

Red flags for arms trade corruption

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Abstract

The international arms trade is highly prone to corruption. Reasons for this include the size and technical complexity of deals, the secrecy and lack of transparency surrounding the trade and the broader military sector, and the crowded nature of the arms trade where exporting nations and companies are often desperate to make sales to maintain their business and technological capabilities. But which arms deals are most likely to be corrupt? This article considers some of the “red flags” for corruption in the arms trade, including those relating to the buyer, those relating to the seller, and those relating to the deal itself, most notably the use of agents or intermediaries, and the role of offsets. The article also argues that corruption in the arms trade is a function of its very close connection with political power in both the buyer and seller countries. Major arms deals are frequently regarded as being of strategic political importance by exporting governments, while opportunities for political finance are often a motivating factor for corruption for both buyers and sellers.

The international arms trade is highly prone to corruption. This article builds on Perlo-Freeman (2018), which discusses some of the key factors relating to the nature of the arms trade that make corruption so likely—in particular, the political-economic structure of the international arms industry and trade. These include: The large, technically complex nature of major arms deals; the secrecy and lack of transparency surrounding the arms trade; the nature of the contemporary arms trade as a buyer’s market, in some sectors in particular, where many sellers are competing for scarce deals; the enormous incentive for arms supplier countries to sell at any cost to support their domestic industries; and the role of arms trade corruption as a key conduit for political finance in both buyer and seller countries.

This article extends this previous work in two ways. First, in analyzing and summarizing the key warning signs, or “red flags”, that indicate a particularly high risk of corruption; second, in situating corruption as one element within the broader set of political, economic, and security relationships between buyer and seller countries. These networks of relationships often give rise to the

biggest risk factor of all—governments and companies at the highest level make active decisions to engage in corruption, something which no amount of technical due diligence can overcome on its own. The conclusions in this article arise from several years of study by the author and colleagues at the World Peace Foundation (WPF) centered on the *Compendium of Arms Trade Corruption*, and other research; these include country case studies of Indonesia and Russia, and a thematic study of the role of arms trade corruption in political finance.¹

Discussion of “corruption risks” or “red flags” sometimes seems to be framed as though corruption is the result of a series of traps that a well-intentioned company or government may stumble into if care is not taken. However, some of the major arms corruption cases—such as Saudi Arabia’s Al Yamamah, the South African arms deal, or the numerous corrupt submarine sales by France and Germany—did not happen because of a failure of due diligence, but because corruption was sanctioned and executed at the highest levels. Such corrupt deals are typically facilitated by a complex network of shell companies, offshore accounts, and intermediaries. In many cases, the willingness of supplier

governments to tolerate such practices was also a key enabling feature.

This is not to say that due diligence and strong anti-corruption policies and procedures are useless. Without them it is easy for smaller-scale corruption to occur at lower levels of a company, where eager sales agents are willing to cut corners to advance their careers. However, such due diligence procedures cannot in themselves help where corruption is a deliberate policy decision taken by a company's top management—who can establish ways round the policies applied at lower levels, ensure that relevant information does not reach compliance officers, and who may be difficult to challenge by more junior executives. Moreover, an exclusive focus on technical measures risks “missing the forest for the trees”, by failing to address the fundamental political and economic drivers of high-level corruption.

Following a summary of arms trade corruption, this article reviews some of the existing literature on arms trade corruption and recaps some of the key conclusions arising from the *Compendium*. Subsequently there is a discussion of corruption risks related to the buyer, the seller, and to different aspects of an arms deal itself. This is followed by a consideration of the broader context of political relationships between buyers and sellers, and how the various red flags interact with one specific case study. Finally, a conclusion summarizes the integral nature of corruption within the framework of arms trading and where the warning signs may be found.

