

Beyond Utility: A Multi-Theoretical Analysis of Global Arms Proliferation



ما وراء المنفعة: تحليل متعدد النظريات لظاهرة انتشار الأسلحة على المستوى العالمي

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Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies: 2026, Volume: 16, Issue: 5

الكلمات المفتاحية: انتشار الأسلحة، عمليات نقل الأسلحة الدولية، العقلانية، المؤسسية، البنائية، الأمن القومي، هوية الدولة، المعايير والمكانة، السيادة.

كيفية اقتباس البحث

حالي ، الان نزهت ، ما وراء المنفعة: تحليل متعدد النظريات لظاهرة انتشار الأسلحة على المستوى العالمي، مجلة مركز بابل للدراسات الانسانية، آيار ٢٠٢٦، المجلد: ١٦، العدد: ٥.

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Registered مسجلة في
ROAD

Indexed فهرسة في
IASJ

Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies :2026 Volume: 16 Issue :5
(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print) (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)



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Keywords : Arms Proliferation, International Arms Transfers, Rationalism, Institutionalism, Constructivism, National Security, State Identity, Norms and Status, Sovereignty.

How To Cite This Article

Hali , Alan Nazhat , Beyond Utility: A Multi-Theoretical Analysis of Global Arms Proliferation , Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies, May 2026, Volume:16, Issue 5.



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Abstract

This article explores two influential frameworks, rationalism and institutionalism, in understanding the global spread of advanced weaponry. Traditionally, rationalist explanations have dominated the literature, emphasizing national security concerns and cost-benefit analyses to explain arms proliferation. However, this study broadens the perspective by emphasizing the importance of norms, status, and identity in shaping states' behavior regarding weapons procurement. By viewing arms transfers as social phenomena, the research reveals that military acquisitions are motivated not solely by functional needs but also by symbolic considerations. The high-tech weapons serve as markers of modernity and sovereignty, carrying significant symbolic value beyond their practical military utility. This approach emphasizes the dual influence of practical security interests and sociocultural factors in arms proliferation, demonstrating that states often pursue advanced weaponry



to enhance their international standing and political legitimacy. The findings suggest that understanding global arms transfer dynamics requires an integrated approach that considers both strategic calculations and the social and normative meanings attached to military technology. Overall, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities behind weapons proliferation, highlighting the importance of social symbolism alongside traditional security paradigms.

المخلص

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تقديم تحليل معمق وشامل لظاهرة الانتشار العالمي للتسلح المتقدم، وذلك من خلال توظيف إطارين نظريين بارزين في حقل العلاقات الدولية، هما العقلانية والمؤسسية. فقد هيمنت التفسيرات العقلانية على الأدبيات التقليدية، حيث ركزت على اعتبارات الأمن القومي وتحليلات الكلفة والمنفعة باعتبارها المحدد الرئيس لدوافع الدول في مجال التسلح. ومع ذلك، فإن الاقتصار على هذا المنظور يظل قاصراً عن تفسير التعقيدات المتزايدة المرتبطة بانتقال الأسلحة في السياق الدولي المعاصر، خاصة في ظل التداخل بين العوامل المادية والرمزية. ومن هنا، تسعى الدراسة إلى توسيع نطاق التحليل عبر إبراز دور المعايير الدولية والمكانة والهوية في تشكيل سلوك الدول إزاء اقتناء الأسلحة، بما يعكس أن قرارات التسلح ليست مجرد استجابات عقلانية لحاجات أمنية، بل هي أيضاً انعكاس لاعتبارات اجتماعية وثقافية. تكشف النتائج أن عمليات التسلح لا تُحفز فقط بالحاجات الوظيفية أو الضرورات الأمنية، بل تتداخل معها اعتبارات رمزية ذات دلالة سياسية وثقافية عميقة. فالأسلحة عالية التقنية تُعد مؤشراً على الحداثة والسيادة، وتحمل قيمة رمزية تتجاوز وظيفتها العسكرية المباشرة، إذ تُستخدم كأدوات لتعزيز المكانة الدولية وترسيخ الشرعية السياسية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن فهم ديناميات نقل الأسلحة على المستوى العالمي يتطلب مقاربة تكاملية تراعي الحسابات الاستراتيجية إلى جانب المعاني الاجتماعية والمعارية المرتبطة بالتكنولوجيا العسكرية. وبذلك، تسهم هذه الدراسة في إثراء الأدبيات الأكاديمية عبر تقديم قراءة أكثر عمقاً وشمولاً لتعقيدات ظاهرة انتشار الأسلحة، مع إبراز أهمية الرمزية الاجتماعية إلى جانب النماذج الأمنية التقليدية.

