



# The organized hypocrisy of ethical foreign policy: Human rights, democracy and Western arms sales

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, Western political leaders have scripted a more ethical foreign policy, wherein far greater weight is given to protecting the rights and freedoms of extra-territorial citizens. Using the example of arms exports to developing countries, the present paper exposes the organized hypocrisy underlying countries' self-declared ethical turn. We show that the major Western arms supplying states – France, Germany, the UK and the US – have generally not exercised export controls so as to discriminate against human rights abusing or autocratic countries during the post-Cold War period. Rather, we uncover ongoing territorial egoism, in that arms have been exported to countries which serve supplying states' domestic economic and security interests.

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## 1. Introduction

A defining feature of geopolitics over the past two decades has been the extent to which Western political leaders have placed ethical and moral considerations at the heart of their foreign policy discourse (Chandler, 2003; Dodds, 2005; Slater and Bell, 2002). In practice, this has meant different things in different countries, and the centrality ascribed to ethical concerns has waxed and waned across and within political administrations. Yet it has invariably included a heightened commitment to promote human rights and, to a greater or lesser extent, discursive endorsement for the principle of protecting or advancing democracy in extra-territorial spaces (Gaskarth, 2006; Manzo, 2003; Perkins and Neumayer, 2008; Webber, 2001).

For geographers, Western powers' self-declared ethical foreign policy is of particular interest. Assertions about the need to consider the rights, freedoms and well-being of distant strangers script a geographic imaginary of a universal moral space where everyone, everywhere is governed by the same moral rules, and a stretching of state responsibility to protect beyond the national territory (Dodds, 2005; Flint and Falah, 2004). Public declarations by Wes-

tern elites to pursue a value-based foreign policy signal a more cosmopolitan, post-sovereign geopolitical order whereby international politics is increasingly guided by shared principles and norms, and state power is deployed in order to tackle non-territorial challenges of global justice (Beck, 2006; Behr, 2008; Rose-nau, 1990). Accompanying these discursive scripts has been a reworking of notions of the national interest. Acting to protect extra-territorial citizens is not only the “right thing” to do, but according to recent public statements, also the “self-interested” one (Cook, 2002; Hancock, 2007; Sparke, 2007).

A central question is whether this scalar construction of state morality, responsibility and geopolitical interests – laced with utopian visions of a world society built upon universal values, shared rules and mutual gains – amounts to anything more than empty rhetoric. Certainly, liberal visions of an ethically-motivated, post-sovereign state identity sit rather uncomfortably with (neo-)realist accounts, which portray states as selfish actors, primarily concerned with the defence of national interests of economy and security. One area where these disparate models of state action are likely to come to the fore is arms transfers. As part of their ethical commitments, many Western governments have pledged to consider human rights and (to a lesser extent) democratic conditions in deciding whether to sanction weapons exports from their territories. Yet implementing these obligations to protect universal rights at the international level might plausibly conflict with self-help, materialist national interests of economy and security. Have

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states reformed and rescaled their national interests and normative concerns such that they are willing to privilege the interests of distant strangers over conventional commercial and security imperatives?

In order to address this question, we examine whether the West's four major arms exporting countries – France, Germany, the UK and the US – have discriminated against human rights abusing and autocratic states, in the sense of (a) refusing to export weapons altogether or (b) restricting the amount of exports such that they receive a lower relative share of their overall weapons transfers. Building on theories of organized hypocrisy, we suggest that they are unlikely to have done so, with actual arms control practices decoupled from ethical commitments (Brunsson, 1989; Krasner, 1999). Supporting our argument, we find very little evidence that Western countries have systematically discriminated against states with poor levels of human rights or democratic freedoms. Rather, we uncover ongoing territorial egoism, in that arms have been exported to countries which serve supplying states' domestic economic and security interests.

## 2. Organized hypocrisy

Our central argument in the present paper is that Western countries' value-based arms control policy and practice is best understood in terms of organized hypocrisy – that is, inconsistent talk and action, arising from contradictory interests, obligations and incentives (Brunsson, 1989; Krasner, 1999; Lipson, 2007). Although the concept can be traced to sociological notions of “decoupling” (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), it is Krasner's (1999) conceptualisation of organized hypocrisy that is most instructive in relation to questions about foreign policy. After March and Olsen (1979), Krasner identifies two logics which govern actors' behaviour: logics of consequences, which conceives ‘political action and outcomes, including institutions, as the product of rational calculating behaviour designed to maximise a given set of unexplained preferences’ (i.e. instrumental, materialist), and logics of appropriateness, which ‘understand political action as a product of rules, roles and identities’ (i.e. normative, ideational) (Krasner, 2001, pp. 175–176). For Krasner, logics of consequences frequently take precedence over logics of appropriateness in world politics, giving rise to organized hypocrisy. Countries' rulers ‘rhetorically embrace’ international norms, rules and roles, but responding to domestic materialist imperatives, act in ways that contradict normative commitments.