Corruption in the arms trade—what we know

The issue of corruption in the arms trade first drew political attention with the work of the Church Subcommittee on Multinational Corporations in 1975-76, which uncovered the Lockheed bribery scandal. A concrete result of this was the passage of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act by the U.S. Congress in 1977, outlawing the bribing of foreign officials by U.S. persons and entities. In 1999, similar provisions were made by European countries following the OECD Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions. However, systematic coverage of the phenomenon was scarce until the 2000s. Greater interest from this time was spurred by

The arms trade is a political business, and corruption in the arms trade even more so. Understanding and assessing corruption risks ought to be seen from this perspective. Red flags signaling corruption, requiring differing levels of access, can be identified across the buyer, the supplier and the deal itself.

the major corruption revealed in “The South African Arms Deal”, where there was a strong case for concluding that the opportunities for bribes *motivated* the deals (given the lack of a clear defense or security rationale for the major arms purchases). Corruption researcher and former oil industry executive Joe Roeber discusses the case and estimates that 40% of such international trade corruption as being related to the arms trade. He argued that the arms trade was “hard-wired for corruption” due to its secrecy, the enormous value of individual deals, offering life-changing opportunities for bribes of just a few percent, and the technical complexity of deals. In 2006 the U.K. Serious Fraud Office cancelled an investigation into potentially billions of pounds worth of corruption in the U.K.–Saudi Al Yamamah deal; further highlighting the crucial role of states in supporting and providing political cover for corruption in the arms trade. Feinstein (2011) and Guisnel (2011) delved further into the world of arms trade corruption with details of large numbers of major cases, illustrating the systemic nature of corruption in the business.²

The WPF has taken this work further through the *Compendium of Arms Trade Corruption*, and numerous subsequent publications. While not comprehensive, the *Compendium* brings together in one place a large number of cases (currently 41), using a common format, allowing for an analysis of key patterns that may emerge. It includes cases where there have been substantive public domain allegations of corruption, that have led in almost all cases to a serious legal investigation in one of the jurisdictions concerned (though not always conviction); or in the few remaining cases, to a substantive and well-founded media or civil society investigation. Cases have also been selected to provide examples, from different parts of the world and involving various different types of weapons systems. A significant lacuna is the limited number of arms deals in the *Compendium* where Russia

is the exporter, and an absence of deals involving China—probably due to the limited possibilities for investigations. The *Compendium* has continued to be developed since its initial publication with 17 cases in 2017, and so is extending its capacity to support the drawing of meaningful conclusions and patterns.³

In a previous paper published in this journal, “Arms, Corruption and the State”, the author summarizes some of the key conclusions arising from the *Compendium* and other work by WPF on the subject. These include the finding that corruption in the arms trade is widespread, affecting both buyers and seller countries in all regions, developed and developing. Indeed, in some sectors, such as major combat aircraft and submarines, corruption seems to be so common as to be almost routine. It is apparent that strong institutions and democratic polity in a buyer country are not enough on their own to prevent corruption in major arms deals—countries with weak institutions are, however, prone to more extreme forms of corruption that go beyond bribery into outright embezzlement and fraudulent contracts. Corruption is also seen to be very difficult to prove, due to the multi-jurisdictional nature of investigations and the complex web of intermediaries typically used in corrupt arms deals. This is exacerbated by the extreme reluctance of governments in supplier countries to prosecute their own arms industry. There is evidence that U.S. arms companies are less likely to pay bribes to win arms deals. In part this is due to the effect of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) and U.S. export control legislation which is stronger and better enforced than comparable European legislation (see the section under *Agents* later in this article). However, this is also due to the structural advantages the U.S. has in the international arms market and the lower level of export dependence of U.S. arms companies. Nonetheless, bribery by U.S. companies does occur in some cases. In the U.S., the issue of “legal corruption”, or state capture, is highly pertinent. U.S. arms companies have little need to resort to illegal forms of corruption, with all the risks this entails, given the effective unlimited ability of U.S. corporations to fund political campaigns (through “Super-PACs”) and to engage in lobbying, the “revolving door” between the

Department of Defense (DoD) and industry, and the willingness of legislators to collude with the industry in padding defense budgets to create jobs in their districts. The domestic military budget already provides a huge market for arms companies’ products and, frequently, on very lucrative terms.⁴

