

The Need for an International Regime on Conventional Arms:  
A Study of Russia, China, the United States and the  
World of Arms Transfers

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IDL Conference  
April 2005

For the past four decades, Russia and the United States have been at the forefront of disarmament and non-proliferation efforts. From bilateral agreements like the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), SALT I, and SALT II to multilateral agreements such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the United States and Russia have worked together to promote transparency and understanding to establish a safer and more secure world order. However, the structure of the international community has changed since the Cold War to one in which bilateral agreements between Russia and the United States are no longer sufficient to reduce global armament and arms proliferation. New players have come onto the scene, some of which, like China, undermine the goals of Russian-American cooperation by selling nuclear and conventional weapons and technology. In this essay, I argue that ad hoc bilateral agreements are an insufficient tool in protecting the security interests of Russia, the United States and the international community as a whole. I will examine the domestic and international consequences of such arms trade in an attempt to show that the benefits of weapons trade are not only less than the global social cost, but more pertinently, less than the domestic social costs. When such Pareto-optimal outcomes cannot be achieved through uncoordinated individual calculations of self-interest and autonomous action, an international regime can be effective (Keohane 1982). I hope to show through a brief study of Sino-Russian arms trade that current conventional arms trade exhibits such Pareto-inefficiency and consequently an international regime dedicated to conventional arms trade could serve to fix these imbalances and eradicate inefficiencies that plague the international system.

### **Conventional Arms Trade: The US, Russia, and China**

There are currently various bilateral agreements and multilateral organizations that deal with specific aspects of arms trade. For example, the United Nations sponsors a

disarmament committee that submits recommendations on reducing arms proliferation. The UN also put forth an agreement on Transparency in Armaments that requires UN member states to submit data on the number of arms exported or imported to their territory in the previous calendar year. There are regional agreements, such as the Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSCE/OSCE) for Europe and the Program for Coordination and Assistance for Security and Development in Africa (PCASED). Other agreements like the Convention on Conventional Weapons or the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) tackle the problem of only a select few conventional weapons.<sup>1</sup> Finally, there are multitude agreements that are weakly and indirectly related to conventional arms' regulations by dealing predominantly with WMD like the Australia Group, CTBT, CWC and the BWC.

The aforementioned agreements collectively address the different aspects of conventional arms trade like security instability, transparency, restrictions on certain arms exports, but no regime exists that addresses all relevant issues and with the support of all relevant actors. Furthermore, the agreements that have been reached exist within the framework of larger regimes like the United Nations or the NPT and therefore tend to take a second seat to the core missions of these organizations. The Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies, in the author's opinion, is the only agreement with realistic potential to become an all-encompassing international conventional weapons regime.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, because many serial proliferators like China are not members and the importation of arms from member nations is not predicated on membership, the regime fails to adequately meet the necessary standards for effective international regulation of conventional arms trade.

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of CCW, landmines, laser weapons and incendiary weapons; in the case of MTR, missile and missile-related technology.

<sup>2</sup> Information in this paragraph on various regimes obtained at [www.fas.org](http://www.fas.org).

In contrast to the progress made in the realm of nuclear weapons, Russia and the United States have yet to take formidable steps to reducing their conventional arms proliferation. In 2003, the United States and Russia were the leaders in worldwide arms trade, collectively constituting the vast majority (75.3%) of all international arms transfer agreements in 2003.<sup>3</sup> However, from 2000-2003 the United States, followed by Russia, was the leader in global conventional arms agreements and deliveries (CRS Report) to developing countries.<sup>4</sup> Because of their great influence in the arms trade market as well as their political influence, a successful regime would need their full support. Arms transfers in and of themselves are not “bad”; all countries possess the right to defend themselves. An effective security force is generally required for such a defense and arms are an important component. An international regime would, however, ensure that no transactions would lead to arms races or shifts in the balance of power towards a new status quo conducive to civil and international conflict. It is within this analytical framework of determining both the costs and the benefits of arms transfers as a political and economic endeavor that I explore how an international regime may serve a country’s national interests.