Introduction

The primary goal of this essay is to analyze the traditional rationalist and institutional arguments surrounding the global proliferation of arms. Rationalist explanations have predominantly dominated the literature on arms transfers. This essay emphasizes the importance of norms and status



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in states' procurement and production of advanced weapons. The institutional theory of arms transfers views weapons proliferation as a social phenomenon rather than merely a rational or functional military issue. According to institutionalists, the worldwide spread of high-tech weaponry results from factors beyond rational policies or national security concerns. Weapons proliferate not only because of a match between their technical capabilities and national security needs, but also because of the highly symbolic and normative nature of militaries and their weaponry. Weapons have spread due to the socially constructed meanings they carry. Advanced military equipment symbolizes modernity, efficiency, and independence. Consequently, the proliferation of weaponry is influenced and directed by established normative frameworks that link military power and sophisticated weapons to a nation's sovereignty, modernization efforts, and domestic and international legitimacy (Eyre & Suchman, 1996, p. 87). This analysis compels a reevaluation of arms proliferation narratives, integrating a broader understanding of the social dynamics at play.

The Rationalist Paradigm: Security and Utility

International relations scholars apply multiple analysis levels to study arms transfer dynamics. Some use the individual-level analysis to highlight that behind every arms transaction lies a tapestry of personal motivations, fears, and ambitions. They remind us that the international arms trade isn't merely a mechanical exchange between political entities such as states but a dynamic interplay of individual human decisions (Hermann 2003; McDermott 2004). Other scholars explore the domestic level of analysis, revealing how internal factors within states—such as political institutions, economic interests, social dynamics, and bureaucratic politics—shape their international arms trading (Neuman 2010), (Brzoska 2004), and (Jacques 2011). Scholars like Laurence (1992) utilize the international system level to address arms proliferation. Eyre and Suchman assert that there have been three broad traditional arguments about arms transfers: superpower manipulation, national security, and factional interest. They claim that each explains weapons acquisition and military force structures as the result of rational calculations by actors pursuing their self-interest. All three explanations fall within the rational choice paradigm for explaining arms proliferation (Eyre & Suchman, 1996, p. 81). Mearsheimer and Rosato (2023, p. 17) define rationality as:

“Rationality is all about making sense of the world for the purpose of navigating it in the pursuit of desired goals. In the foreign policy realm, this means it has both individual and state-level dimensions. Rational



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decision makers are theory-driven—they employ credible theories both to understand the situation at hand and to decide the best policies for achieving their objectives. A state is rational if the views of its key decision makers are aggregated through a deliberative process and the final policy is based on a credible theory. Conversely, a state is nonrational if it does not base its strategy on a credible theory, does not deliberate, or both.”

The rational choice approach views behavior as directed by specific goals, evaluates possible actions, and aligns choices with those goals. Alternatives are selected based on a decision rule, such as maximizing goal attainment. Traditionally, realist and liberal international relations theories have provided policymakers with the decision rules or rationality for arms trading. Krause (1995) identifies the pursuit of wealth and power as the main motivations behind arms production and transfer. State policies regarding the arms trade depend on political factors and prevailing economic beliefs. Traditionally, arms were seen as a source of power and were not traded except for strictly political reasons. With the shift from mercantilist to market-economy thinking, the arms trade is now considered a means of generating wealth and power, acting as an engine of sustained growth and enhanced productive capabilities. The emergence of the state system spurred large-scale arms production. Arms, like any other commodity, require market demand to stimulate production. Pursuing power drives states to develop large-scale arms production industries and acquire advanced military technology, which are vital aspects of relative state capabilities within the international system. The realist-rationalist perspective posits that the uneven distribution of economic, military, and technological capabilities drives changes in the international system. Thus, states will attempt to innovate in military technology and production. All states would produce arms in a self-help international system to ensure their survival. However, not all states can manufacture arms. The asymmetric distribution of knowledge, technology, and economic and social capabilities among states creates disparities in arms production. Consequently, states unable to produce arms will seek to purchase them from major arms producers. The realist-rationalist framework emphasizes the connections among arms transfers, arms production, and the structure of the international system. Therefore, arms transfer and production dynamics changes reflect shifts in the international system (pp. 14-16).

