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QUICK STUDY: THE GLOBAL ARMS TRADE

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Andrew Feinstein is the inaugural host for "Quick study", a new series on The Economist's Prospero blog that offers a crash course in a particular subject, delivered by an expert in the field, with some suggestions for further reading. Mr Feinstein is the author of the new book "The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade", out this week in Britain and America. A former South African MP, he resigned in 2001 in protest against the government's refusal to allow an investigation into a corrupt £5 billion arms deal. His 2007 political memoir, "After the Party: A Personal and Political Journey Inside the ANC" (reviewed by The Economist here), became a bestseller in South Africa. Mr Feinstein lives in London and he co-directs Corruption Watch, an anti-corruption organisation. Here he answers a few questions about the global arms trade.

What is the first thing I need to know about the arms trade?

We estimate that armed conflict was responsible for 231m deaths last century. That figure has probably continued proportionally, if not increased. I'm not saying that the arms trade has caused 231m deaths, but I'm saying that the nature of the arms trade intensifies these conflicts. Often the conflicts are far more bloody because of the easy availability of weapons.

Global military expenditure is estimated to have totalled $1.6 trillion in 2010. That is $235 for every person on the planet.

Suggested reading: The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Yearbook offers incredibly impressive figures on exactly who buys and sells what.

Why?

I think because the United States has become so militarised and militaristic. It spends $1 trillion a year on national security—as much as the rest of the world put together. That really came to a head during the George W. Bush administration. The Obama administration has simply continued this. Defence spending under Obama has actually risen.

Is that because he doesn't want to seem weak, or is he secretly more hawkish than he appears?

It is very difficult for a president who wants to win another election to appear soft on national security. [Then there] is the power of "the iron triangle"—that is, the Pentagon, the defence contractors and Congress. At a time of some economic difficulty for the United States, the country is still pressing ahead with the development of a jet fighter called the F-35, which will cost the country over $380 billion. It is virtually irrelevant to the current conflicts in which the US is engaged.

In 2010 84% of retiring generals in the Pentagon went into employment with the big defence contractors. Lawmakers seldom vote against any of these gargantuan projects. They get a lot of campaign contributions from the large defence contractors, and the contractors ensure that there are jobs on these contracts in every single congressional district, even if it's just a couple of people sitting around a table surfing the internet. This means that anyone who votes against these projects is accused by the lobby of voting against jobs in their own constituency. A Pentagon whistleblower I interviewed, Chuck Spinney, describes the system as a self-licking ice cream.

Suggested reading: William Hartung's "Profits of War" (2010). This is a history of Lockheed Martin, the world's biggest defence contractor. Lockheed Martin was at the forefront of global arms-trade corruption in the 1960s and 1970s until the US cleaned up its act with the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (1977), which is now under threat from the US Chamber of Business.

Presumably there is then the illicit arms trade complicating things further?

The boundaries between the formal arms trade and "the shadow world" are extremely fuzzy. Someone like Viktor Bout [now on trial in New York] has actually done logistics work for the US and the UN. There is often a relationship between a country's departments of defence and the big arms producers, but also between their intelligence agencies and the illicit dealers. There was an Interpol warrant out for Bout's arrest for nine years, and during that time the US was using him in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Why?

He had an ability to take weapons and military material anywhere in the world, regardless of conditions on the ground. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Bout bought up massive military transport planes that are incredibly dangerous to fly. He paid pilots to land these

gargantuan beasts anywhere in the world. He also had access to surpluses of former Soviet weaponry. Bout armed elements of the Taliban, elements of the Northern Alliance; in Liberia and Sierra Leone he was involved in weapons dealing around the blood-diamond phenomenon. There were al-Qaeda elements involved in those transactions, so he's also an intelligence asset.

And a risk.

Yes. The American academic Chalmers Johnson refers to the unintended consequences of the arms trade as "blowback". These weapons land up in places you don't want or expect them to. In Libya the NATO forces were destroying a lot of weaponry that the NATO countries had sold to Qaddafi, especially since 2004. Now a whole lot of those weapons, including surface-to-air missiles, are turning up on the black market around the world.

Suggested reading: Richard Bausch's novel "Peace" (2009). It's about a small group of soldiers in Italy in 1944 dealing with the moral consequences of the behaviour of their little unit leader. It's one of the most powerful things I've ever read about the arms trade.

What about straightforward corruption?

The industry is hardwired for corruption. The last figures on the arms trade, up to the end of 2003, show that it is responsible for 40% of all corruption in world trade. The arms trade undermines accountable democracy in both buying and selling countries. UK police investigating the largest-ever arms deal, the al-Yamamah deal between the UK and Saudi Arabia, estimate that around £6 billion of commissions were paid on that deal alone. Mark Thatcher received £12m as an agent on the deal and al-Yamamah became known in certain circles as "Who's Your Mama". Tony Blair intervened to ensure that that investigation was closed down. Similar things happen in the buying countries. The South African deal with BAE Systems [1999] has had a devastating impact on South Africa's democracy. Until ten days before he was elected President, Jacob Zuma was facing 783 counts of corruption, fraud and racketeering in relationship to this deal. So they disbanded the country's two anti-corruption bodies.

Suggested Reading: Nicholson Baker's "Human Smoke" (2008). It's 400 pages of quotes and radio reports taken in the lead up to the second world war. It's a remarkable compilation of the contradictions in how we are governed and how we find ourselves in wars like the second world war.

What needs to be done?

This is a matter of political will. The imperatives of national security and commercial confidentiality legitimately conceal some aspects of these deals, but they're also used to hide the malfeasance that takes place. There needs to be greater transparency, particularly around the use of middlemen. Secondly, we need far stronger regulation of an industry that quite literally counts its costs in human lives and is highly under-regulated. There are negotiations in the UN at the moment for an international arms-trade treaty, but it will have to be tough with meaningful enforcement methods. I would also suggest that no weapons manufacturer should be allowed to make any political contributions.

More reading about the campaign against the arms trade can be found at Amnesty International, Control Arms and Oxfam. Mr Feinstein's book "The Shadow World" is published by Hamish Hamilton in Britain and FSG in America, and is out this week.