China’s military modernization, especially in the form of hardware procurement and mobilization has been an explicit policy goal since the Deng Xiaoping Era. Consequently, China is ranked first among developing nations as a purchaser of conventional arms (9.3 billion) in 2000-2003. As demonstrated in appendix one, Russia is China’s number one supplier.<sup>5</sup> Russia has sold a variety of military equipment to China, most of which is

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<sup>3</sup> CRS Report for Congress 2004; Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations 1996-2003, p10. Such agreements valued at 14.5 billion dollars for the United States and 4.3 billion dollars for Russia

<sup>4</sup> Here developing nations mean all countries except Russia, Australia, Japan, Canada, the United States, New Zealand and European Nations. The data for agreements is as follows: US: 35.8 billion dollars; Russia: 21.1 billion dollars in constant 2003 US dollars

<sup>5</sup> SIPRI Yearbook 2004

indisputably offensive in nature. Russian arms export companies like Rosobornoexport have sold everything from 24 Su-30 MKK multi-role fighter aircraft to Sovremenny-class destroyers equipped with sunburn anti-ship missiles to China. Negotiations are currently underway to sell to China Tu-95MS and Tu-22MZ, which have the capability of carrying nuclear weapons. From another perspective, 90% of all Chinese arms expenditures end up in Russia.

### **Arms sales as an economic endeavor:**

In most cases, arms trade is an extremely lucrative business and is used to stimulate the economy and promote economic development. Russia gains much in economic benefits from the aforementioned arms trade agreements with China. The government perceives arms transfers as a way to raise capital or as a barter arrangement to repay international debt.<sup>6</sup> In 1996, through aggressively promoting their products throughout the world, Russia managed to capture a client base to 51 countries. As a result, Russian arms exports have doubled in the past 5 years, reaching US\$5.12 billion dollars in 2004. In theory, the defense industry is creating jobs for the Russian people as well as stimulating the Russian economy. Because there are hardly any domestic orders for these materials, China's consumption of Russian arms is key to maintaining Russia's defense industry as well as providing them with funds for the research and development necessary to rehabilitate Russia's own military prowess.<sup>7</sup>

However, many of these alleged economic benefits of arms trade to Russia are to a great degree controversial and uncertain. Even though Russian arms exports have doubled in the past 5 years, reaching 5.12 billion in 2004, the economic benefits are greatly distorted.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Russia: Foreign Arms Sales: [http://www.russiansabroad.com/russian\\_history\\_345.html](http://www.russiansabroad.com/russian_history_345.html)

<sup>7</sup> Lague, David and Lawrence, Susan V. *In Guns We Trust*. The Far Eastern Economic Review, Dec 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Golts, Aleksandr. *Arming the World: Russia's Lethal Exports*. The Yezhenedelny, Feb 2005, p1.

The fact that Russian arms traders focus on sales volumes instead of profits is indicative of the small size of the actual profit margin. Golts posits that because of Soviet-style production of arms, that is the defense industry produces a wide array of products instead of producing a limited variety efficiently, arms exports are unprofitable for the economy as a whole, though it is quite lucrative for individual exporters.<sup>9</sup> Though much more research needs to be done, it is quite possible that economic resources are diverted to the less unprofitable arms industry that could be used in a more efficient manner to increase production and still ensure national security.

Furthermore, the wealth accumulated through arms sales is extremely concentrated. Rosoboronexport accounted for about 90% of sales<sup>10</sup> which is indisputably a large enough market share to be labeled a monopoly (which are inefficient in their own right). The rights to this monopoly and the concentration of wealth are perfect conditions for breeding political corruption that can undermine any benefits to economic development of arms trade. Arms manufacturers have great political power and consolidate their influence to push towards policies that are beneficial to them.<sup>11</sup> The political power of economic groups with a collective interest in arms exports is not unique to Russia. Even within the US, who is adamantly opposed to weapons transfers to China, arms manufacturing companies lobby for a share in the profits from Chinese arms expenditures. An international regime can help leaders to fight the political corruption closely tied to arms trade that causes the deterioration of the political system. An international regime would provide domestic leaders with the leverage (and a scapegoat) to work against arms manufacturing companies when necessary.

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<sup>9</sup> Golts, p2.

Russia Defies US Pressure on International Arms Sales:  
<http://www.mosnews.com/news/2005/02/10/armstrade.shtml>

In addition, in many cases it is not politically viable for nations to accept bilateral conditions relating to arms transfers because it is seen as catering to another power. Within an international forum, when leaders decide that the cost to their reputation and credibility in the international community is too high, they can restrict arms trade without looking weak. On the contrary, such leaders could benefit politically by portraying their nation as a strong and respectable country that honors their international commitments. An international regime could therefore not only reduce the domestic influence of arms manufacturing companies, inhibit domestic corruption related to arms trade, but also creates disincentives for unsound economic development policy.