In “Arms, Corruption and the State”, the author emphasizes the fundamental political motivations behind arms trade corruption from both the buyer’s and the seller’s point of view. For many exporters, the drive to export is an “existential need”, as a means of maintaining capabilities in the domestic arms industry, in between relatively infrequent orders from the national armed forces. Without such exports, not only would unit costs be higher, but long production gaps might lead to a loss of key personnel and technical know-how, putting the viability of certain sectors of the arms trade in jeopardy. On the buyer’s side, arms trade corruption is not only linked to the personal enrichment of key decisionmakers, but is also used as a source of political finance to fund election campaigns, political parties, and less formal patronage networks that shore up a politician’s position. Moreover, sometimes the commission payments used to pay bribes may be partly diverted back to decisionmakers in the seller country—so-called “retrocommissions”—often to provide a means of covert funding for election campaigns. The role of arms trade corruption as a means of political finance renders it a means by which domestic political competition is conducted. Such deep embedding in state institutions makes arms trade corruption hard to tackle.⁵

Key warning signs (“red flags”) for corruption in the arms trade

In the light of the above, major international arms deals can be argued as inherently involving a high corruption risk. However, certain aspects of deals make some more risky than others; in some cases, these aspects can readily be seen by outsiders, but other warning signs may only be readily known by those involved at a governmental or corporate level. These red flags for corruption may, in turn, be used to support due diligence efforts within governments and companies, or by NGOs, investigative

journalists, and others, to externally scrutinize the arms business.

The following subsections discuss, corruption risks related to the buyer, to the seller, and to the deal itself.

Red flags related to the buyer

Transparency International's (TI) Defence and Security division produces an index, the Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index (or simply, the Government Index), which assesses the level of corruption risk in each country's military sector, based on a wide range of criteria. Countries are given a rating from A to F, representing a "very low" to a "critical" corruption risk. This rating is broken down into five categories: Political, financial, personnel, operations, and procurement. Procurement is most directly relevant to the arms trade, but the political and financial categories are equally important in framing the conditions for procurement.⁶

The most recent full survey, covering 115 countries, was published in 2015. Currently, TI are carrying out a new survey in a series of "waves", so far covering a number of countries in North and West Africa and the Middle East. In 2015, 81 out of 115 countries were rated "D" (high risk) or worse. If anything, the picture has worsened slightly in 2019 for the countries covered to date, with some countries (including Saudi Arabia) deteriorating from an E to an F.⁷

The 76 indicators in TI's five subcategories can be reasonably broken down into three key types of factor: *Transparency* (information availability); *decision-making processes* (institutions, laws, and procedures); and *monitoring, scrutiny, and oversight*. Table 1 summarizes some of the key aspects of these criteria. A lack of information and transparency on military spending and procurement is a key red flag; if those outside government cannot know how money is being spent, and why, then it is much easier for corrupt payments to be hidden. This also applies when little or no information is provided on the details of arms deals.

The worst red flags for decision-making processes are where arms procurement deals are highly personalized—for example, at the sole discretion of the President or other top government leaders (as in many of the Gulf states receiving F grades), or alternatively being left to

individual generals and admirals (as has been the case in Indonesia). However, even where more open processes exist, robust mechanisms for tendering, evaluation, due diligence, and appeals must be present. Frequent sole-source procurements without clear justification are a major red flag, as are opaque tender processes that can be manipulated in favor of, or against, particular bidders.⁸

The third key set of issues concerns who gets to monitor and scrutinize the spending and procurement processes. Generally, the more separate sources of scrutiny exist, and the more freedom and capacity they have to act, the better the prospects for restricting corruption. Moreover, oversight bodies must have sufficient access to information and resources in order to properly conduct their roles, and be as free as possible from political interference. Lack of such independent and resourced bodies is therefore a red flag. A free media and civil society are other crucial aspects of scrutiny; authoritarian rule stifling these is, in itself, a corruption red flag.