Underlying organized hypocrisy, Krasner argues, is a number of features of the international system. Most fundamentally, perhaps, is its anarchical nature. Inter-state competition for wealth, power and influence means that the compulsion for domestic governments to defer to domestic consequential logics is strong. Conversely, norms at the international level are characteristically weakly institutionalised, often ambiguous and vulnerable to defiance by powerful states.

Not all scholars subscribe to the view that logics of consequences, on the one hand, and logics of appropriateness, on the other, can be treated as two entirely separate causal systems (Fearon and Wendt, 2002; March and Olsen, 1998). According to one line of argument, therefore, many actions equated with materialist motives involve a normative dimension. Hence, defending the economic or security interests of a territorially-bounded electorate may be the self-interested course of action, but it can also be interpreted as part-and-parcel of domestic politicians' normative obligations. Another related line of argument maintains that normative concerns are themselves constitutive of interests and that norm compliance may be governed by calculative expectations of consequences.

We are partly sympathetic to these arguments and, in line with several recent contributions, would submit that materialist interests and moral obligations are ‘not mutually exclusive and are interconnected in several ways’ (Herrmann and Shannon, 2001, p. 622). Hence particular choices, actions and representations may be guided by both sets of logics (March and Olsen, 1998). We nevertheless believe that logics of consequences and appropriateness remain useful analytic concepts, especially in situations involving trade-offs between domestic economic and security interests, on the one hand, and non-territorial normative obligations which prescribe right and wrong, on the other.

## 3. Arming the third world

Arms transfers are another area where states might be expected to encounter competing interests, obligations and incentives. Arms are big business. As an indication: the total value of the global arms trade over the period 1992–2004 is estimated at roughly US\$269 billion (1990 prices), of which roughly US\$185 billion comprised sales to developing countries (SIPRI, 2007). According to nearly all measures, the US is by far the largest supplier of arms to developing countries, accounting for close to 40% of transfers between 1992 and 2004. The other “big” four are Russia, France, Germany and the UK. The latter three countries were together responsible for almost 20% of arms transfers over the same period, while Russia accounted for approximately 30.5%.

Although a handful of countries dominate the transfer statistics, globalization of the defence industry over recent decades means that a growing share of the components, sub-modules and modules that go into making many weapons systems are manufactured in a number of different economies (Garcia-Alonso and Levine, 2007; Lovering, 1994). Still, control, co-ordination and final assembly activities continue to be managed largely by firms headquartered in the traditional arms supplying countries, such that government export controls in these territories exert a potentially decisive influence over the destination of finished weapons.<sup>1</sup>

There is nothing especially new in Western arms control. According to Krause and Latham (1998), the concept has its roots in the early Cold War period, underpinned by strategic motives to reduce the risks of an escalating East–West conflict. Later on, during the 1970s and 1980s, humanitarian principles began to assume a growing role in Western arms policy (Cooper, 2000). As an example, President Carter introduced a new set of US export guidelines in 1977, which included a clause to “promote and advance respect for human rights in recipient countries” (Klare, 1998, p. 86).

Still, humanitarian concerns occupied a comparatively marginal position prior to the 1990s, with restrictions garnering only limited political traction in practice (Krause and Latham, 1998). With the end of the Cold War, however, Western governments have sought to reinvigorate their support for a more ethically-grounded arms control regime. Indeed, consistent with their rearticulated rhetorical support, Western arms exporting countries have adopted new or revised arms control policies prohibiting or discouraging arms exports to regimes which infringe particular principles, particularly on human rights. In the US, Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 34 issued in 1995 affirmed the country's moral commitments by stating that, “The United States will act unilaterally to restrain the flow of arms...where the transfer of weapons raises issues involving human rights” (The White House, 1995). The UK government also adopted revised criteria for arms export licenses in the 1990s, with Britain's foreign secretary boldly announcing,

<sup>1</sup> All cross-border arms transfers – together with dual-use components which could potentially be used to manufacture weapons – from Western arms exporting countries require government export licences.

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