**Arms sales as a political endeavor:**

Arms sales and transfers are often used to strengthen relations with another country or expand a sphere of influence. Many governments see arms exports as an instrument that can be used to achieve certain foreign policy objectives. For example, granting access to certain technologies may help strengthen bilateral relations between two states or reduce the burden on one state of protecting the other state. Conversely, denying access to particular items may be interpreted as a signal of a problem in a bilateral relationship. The United States holds fast to this doctrine, providing large arsenals of weapons to strategic allies such as Egypt, Israel, Taiwan and NATO members. During the 1980s, the Soviet Union followed the same doctrine, transferring without payment, on credit or on a barter basis \$20 billion dollar worth of military equipment and technology per year to Soviet allies<sup>12</sup>. Just last month, when the EU voted to lift the arms embargo against China, the main reason cited by EU nations to lift

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<sup>12</sup> Russia Defies US Pressure on International Arms Sales:  
<http://www.mosnews.com/news/2005/02/10/armstrade.shtml>

the embargo was to strengthen general commercial relations with Beijing.<sup>13</sup> Russia is also very explicit about promoting cooperation with China through arms deals. Though Russia has in the past had strong reservations about transferring advanced military technology to such an unpredictable neighbor, perhaps it is because of these worries that Russia has sought to decrease tensions through arms trade.

If indeed Sino-Russian arms deals create the positive externality of a stronger strategic partnership like it appears, we would expect this partnership to continue despite changes to the economic market of arms trade. China has purchased arms from Russia in the past decade because few other countries were willing to sell to China after the Tiananmen incident. Most of the weapons being sold are old Soviet military hardware that in quality cannot compare to more modern weapons systems.<sup>14</sup> Once the EU lifts the arms embargo on China, as they are predicted to do, China will have numerous other sources from which to purchase their military equipment. From this scenario, if the arms sales were indeed a manifestation of a deeper strategic relationship, China would continue to buy weapons from Russia to preserve this relationship. Though arms sales did benefit the Russian-Chinese relationship, I predict that these benefits will probably prove transitory and not transcend beyond a buyer-seller relationship.

More importantly, if arms transfers do build an enduring relationship between Russia and China, Russia must consider the consequences of arming a potential rival. Though Chinese proliferation activities and their military build-up are currently more cause for concern for the United States, border concerns for Russia and antagonisms from the Cold War should also cause Russia to be concerned about China as a potential rival. Though

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<sup>13</sup> Lobe, Jim. *EU Decision to Delay China Arms Sales Big Win for Bush*.

<sup>14</sup> Lunev, Stanislav. *Russia Steps up Arms Sales*. May 24, 2000.

Russia's relationship with China has perhaps ameliorated due to the arms trade between the two countries, it is important for Russia to remember that China has historically (and still does) view Russia as a strategic competitor. Competition between the two nations for influence and control over the regions that are Russia's far east has existed for centuries, and is likely to resurface.<sup>15</sup> The doctrine of China since the Deng Era is to avoid war for 50 years to make room for economic development. Though China has recently cooperated to resolve border disputes, this strategy could prove to only be temporary. China's actions to a great degree are unpredictable; it is uncertain who China's future biog buyers will be and how it may affect Russia's national security. The United States, perhaps more so than any country, understands the costs of support an ally that could potential turn enemy in the future.

Many countries understand that arms sales breeds distrust and complicates relations with those countries not involved in the transfer and would prefer to avoid trade-offs that involve weapons. Because of the unpredictability of other nations' actions and intentions and the domestic issues listed earlier, it is in every nation's interest to participate in an arms control regime which reduces the proliferation of conventional arms, increases the transparency of such transfers, and makes the purchase of arms contingent on one's standing in the international regime. Arms transfers for international political favor are against state interests if there is a chance for future conflict. In many cases, the countries themselves are coerced into such agreements because of their need to secure agreements in other areas. An international regime would remove arms sales as a tool and obligation in relations between nations. Though arms trade can be very attractive, less armament and proliferation of arms to other nations with their own strategic interests is equally as enticing. In short, if the international community moved together to reduce the stress of arms transfers in strategic

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<sup>15</sup> Lague, p.3.

alliances, there would be less temptation to use arms transfers to prove one's loyalty and ensure one's national security.

### **Sovereignty vs. responsibility: International regimes and reciprocity**

The Nuclear Proliferation Treaty recognizes a country's right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy only if they fulfill their responsibilities under the NPT. In order to reduce armament and arms races, conventional arms transfers should follow a similar framework. Just like the NPT, one would not be forced to be a signatory, but then, as in the case of China, countries who are not signatories would be barred from acquiring weapons. Currently, the various agreements and initiatives that have potential to become an all-encompassing regime have not succeeded in increasing the costs and difficulty of non-signatories relative to signatories in acquiring military technology, China being a prime example of this failure.