Arms exports are pivotal in shaping the foreign policy strategies of leading arms suppliers, such as the United States and the Soviet Union. According to Catrina, the economic benefits derived from these arms





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transfers are often overshadowed by more significant political motives. While for major powers, the financial gains from arms exports may be secondary, for smaller exporters, such as France and Britain, these transactions bolster their national defense industries and contribute to foreign trade. In this context, arms exports are not merely transactional; they are strategically employed as instruments of foreign policy to achieve specific political objectives. For instance, France and Britain's approach to arms exports was designed to maintain the viability of their domestic arms production capabilities, thereby intertwining economic needs with national security concerns. Catrina underscores that the implications of arms exports extend beyond immediate financial gain, encompassing broader political and military considerations on a global scale (1988, p. 70). Catrina also applies a rationalist approach in his study of arms exports, analyzing the cost-benefit calculations of supplier and recipient states in exporting and importing arms (1988, p. 73).

According to Eyre and Suchman, superpower manipulation and geopolitical arguments illuminate choices at the level of major international powers, while national security explanations pertain to individual nation-states, and factional interest approaches focus on subnational interests (Eyre & Suchman, 1996, p. 83). During the Cold War, the spread of conventional weaponry and, more broadly, the militarization of the world system were largely the result of decisions by major powers. Regional conflicts are seen as manifestations of superpower tensions in various arenas; the global strategies of the U.S. and the Soviet Union drove weapons proliferation. For instance, Kinsella argues that superpower competition intensified two significant conflicts in the Middle East. The Soviet arms transfer to Syria and Egypt systematically influenced the Arab-Israeli rivalry; the conflict manifested itself in more Arab belligerence and Israeli preemptive attacks in 1967. Also, the U.S. arms transfer to Iran raised tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbors, particularly Iraq (Kinsella, 1994, p. 578). In this sense, in an anarchic international system, regional states in the Middle East must rely on acquiring military capabilities from their allies, Russia, France, China, and the United States, to ensure their survival. Arms and transfers, based on rational theory, thus, are strategic choices aimed at deterring potential adversaries and balancing regional power structures.

Moreover, during the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a balancing act by supplying arms to their allies worldwide. Their policy fit the framework of the realist-rational balance-of-power theory. Realists view states as unitary, rational actors that base arms trade policies primarily on cost-benefit analysis of their security

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dilemmas. For example, according to SIPRI data, in 2020 the top five arms-exporting countries were the United States (37%), Russia (21%), France (8.9%), Germany (8.3%), and China (4.4%) (SIPRI, 2020). Their export patterns closely align with their strategic imperatives in the international arena. At the domestic level, rationalists argue that weapons procurement and production stem from national strategic choices; government leaders choose specific weapons and total force posture based on careful assessments of national objectives, perceived threats, and strategic doctrine within the limits of technology and budget. Therefore, weapons procurement and production are driven by security needs and by threats to the state. At the factional level, arms procurement reflects competing internal interest groups. The military is the primary group with the most direct interest in weapons purchases; political parties and manufacturers also influence the arms procurement dynamic within a state and internationally. Domestic defense industries and lobbying groups significantly influence national arms export policies. Arms transfers are part of a lucrative global trade worth multibillions of dollars. States export weapons not solely for security reasons but also to nurture domestic industrial capacity, create jobs, and cement competitive advantages in defense technologies. For example, the defense sector provides technological and economic benefits in the United States and wields substantial lobbying power. For example, the U.S. arms deals with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, cumulatively valued at over \$110 billion in recent years, reflect strategic counterbalances against adversaries like Iran, as well as domestic economic benefits and the self-reinforcing interests of the defense establishment. Also, despite strong public debate over arms proliferation in Europe, Germany has maintained significant arms exports to support its robust defense sector and broader economic interests. This persistence illustrates how national industrial policies and economic imperatives can diverge from purely security-based reasoning. While such evidence is compelling, it does not capture the full spectrum of motivations behind arms transfers (Thurau, 2025).

