

Thesis critique by Tomáš Kopečný

Marek Štrbák: *International Arms Trade: U.S., Sweden and Russia*

The thesis takes a topic of arms trade from a rather understudied perspective of the arms and weapon systems producers and exporters. The studied country cases of USA, Sweden and Russia are well chosen and provide a good opportunity to contrast and compare major aspects of the countries' policies and approaches towards their defence industries with regards to the international arms trade. However, the overall execution of this ambition is stained by several important pitfalls. A poor use of English grammar is making the whole work less digestible and comprehensible than it could be. Even more importantly though, the thesis lacks a clear direction and doesn't offer answers to what has been set as its main goals. At the same time, it still manages to provide a useful guidance to an original topic with lots of practical examples and good understanding of certain aspects of the research area.

The lack of proper English is indeed regrettable. Grammar mistakes can be counted in their hundreds, basically being on almost every page. Some expressions or grammar forms (especially conjunctions) do not make a lot of sense in the context being used. In combination, the whole text needs a thorough reading at the end of which, sometimes, it is not understandable, thus undermining whatever good ideas or intentions the research could have brought up.

I fully support the ambition to use the work as a contribution to the existing international research. However, it will have serious troubles reaching an audience under such state of written language. My recommendation would be to let the whole work be corrected by a native speaker.

Another important pitfall is the overall direction, aim and structure of the thesis with regards to its compatibility and clarity. First of all, the main goal is stated to be a research of the functioning of arms trade since the post Cold War of the three selected countries with a special focus ("the most discussed and measured") on the past five years between 2013 and 2017 (p. 2). It is not clear though, what should we imagine under this intensified discussions and measurement since it is not clearly stated or reflected in the text.

The main research questions are "What are the current trends (situation) and future of the international arms trade in the U.S., Sweden and Russia? How does the arms trade differ in these countries?" The very formulation of trends (situation) is rather confusing, let alone the ambition to suggest the future of the topic. A crucial problem of the thesis is in lacking a clear answer to what has been stated as the first primary research question. The trends are not clearly identified, the suggested future unconvincing. On the other hand, the differences in arms trade practices are well presented and put in a broader perspective.

Two other secondary questions ("What are the main differences in the historical, societal perspective and character of defense industrial base between these countries? What are the typical forms of conducting the arms trade in these countries?") were directly dealt with individually and with a lesser success also in comparison of the countries. However, a third secondary question ("Is the arms trade dynamics of the chosen countries mainly driven by the realist theory?") has been discussed and resolved in a rather unsatisfying manner. The thesis only offers a limited thought that the arms trade is driven by realism „because the states are seeking more hard power (ensure by arms) for their protection as well as for more prestige and in order to preserve their power and economic status“.



Sometimes, the understanding of the topics is overshadowed by oversimplified statements that make little sense (e.g. “trade of small arms causes 90% of civilian casualties”, (p.1) - The trade itself doesn’t cause casualties, it could be and is caused also by small arms not subject to international trade which is the subject of research).

In other cases, out-of-nowhere conclusions appear with no logical explanation (eg. “Finally, it can be concluded that the foreign policy motivates the selling to particular states.” (p.8) – It might well be true but there is no single quotation in the whole paragraph, neither an argumentation or empirical evidence.) With no quotation or empirical evidence, some arguments provided by the author seem utterly confusing and misplaced (eg. “This method is questionable especially in the case of the Middle East, where the arms once used by U.S. or Russian (former USSR) partners or proxies were later used for terrorist purposes.” (p.8)). Examples of such unquoted and unexplained dubious statements occur many times over the text (e.g. p. 10-11, p. 18, p. 35, p. 36 (repeated yet unexplained notion of Swedish feminist policy or politics?), p. 55.

The structure is well designed with five areas being monitored in each country case. Unfortunately, a selective nature of the data provided is not only causing imbalance between the same sections of different countries and thus making them hard to compare, but also missing on very important topics in some of them. The suggested comparison itself is in certain cases (p.48-49) more of an assembly of unrelated cases than a proper comparison.

On the other hand, the thesis also possesses quality for which it is worth further exploring and improving. It captures well basic concepts of international arms trade while critically assessing individual notions. (p. 5) It offers a solid typology of arms producers (p. 7-8), but unfortunately doesn’t use it in its own research. It also provides a very well worked out and contextualized structure of the major defence industrial actors on the business side (p. 13-14). Many important trends in the individual countries’ policies, historical developments and industries are captured with a solid knowledge of the affairs. Practically all chapters on the territorial dimension of export activities are covering both the trends and details and thus offering a valid overview of the subject matter.

The main problem of the work (besides grammar) is in its too ambitious research goals. By setting up five research questions and managing to only answer to three of them in a satisfying manner, it has diminished its own quality as a whole.

With what has been submitted, I suggest grade C. However, should the student answer the below mentioned questions well, I would recommend the grade B/C.

Questions and suggestions for the thesis defence:

1. Provide a clear and definitive answer to all five of your research questions.
2. To complete some of the missing important information in the country analyses, what are the main areas of defence industrial production in Russia after WW II? What are the major companies in defence sector in Russia today? Limiting the answer to only small arms and shortly mentioning some fighter jets and one air defence system is unsatisfying.
3. What were some of the biggest controversies of Swedish defence industrial export activities of the past two decades?