Red flags related to the supplier

A past record in engaging in corruption is the most obvious red flag related to a supplier. Unfortunately, most of the major European arms companies have a dismal record in this regard, which limits the discriminatory value of this criterion. Major companies featured prominently in the *Compendium* include Airbus (Germany), BAE Systems (U.K.), Dassault (France), Leonardo (Italy/U.K.), Naval Group (France), Rheinmetall (Germany), Rolls Royce (U.K.), Saab (Sweden), Thales (France), and Thyssen Krupp. U.S. giants Lockheed Martin and Boeing also feature, although in smaller and/or older cases. Israel's major arms companies, Elbit Systems, IAI, and Rafael are also prominently featured. Less information is available about Russian arms deals, but Rosoboronexport, the state arms export agency through which almost all Russian arms exports are conducted, has certainly been involved in corruption cases, including the "Azerbaijani laundromat".⁹

A potential red flag, however, could be the relative importance of the deal to the company in terms of its size

Table 1: Key indicators relating to the buyer

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Summary</i>
Transparency	<p>Defense policy: Is there a publicly available document setting out perceived threats, defense strategy, missions of the armed forces, and resources required?</p> <p>Military budgeting and expenditure: Is the military budget publicly available? How much detail? Is there hidden or “off-budget” spending? Is actual spending reliably reported against budget?</p> <p>Procurement: Are procurement tenders and contracts published? Can the public know what is being bought, why, and for how much?</p>
Decision-making processes	<p>Who is involved in deciding procurement? Clear political control with democratic oversight. (Worst cases give senior officers free reign)</p> <p>Budget decided by executive and Parliament; no military “self-financing”.</p> <p>Clear tender criteria based on needs assessment, widely publicized (including online)</p> <p>Open to all qualified bidders, with rigorous due diligence</p> <p>Single-source procurement rare, and with clear justification</p> <p>Robust processes for evaluating bids, with anti-corruption checks at all stages, and an appeals process</p> <p>Minimal political interference in evaluating bids—political role in establishing needs and allocating resources</p>
Monitoring, scrutiny, oversight	<p>By legislative committees (defense, public accounts)</p> <p>By internal auditors</p> <p>By national audit institution</p> <p>By national anti-corruption agency/state prosecutors</p> <p>By media and civil society groups</p> <p>Sufficient information, resources, and independence for oversight bodies</p>
relative to overall turnover and profits or important to particular sectors of the company’s business (especially where these concern capabilities). At a government level, importance may lie in facilities of particular political,	industrial, or technological significance—for example, if the deal would ensure the preservation of a large number of jobs in a particular locality, or the maintenance of an industrial capability viewed as strategically important by

the company's home government. Such indicators could give a sense of the urgency for the company in making the sale, thus providing a strong motive to use any and all means to win the deal, as well as a strong political constituency to provide cover against future scrutiny. This would not, of course, provide any direct evidence of corruption in a specific case.

However, at the smaller end of the arms industry and trade, in particular in relation to domestic procurement rather than major international arms deals, there are a number of supplier-related red flags to look out for. These include companies that have: Only just established prior to applying for the tender; no track record in the type of business involved in the contract, and no relevant experience suggesting capacity to do the work; no evidence of employees, premises, a website, or financial records; directors involved in corrupt or criminal activity in the past; directors or beneficial owners that include politically well-connected individuals, such as friends and families of senior government or ruling party figures.¹⁰

The last point is not always readily apparent, as politicians and their associates may go to considerable lengths to hide their ownership of the company by use of anonymous shell companies registered in a jurisdiction that does not provide ownership information. Such anonymous shell companies are a major source of corruption in general, and are at present still legal in the United States, although the Corporate Transparency Act, which passed the House of Representatives in 2019, would ban them, requiring disclosure of companies' beneficial ownership for the first time.¹¹

Transparency International Defence and Security are currently working on an updated version of their Defence Companies Anti-Corruption Index, based on a new methodology which will involve much more detailed scrutiny of companies' actual practices and implementation of anti-corruption policies, and the concrete actions they have taken to prevent corruption, (in contrast to the existing index which relates more to the existence of policies on paper). The new index, based on this methodology, has not yet been published, but the draft model questionnaire has.¹²

Red flags relating to the deal

There are many aspects of a deal which can raise red flags for corruption—here the focus is on two aspects that are frequently central to arms trade corruption: The use of agents or intermediaries, and the role of offsets.¹³