Though trade with China may be legitimate from an international law perspective, China is either not a signatory or in noncompliance with international agreements on arms proliferation. While Russia is a signatory of the OSCE Criteria on Conventional Arms Transfers as well as the Wassenaar Agreement and suffers politically even when they make legal, but unfavorable arms trade decisions, China is free from all such international obligations. China stresses its sovereignty at the expense of international security, refusing for example to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) which requires more stringent full-safeguards as a condition of supply.<sup>16</sup> In some instances the United States will put sanctions on China, but with less and less support by other countries to follow suit, sanctions are proving to be a less and less effective method.

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<sup>16</sup> DeSutter, p5.

As noted, China has an abysmal record of noncompliance with most of the non-proliferation multilateral agreements they are part of. China has either sanctioned or ignored serial proliferators such as the China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO) and CPMIEC, making China fourth among suppliers of arms from 1999-2003. China sold 7.3 billion dollars worth of weapons that year to many countries, including those that seek to destabilize the international system. Though it is difficult to assess the severity of the problem, it is indisputable that China has become a key exporter of WMD and missile technology. Frequently disseminated unconfirmed reports indicate that Beijing has cooperated with Iran, Algeria, Syria and Iraq by offering up nuclear and chemical know-how as well as materials.<sup>17</sup> The investigation of Pakistan's A.Q. Khan network proved that China had aided Pakistan with their nuclear weapons program, thereby violating the NPT to which they are a signatory. Furthermore, Chinese has repeatedly gone against their commitments, most notable the MTCR, and provided missile technology to Pakistan, North Korea, Libya, Syria. Another cause for concern is China's role in providing chemical weapons related technology, equipment and precursor materials to Iran.<sup>18</sup>

There is a weak, if existent, link between a country's proliferation activities and their ability to acquire arms. China is not committed to cooperating internationally in the arena of arms transfers and has no qualms about imposing the consequences of its subjective decisions on the international community.<sup>19</sup> The international community needs to have a framework in which to hold countries accountable for de-stabilizing international security

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<sup>17</sup> Yee, Herbert and Storey, Ian (editors). The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002, p322.

<sup>18</sup> DeSutter, p5.

<sup>19</sup> Many might reference the United States' failure to sign the Kyoto Protocol as also being internationally irresponsible and imposing their will on other nations. The scenario is quite different however; China does believe that such regimes that infringe on sovereignty should never exist, while the United States firmly believes in protecting the environment in an international manner, but was opposed to the *framework* in which such a goal was to be carried out.

through the transfer of conventional arms. China refuses to sign the Wassenaar agreement or partake in existing arms control regimes because they “infringe” on China’s sovereignty.

Why should other nations have to give up a piece of their sovereignty in the name of international security only to be subjected to China’s strategic interests?

Therefore it is important from both a Russian and American national security perspective that countries like China who have proven themselves irresponsible in the international community and whose strategic goals may be potentially threatening to Russia and the US, to be somewhat constrained in their proliferation of arms and in their own armament. A forum on conventional arms would promote transparency of dealings and allow countries to discuss their security concerns with one another. This would ensure that military build-ups are indeed purely defensive, thereby minimizing the likelihood of a security threat emerging. The NPT was enacted because of the universal belief that the proliferation of nuclear weapons would only serve to threaten countries’ national security, not enhance it. Conventional arms races can be just as destructive and spiral into conflict just like the build-up of nuclear weapons can.

For any progress to be made on disarmament and arms proliferation, all countries, especially serial proliferators like China, need to be on board. Currently such countries do not put great value on their reputation and role in the international community; it might require significant diplomatic pressure to induce them to comply. Any international regime on conventional arms trade needs to reflect the underlying power structure of the international community in order to sustain itself. Furthermore, such a regime would require all countries who currently capture a significant amount of market share in arms trade and have advanced technologies (the five members of the Security Council or the G8 for example)

to be signatories and leaders of such an agreement in order to provide the appropriate incentives and disincentives for participation and compliance. Therefore, because of their role in the arms market, the Security Council and their overall political influence, Russia and the United States need to move to the forefront in promoting such a regime.

### **Why go international? Some concluding notes**

Currently many different international bodies occupy themselves with the trade of conventional arms. However, the international community needs a single forum in which they can consolidate all their concerns and their needs; one that is solely dedicated to the fight against arms proliferation so conventional arms exports are not cast aside in order to negotiate what is perceived as more important agreements. As explored above, in the world of arms trade, economic and political forces both play a part in determining the final outcome of arms trade agreements. A uniform forum in which countries can negotiate with one another would facilitate the fulfillment of countries' needs without undermining the security of other nations. Linking issues in negotiation can be a valuable way of reducing the global negative externalities of certain arms agreements and of creating more flexibility in addressing the security needs and concerns of countries.

