of arms trade mainly argue the dangerous nature of small arms indirectly or directly deriving from the trade.

In conclusion, arms trade is now becoming recognised as 'problem' by both the North and South. Furthermore, the idea of global governance reflects the paradigm shift of the concept of security challenging the conventional military-based peace. In this context, the awareness of the broad definition of stability is also changing the value of the *good* for people in different sectors regardless of the universality of morality. Therefore, the question '*Is arms trade immoral?*' is a very conventional debate and does not reflect the recent one in the present international community. Moreover, such a question may blind us to the nature of the problems of arms trade debate. Suppose utilitarianism can be the standard of morality in a sense, the answer of the question '*Is arms trade immoral?*' could be YES. However, arms trade controversy today is a further broader debate involving changes in the concepts of security and development. In reality, the clue to the solution is very pragmatic regardless of the universality of morality related to arms trade. Therefore, morality is no longer the core of the debate.

(1408 words)

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