Agents: The vast majority of international corruption cases in the arms trade and elsewhere involve agents, or third-party intermediaries hired by companies to promote their offerings to the customer, often using corrupt means. Since the U.S. FCPA passed into law in 1977, almost 90% of cases reported under the act involved the use of agents. In the *Compendium*, out of 33 cases related to the international arms trade, 30 clearly involved the use of agents.¹⁴

While agents may perform a legitimate service in terms of providing useful local knowledge, very often the real purpose of an agent is to pay bribes to key officials and politicians. Most companies choose to channel bribes through intermediaries because they provide a layer of deniability between the company and the bribe recipient. The use of financial intermediaries, often anonymous shell companies, also helps make corruption on the company's part very hard to prove. Moreover, agents will often know exactly who needs to be bribed to secure a deal, or may themselves be politically well-connected, sometimes acting as a "gatekeeper" for access to key decisionmakers. Xiaodon Liang distinguishes between different types of agents according to their roles in the corruption process, including: *Sales agents*, who regularly act for a particular company on a regional basis; *national conduits* who are exceptionally well-connected individuals who are key to winning contracts in a particular country; *gatekeepers*, who are critical for gaining access to a particular individual with a leading role in arms procurement decisions; *money launderers*, who handle the financial side of corrupt transactions, ensuring the trail of payments is as hard to trace as possible; and *offset brokers*, who specialize in finding offset opportunities that can help a company win a deal, or fulfill their offset obligations (see below).¹⁵

Lockheed Martin has published a long list of red flags to use when conducting due diligence on third-party

intermediaries hired in relation to export contracts. The Transparency International report, *License to Bribe* on the role of agents in arms trade corruption, covers similar ground. Some of the key red flags here include:¹⁶

- ▶ *Who the agent is:* Including past record of corruption, or if they use shell companies;
- ▶ *Who the agent knows:* If they are politically well-connected, and in particular if their connection to key public figures appears to be their primary qualification; and whether the agent's company has a politically connected beneficial owner;
- ▶ *What the agent does:* Whether there is little or no discernible legitimate work that the agent is doing in return for their fee, or if their terms of reference are extremely vague; whether their primary activity appears to be to lobby or influence public figures;
- ▶ *What and how the agent is paid:* Excessive fees, or fees are based on a share of deal value can be red flags here, as is the use of a shell company to pay the agent.

While the details of company agents are rarely visible to outsiders, one way in which potential corruption involving agents can be identified is through court records of disputes over payment between agents and the companies that hired them.¹⁷

One key element of the U.S. anti-corruption regime in relation to arms exports is contained in the U.S. Export Control Act, and the accompanying International Traffic in Armaments Regulations (ITAR). These require companies receiving export licenses, under the Direct Commercial Sales program, to declare any commissions, fees, and political contributions made in relation to the contract. This allows any such declared payments to be scrutinized, while discovery of undeclared payments (most probable in corruption cases) means legal exposure without any need to prove that the payments were intended or used for corrupt purposes (which is often very difficult).¹⁸

However, these requirements do not apply to sales made under the U.S. Department of Commerce 600

Series program, which includes most exports of military components and other lower-level military equipment.¹⁹

Offsets: Offsets are increasingly a standard and critical component of international arms deals and they are also highly prone to corruption.²⁰

Paul Holden describes how critical the offsets package was to securing the South African Arms Deal, and how the benefits they promised to the South African economy proved to be largely a mirage. However, to those negotiating deals, their role as a potential channel of corruption may be their biggest advantage.²¹

Offsets were a feature of the corruption in at least 11 cases in the *Compendium*. Offset deals create enormous possibilities for corruption. They are typically far less transparent than even the arms deals they originate from, and details of offset-related contracts are very rarely published. They also create an extra layer of distance and deniability between the company and the corruption, enabling a company to claim to have no knowledge that the customer government was deliberately directing offsets to benefit particular individuals. Offsets create an expectation of a financial flow between the exporting company and the offset recipient, allowing bribes to be masked and rebranded as a payment related to an offset contract. There is further potential for corruption in the allocation of offset credits itself, as exemplified in the Portuguese submarine case. Perhaps most importantly, offsets provide for the distribution of very large benefits to a wide range of actors in the recipient country: Subcontractors, local partners in joint ventures, recipients of investments, companies involved in countertrade deals, and the many agents who may be involved in identifying and implementing offset deals.²²

