

(Dis)Arming the Responsibility of Western Arms Producers

Written by Bretton J. McEvoy

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BRETTON J. MCEVOY, JAN 16 2025

The German arms producer, Rheinmetall, prominently proclaims on its website that it is taking responsibility in a changing world. Gesturing towards the *Zeitenwende* (“historic turning point”) in German politics after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this “changing world” marks a dramatic shift in Germany’s traditionally restrained military posture. Just three days after the invasion, the chancellor announced a 100 billion euro investment fund to rebuild and modernize the German armed forces. This new environment has even made possible an official partnership between Rheinmetall and the professional football team Borussia Dortmund, a collaboration that would have seemed unthinkable in Germany just a few short years ago.

While the winds of contemporary world order may indeed be shifting, the claim to be “taking responsibility” as an arms manufacturer is a provocative declaration. What does ‘responsibility’ mean for companies that manufacture products whose intrinsic purpose is to harm? While not an altogether new question, especially within activist circles, this topic has been surprisingly underexamined in scholarly discourse. As a first step in addressing this gap, a group of critically-oriented researchers and practitioners spanning the disciplines of international relations, sociology, economics and history recently gathered at the University of Bayreuth in Germany for a workshop entitled, *(Dis)arming responsibility: An interdisciplinary workshop on the responsibilities of (European) arms companies*. From our productive discussions, I came away with three key takeaways:

First, everything has changed and nothing has changed. The liberal promise that accompanied the end of the Cold War is said to have ushered in a “golden age” of arms control. That included the (re)invigoration of humanitarian arms control (HAC) norms that rose to prominence alongside other ostensibly rights-based frameworks such as the corporate uptake of social responsibility during the 1990s. With many of the security agreements concluded in the years following the end of the Cold War ceasing to exist today, however, the architecture governing global arms control has, on the one hand, shifted dramatically. On the other hand, Western states and arms companies have continued to authorize and export weapons to states where there is a clear risk of them being used in serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, casting doubt on the original potential of HAC to serve as an effective regulatory force.

At the level of arms control writ large, this account of recent history does reflect the tectonic plates rumbling underneath the liberal governing order today. On HAC more specifically, however, evidence suggests that any professed commitment to a values-based arms control policy has been largely a matter of symbolic politics. Indeed, if we examine Western state and corporate arms transfers as existing along a continuum that preceded and succeeded the end of the Cold War, it is far from clear that the “golden age” of arms control translated into more responsible (conventional) arms export behavior. It may have even helped to facilitate exports.

Such continuities emanating from within the Western arms production and transfer system challenge the liberal proposition that Western arms suppliers are qualitatively *better* than competing suppliers in countries such as China, Russia or Iran. Rather than a civilizational distinction that separates the humanitarian restraint of liberal democracies from the pure self-interest of non-democratic others, what is consistently dispositive is the political economy.

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At the same time, the global order is changing. Even if the normative shift towards 'responsible' arms exports over the past several decades has been more discursive than material, the emerging multipolar world will reshape the expectations placed upon corporate actors and states engaged in the arms trade. Especially given the ways that post-Cold War HAC has focused on controlling the governance of North-South relations, these changes compel a more complex, data-driven and historically-attuned approach to understanding responsibility in the (Western) arms production and transfer system of tomorrow.

Second, despite considerable attention dedicated to bringing control and responsibility into the global arms trade over the years, the vast majority of scholarship has been directed towards states as regulators of the industry, and not towards the companies as producers, and indeed co-facilitators, of the trade. This absence of academic research stands in stark contrast to NGO and activist campaigns challenging the arms trade which, although not without their own shortcomings, have been tracking and calling out both states *and* companies in recent years and for generations.

Why haven't scholars been paying attention to the responsibilities of arms manufacturers? Most prominently, there is the claim that the industry is exceptionalized as a (militarized) instrument of national sovereignty. Closely related, national security justifications – alongside economic and diplomatic priorities, as well as corporate confidentiality clauses – envelope the sector in secrecy, hindering public access to information. Finally, given that the state functions as regulator of the industry and overseer of arms exports, responsibilities are typically directed towards the state, with arms companies being cast as 'mere' producers despite the active partnership that often exists between state and industry.

Notwithstanding the national security rationale, few of these arguments are unique to the arms sector. Confidentiality swathes other privileged sectors in secrecy, and many diverse corporations strategically exaggerate the public-private binary to escape responsibility demands. Yet even in the face of national security claims, the 'exceptionalism' rationale only begins to explain how arms companies have managed to escape scrutiny, not why scholars have left the industry underexplored.

Given what is already known about the arms industry and its longstanding continuities, the answer to this question seems to be more political than intellectual. That is not to say that targeted research is not warranted in this case, to the contrary. There is a profound lack of (academic) scholarship that aims to critically situate arms manufacturers within their historical and transnational contexts, especially in the post-World War II era. But acknowledging the political roots of the scholarship gap, alongside activist campaigns' struggle to make headway in the world of practice, it may be that the strategy directing what and how research is conducted on the arms trade needs to change. Which leads me to my third and final takeaway on the limits of exposing hypocrisy.

Despite Israel failing to meet any of the criteria laid out in the Biden Administration's October 13th letter demanding an improvement to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, there were no consequences to the ongoing supply of US arms. While the UK has recently suspended some arms export licenses to Israel, it retains its F-35 exception, and Germany has shown no signs of halting its military assistance.

These states have justified their authority in part by asserting adherence to liberal democratic values, particularly claiming legitimacy derived from the consent of the governed. While the secrecy and endemic corruption that accompany arms transfers reduce the strength of this social contract, the extensive regulations put in place to oversee arms exports in these countries evidence states' concern for being perceived as legitimate on this issue. The arms companies, then, rely on national security claims and the state's normative leadership to position themselves as ethical actors, all the while deflecting their own political responsibility by retreating to being 'just a business' when caught transgressing societal norms.

Scholars have noted the organized hypocrisy that tends to guide Western powers in their values-based arms control policies, with security and economic interests often trumping ethical commitments despite professed speech to the contrary. Yet the naked abandonment of concern for legitimacy and consistency with respect to Israel's actions in Gaza breaks new ground, with implications for the pursuit of accountability in the sector. In particular, it means that

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the traditional “naming and shaming” tactic of exposing the ‘truth’ of state and corporate hypocrisy is no longer – or perhaps never was – sufficient. Especially in a context of rising armament in a shifting world order, where liberal states and their corporate partners may find it easier to rely on national security discourses to justify deviating from their own moral and legal boundaries, new research and activist strategies may need to be developed that provoke not just exposure but revelation. That is, if state and corporate power is ultimately dispositive in arms export decision-making despite the remarkably visible and brutally recurrent consequences for effected (Palestinian) populations, then simply producing more exposure of hypocrisy may lead to little, or only symbolic, reform.

Instead, or rather alongside, how can research challenge the prevailing assumption in many arms-producing Western societies that: a) arms manufacturers, states and national publics underwriting arms production and trade are somehow legally and morally separable from product usage even when the harmful impacts of product usage are largely known in advance; and that b) what has been happening in Gaza is somehow acceptable. While the latter is far beyond the scope of this article, an entry point for the former may be the work of revealing and disputing the underlying myths that sustain the arms trade itself. To foster a more informed public debate, this calls for a robust research agenda that investigates how contemporary shifts in power and norms are shaping state behavior, corporate practice and their entangled interactions in the justificatory claims and material realities that fuel the arms trade.

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