The Institutional Perspective: Weapons as Social Symbols

Institutionalist theories contend that the arms trade cannot be fully understood as an extension of pure rationalist security logic. Instead, they identify several key factors. First, institutionalists argue that society isn't just about power dynamics or exchange relations. Instead, they view it as a cultural system. This system is guided by ever-evolving rules and norms that determine what is considered appropriate action. Second, cultural norms are so deeply embedded that individuals follow them without questioning their costs or benefits. Actions align with socially constructed





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realities, giving rise to behaviors that appear autonomous but are shaped by these higher-order constraints. Finally, while cultural norms might seem static at times, this stability stems from a dynamic process. Norms and definitions of appropriateness are constantly evolving. Institutional theory suggests that nation-states derive their legitimacy and sovereignty from the larger, integrated system of socially constructed rules. This global system shapes not only their domestic roles but also their behaviors on the international stage. From an institutionalist perspective, war is framed not as a breach of international norms but as one of the actions legitimized by the societal charter of nation-states. The institutional approach is an interesting lens to understand warfare and arms proliferation, as it aligns with sociological approaches that highlight the influence of social structures on military conflict. The institutional approach aligns with constructivist international relations theory, which also focuses on the roles of identity, ideas, and social construction in international politics (Eyre & Suchman, 1996, pp. 88-89).

The possession of a modern military is a key marker of statehood in the international system. It's not merely a practical need but a constitutive feature of what it means to be a sovereign state. Thus, the militarization of developing nations aligns with their integration into the global system of nation-states. Like a national flag, a modern military is imbued with cultural significance. Just as flags are not acquired for functional necessity but rather to signify national identity within a shared cultural system, military procurement follows a similar logic. The focus shifts from practical demands to the symbolic value of military assets as distinguishing features of statehood. Social objects, such as flags, supersonic aircraft, or other state emblems, are acquired not solely for their functional utility but because they symbolize legitimacy within the world system. The adoption of military and arms is ritualistic in that it conveys meaning and affirms a nation's status rather than being purely utilitarian. This ritual reinforces the shared understanding of what constitutes a modern nation-state. The extent to which a state is embedded in the global cultural and normative framework influences its pace and degree of militarization. This suggests that deeper integration into the global system drives faster conformity to its norms, including military development. The institutionalist perspective challenges conventional explanations of militarization that emphasize specific conflicts or power dynamics within or between states. Instead, it points to a deeper, systemic cause: the normative pressures of participating in a global system in which modern militaries define attributes of sovereignty. For example, developing states may acquire advanced weaponry not

because of immediate military threats but to affirm their status as modern nation-states within a normative world order (Eyre & Suchman, 1996, p. 92). A country with a military armed with advanced weaponry strengthens its identity within the international community; it serves as a status symbol. For instance, Singapore's decision to procure 12 U.S.-manufactured F-35 fighter jets, each valued at approximately \$109 million, illustrates the dual role of military acquisitions in enhancing operational capabilities and reinforcing national identity. At the same time, this relatively modest fleet would likely be inadequate to decisively counter a conflict with larger and more powerful neighbors such as Indonesia or Malaysia; the acquisition functions primarily as a potent status symbol. In doing so, it demonstrates Singapore's commitment to advanced military technology, highlights its sovereignty, and reaffirms its position as an autonomous regional state (Romaniello, 2020).

Constructivism and the Role of Identity

The institutionalist approach has further evolved through constructivist scholars, who argue that the international system and its processes are socially constructed. The essence of Constructivism is that it views international relations as being shaped by the actors' identities, meanings, and assumptions. Ontologically, social constructivism encompasses several fundamental principles, starting with its significance in ideational and material structures. The assumption here is that structures in international relations can either constrain or shape behavior. For example, neorealists highlight systemic anarchy as a factor shaping state behavior, grounded in material structures such as the balance of power and military capabilities. In contrast, constructivists argue that ideas, values, and beliefs also hold structural characteristics and can thus affect social and political action. However, this does not imply that Constructivists reject material structures. In fact, both material and ideational structures shape behavior, but for Constructivists, the system of meanings determines how actors interpret their material environment. As Wendt states, 'material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the shared knowledge in which they are embedded,' opposing the de-socialized perspective of Neorealists. For constructivists, individuals are social beings whose interactions incorporate subjectivity and interpretations, meaning arising from human understanding of the material world (Malik, 2021, p. 75).