As anti-bribery legislation has strengthened, and more companies have faced investigation and conviction (although few serious consequences) for paying bribes to win arms deals, offsets have become increasingly attractive. They offer an exceptionally hard-to-detect, and eminently deniable, means by which corrupt benefits may be distributed to those that need to receive them to win a deal.²³

Key individuals within the purchasing government

may have considerable scope to decide how offset investments and contracts are allocated. They may use this scope to benefit their friends, family, or patronage networks. Offset brokers may also identify suitable politically connected recipients of offsets. The original exporter company may genuinely have no direct knowledge of the corrupt nature of some offset transactions, yet will benefit from them through their value in securing the deal. Again, a lack of beneficial ownership transparency (something which the U.S. Corporate Transparency Act is trying to address), along with the opacity of offset contracts, casts a veil of obscurity over the business that investigators may struggle to penetrate.²⁴

While offsets in general represent a corruption risk (being present in almost all major international arms deals), a number of specific risks in offset programs can be identified:²⁵

- ▶ *Who decides on the offsets?* Is the buyer government, or officials and politicians within it, in control of the details of the offset package, and able to direct offset transactions to specific companies?
- ▶ *Who are the offset recipients?* Who are the beneficial owners and directors of companies receiving offsets, and are they politically well-connected, in particular to decisionmakers for the main arms deal? Do these companies raise any of the “supplier” red flags listed above?
- ▶ *Who are the offset brokers?* The same questions must be asked of these as with any other agent or subcontractor.

The nature of offsets means that a large number of smaller local deals is generated from one large deal; each of these involves its own set of agents and decision processes which are subject to even less transparency than the original arms deal. Moreover, in each offset transaction there are two deals being made by the exporting company—one with the offset recipient, and a second with the buyer government, over the offset credits awarded for the transaction—creating two opportunities for corruption.²⁶

Corruption within the arms trade political economy

“Arms transfers are best understood as ‘reciprocal, bargaining relations’ rather than ‘separate unilateral acts of supplying and receiving’”. A major arms deal is rarely just an arms deal. Very often, it is an expression of a long-term security and foreign policy relationship, and a signal of an alliance. Major arms deals frequently involve senior political leadership in both buyer and seller countries, and may help develop or maintain relationships between these elites, as well as between the countries’ military establishments.²⁷

During the cold war, arms trade relationships acted as a facet of superpower competition, and picking an arms supplier often meant choosing a side. The end of the cold war left the United States as the overwhelmingly dominant supplier in the global arms market, but also removed ideological barriers to arms sales, allowing buyers a wider choice between potential suppliers. Meanwhile, post-cold war cuts in military spending left the arms industries of most supplier nations much more reliant on exports, with the partial exception of the U.S., owing to the huge domestic demand for arms.

The political significance of arms sales remained, however. In particular, U.S. arms deals have often been sought as a means of developing a security relationship with the U.S., and a sign of entry into the U.S. alliance system, backed by security guarantees. This is especially the case in the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. Except for countries that the U.S. regards as rivals or enemies, such as China and Iran, the U.S. is by far the dominant supplier to the Middle East and North-East Asia in particular.²⁸

Arms exporters other than the U.S. therefore need additional selling points. The most obvious are those countries that the U.S. will not sell to, although this tends to mean most European countries will be similarly reluctant. Other selling points include: (1) cost, Russia and China in particular may be able to supply similar weapons to the U.S. at a lower price; (2) long-standing supplier-client relationships, such as Russia’s status as the leading supplier to India; (3) desire to maintain a diversity of suppliers to avoid excessive dependence on one; (4) political relationships between individual

leaders, and broader elites (e.g., U.K.–Saudi Arabia); (5) offsets, and in particular technology transfer, whereby many buyers seek to develop their own arms industries, and with regard to which non-U.S. suppliers tend to be more forthcoming; and (6) corruption.