Arms trade is a market that exhibits huge economic and political externalities and therefore requires more extensive regulation. Above, I have briefly discussed some potential costs and benefits of arms trade to the home country and how a regime can serve to shift the interests of a country towards sound economic and political policies. The benefit of an international regime is that it allows for the internalization of the negative externalities the international community experiences from certain bilateral arms transfers by inflicting costs on nations whose actions are inflicting costs on the international community. This

internalization would provide clarity on the merit or shortcoming of specific agreements to the international community. Bilateral agreements cannot accomplish this because non-signatories do not have to adhere to the stipulations, undermining in many cases the explicit goals of a specific bilateral agreement. A regime can help in capturing all the social costs and benefits for a country of specific arms transfers, thereby shifting the balance of domestic interests in favor with the interests of the international community as a whole.

International cooperation is also dependent on countries ability to manage, channel, or circumvent domestic pressures. Though the realization of international objectives like disarmament and nonproliferation depends on domestic politics and economics, to date the predominance of bilateral agreements largely separates international and domestic politics. As in the case with all regimes, when the strategic interests of a state are more influential than the costs of defecting from an international regime, the state prioritizes their national interests. In some cases, the domestic social benefits accrued from an arms deal are worth the domestic social cost. In these cases of strong state interests,<sup>20</sup> an international regime is helpless in imposing its will on the hypothetical sovereign nation. Because of this, many theorists have posited that a conventional arms regime would fail because of the inherent interests of the state to continue arms sales. I hope I have shown in my analysis that the argument is not so black and white and that an international regime can reduce the amount of dangerous arms transfers within the grey areas by influencing incentive structures and adequately capturing all the costs and benefits of such transfers.

In conclusion, ad hoc arms agreements do not establish a set of universal standards necessary to avoid a situation in which international security is adversely affected by the

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<sup>20</sup> “Bureaucratic” cannot be used interchangeably with “state;” ideally, as discussed in the previous sections, an international regime could successful fight against bureaucratic interests to create an outcome that is optimal for both the state as well as the international community.

decisions of other nations. Currently, strategies like promoting economic development or diplomatic relations through arms trade focus on short term interests. International agreements framed within a regime can be used to alter pay-offs and influence actor strategy to focus on long run interest calculation, where international cooperation is more attractive. In order to truly avoid the build-up of weapons and the dominance of the offensive, both the United States and Russia need to be more ambitious and harness their historical and political influence to extend their mission of mutual disarmament and non-proliferation of conventional arms to the international system as a whole by actively promoting the emergence of an all-encompassing international regime on conventional arms trade.

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Appendix One: information gathered from [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org):

arms exports(1,000,000)	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
China	286	190	163	104	818
US	112795	9996	6086	4905	3941
Russia	1,886	3,698.00	3,798.00	5,418.00	5,941.00
arms imports	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
China	224	1,495	1,744	3,048	2,307
US	119	103	133	114	346
Russia					170

Appendix Two:

Figures are trend-indicator values expressed in \$m. at constant (1990) prices.

Note: SIPRI data on arms transfers refer to actual deliveries of major conventional weapons. To permit comparison between the data on such deliveries of different weapons and identification of general trends, SIPRI uses a trend-indicator value. The SIPRI values are therefore only an indicator of the volume of international arms transfers and not of the actual financial values of such transfers. Thus they are not comparable to economic statistics such as gross domestic product or export/imports figures.

A more extensive description of the methodology used, including a list of sources, is available on the SIPRI Arms Transfers Project Internet site at

URL<<http://web.sipri.org/contents/armstrad/atmethods.html>>.

The figures may differ from those given in previous SIPRI Yearbooks. The SIPRI arms transfers database is constantly updated as new data becomes available, and the trend-indicator values are revised each year.

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers database.

March 10 2005

Imported weapons to China (CHI) in 1989-2004

	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Total	Total %
Russia	1096	772	79	376	1066	545	111	1378	1694	2917	2379	1961	2161	16535	90.77			
Ukraine	42	55	22	73	73	73	73	77	73	113	73	73	820	4.50				
Israel	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	28	28	18	18	236	1.30					
USSR	81	151	232	1.27														
France	35	13	12	8	5	18	15	22	15	8	18	8	8	9	4	4	202	1.11
Uzbekistan	85	85	0.47															
Italy	10	16	5	11	5	3	11	3	64	0.35								
USA	1	31	32	0.18														
UK	10	10	0.05															
Total	35	122	197	1164	851	142	420	1184	654	220	1549	1797	3019	2586	2038	2238	18216	100.00