Despite the differences between realism and neoliberalism, they see material power, military or economic, as the most critical source of influence and authority in global politics. However, constructivists emphasize material and discursive power as necessary for understanding



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world affairs. Discursive power is the power of ideas, knowledge, culture, and language. For constructivists, ideas are essential structures; material capabilities alone explain very little. Power and interest are shaped by the shared knowledge that constitutes them. Identities communicate both your individuality and your perceptions of others. By defining who you are, identities suggest specific interests or preferences that shape your choices and interactions across various areas and with particular actors. Identities shape interests, which then define specific types of action. Constructivists view identities and interests as interconnected. Realist and neoliberal theories view identities and interests as predetermined, with actors approaching one another with established preferences. These theorists overlook how preferences arise and focus solely on how actors pursue them strategically and rationally. In contrast, Constructivists argue that understanding how actors develop their interests and identities is essential for explaining a broader range of international political phenomena that traditional approaches neglect. For example, realism fails to explain why some states are allies or enemies. The notions of power distribution, anarchy, and self-help fail to explain the formation of the European Union and its survival to this day. Based on realism, Britain, France, Germany, and Italy must balance against each other rather than cooperate. However, the constructivist approach explains that shared identity among these nations leads them to collaborate further and integrate more deeply into the European Union. One might argue that the British withdrawal from the EU challenges constructivist thinking, but Brexit also aligns with constructivism's emphasis on identity and ideas. State identity, ideas, interests, preferences, and foreign policy transform. This framework can also explain international arms transfers as influenced by states' identities and their notions of constructed allies and enemies (Malik, 2021, p. 76).

Examining U.S. arms transfers to Iran and Turkey provides a compelling illustration of the constructivist approach in international relations. During the Shah's era, U.S. arms transfers to Iran were significantly influenced by the perception of Iran as a pro-Western ally in the Cold War. The Shah's regime was regarded as a stabilizing force in the Middle East, aligning with U.S. values aimed at containing Soviet influence (CFR, n.d.). According to constructivism, these transfers were concerned with material power while also reinforcing shared identity and mutual trust. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the U.S. perception of Iran changed dramatically. The new Islamic Republic was framed as an ideological adversary, fundamentally altering the shared meanings that

underpinned the arms relationship. The halt in arms transfers and the imposition of sanctions on Iran after the revolution reflect this redefined identity and the breakdown of shared norms. Conversely, U.S. arms transfers to Turkey have been influenced by its identity as a NATO ally and a bridge between the West and the Middle East. Constructivism emphasizes how Turkey's role as a strategic partner during the Cold War and its alignment with Western norms of democracy and security have historically justified arms transfers. However, recent tensions, such as Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile system, have strained this relationship (Al Jazeera, 2021). From a constructivist standpoint, this shift indicates a change in Turkey's identity within the NATO alliance and its evolving role in regional politics. The U.S. response, which includes sanctions and restrictions on arms transfers, underscores how ideational factors, such as trust and shared values, shape these decisions. In both cases, constructivism reveals that U.S. arms transfer policies are not merely reactions to material needs but are deeply rooted in the social and ideational contexts of its relationships with Iran and Turkey. The evolving social and ideational contexts of the bilateral U.S. relationships with Iran and Turkey are reflected in U.S. arms transfers to these countries, highlighting the importance of identity in international relations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the global proliferation of arms cannot be fully understood solely through traditional rationalist or institutional frameworks. The insights gained from this analysis reveal that arms transfers are deeply influenced by social constructs, cultural norms, and the identities of states within the international system. This understanding underscores the need to integrate rational choice theories with institutional and constructivist perspectives. By doing so, scholars and policymakers can better appreciate the complex interplay of material and ideational factors that shape global security dynamics. The role of social constructs in arms proliferation underscores the significance of identity and cultural context in shaping state behavior. For instance, the historical relationships between states, driven by cultural affiliations and social interactions, can lead to alliances that facilitate arms transfers. Moreover, the identities that states adopt within the international system influence their security policies and decisions regarding arms procurement and distribution. Ultimately, recognizing the multifaceted nature of arms proliferation will



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enable a more nuanced and effective approach to addressing the challenges posed by the international arms trade.

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