For producer countries, arms exports are a key means of shoring up the domestic arms industry, the strength of which is seen as essential for maintaining national power, and thus receive top-level support. A further motivation for arms exports is the real or perceived influence that may be gained on the recipient's behavior, especially in relation to the key foreign policy and security interests of the supplier. Dorminey and Thrall (2018) suggest that, even for the U.S., which is most able to wield such influence due to its dominant position, the effect is exaggerated. Additionally, Soubrier (2010) argues that in some Persian Gulf cases, the influence runs in the other direction due to the export dependence of the supplier. However, supplier governments may still perceive sealing a major deal as a foreign policy "win" that increases influence.

Major international arms deals are, therefore, intensely political affairs, involving leaders at the highest level on both sides, frequently heads of state or government, and represent broad "reciprocal bargaining relations". The potential for corruption is just one element of the package, but the close proximity of the deals to politics makes it a significant one, as it offers the possibility for funding political activities and rewarding allies. While the military value of weapons acquired is almost certainly a key factor, it is not necessarily the dominant one—particularly for the majority of countries that do not face any perceived existential threat. Military value is also highly context-dependent and subjective, and preferences may be easily overruled by larger political considerations.²⁹

This understanding of the role of corruption gives a different frame in which to view the various red flags or warning signs for corruption. It is not so much a question of corruption "risks" or "vulnerabilities", but rather a matter of political choice, and the question is how different warning signs may indicate the role of corruption as part of the wider political bargain between

the leadership of two countries.

Many cases in the *Compendium* illustrate the interplay between corruption and the wider political, economic, and security considerations that underpin major arms deals. The next section illustrates the value of the red flag analysis, by focusing on one noteworthy recent series of arms deals, for which there is no current evidence of corruption, but which raises numerous red flags.³⁰

Keeping the red flags flying—Qatar's massive hybrid fighter jet purchase

Qatar acquired three different types of major combat aircraft. First, Qatar signed a deal for 24 Dassault Rafales from France in May 2015 for EUR 6.7bn, followed by an additional 12 in December 2017 for an unknown amount. Then, in June 2017, Qatar ordered 36 F-15Q Strike Eagles from the United States, with an option for 36 more, in a deal worth up to USD 12bn. Finally, in September 2018, Qatar ordered 24 Eurofighter Typhoons from the U.K.'s BAE Systems, for GBP 5bn. This will bring about an eight-fold expansion in the Qatari air force, from 12 aging Dassault Mirage-2000 fighters to 96 fourth generation aircraft.³¹

It is hard to see how a country of Qatar's size (2.6 million, of which only 313,000 are citizens) could possibly find sufficient numbers of trained pilots to fly this many planes, and so foreign pilots will likely be required.

These acquisitions (excepting the first French deal) were the result of the major dispute that broke out in 2017 with its much more powerful regional Gulf neighbors, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who along with Egypt have been unsuccessfully attempting to blockade the country since 2017. But aside from buying more planes than they can feasibly use, what is most questionable about the deals is buying three separate types of multirole aircraft, thus multiplying costs for training, operational support, and repair and maintenance, as well as problems of interoperability. Gareth Jennings of *Jane's* by IHS Markit argues further that the three planes are similar, with few unique capabilities that might explain the choice of a hybrid air force.³²

However, there are other explanations, as one senior Qatari officer commented on the F-15 deal, “This is not a purchase, it is a strategic partnership”. In the face of the potential threat from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which may at one stage have come close to a military assault, Qatar is arguably seeking to buy friends and allies more than it is seeking to acquire usable aircraft.³³

It is certainly plausible that Qatar would wish to shore up its alliance with the U.S. as a counter to potential threats from its neighbors. However, it is less clear what additional security guarantees are gained by buying additional planes from the U.K. and France, given the dominant U.S. role in the region; Qatar itself is host to the largest U.S. base in the Middle East, the Al Udeid air base, with 10,000 U.S. troops.³⁴

Thus, such an expensive set of purchases with no conceivable military rationale, is in itself a major corruption red flag, and the explanation of seeking security guarantees through the strengthening of political and military relationships, offers only a partial explanation.³⁵

Further red flags are raised on the buyer side. Qatar has been given the worst possible rank by TI’s Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index—an “F” grade, indicating a “critical” risk of corruption, in both the 2015 and 2019 studies, with the procurement area being awarded a particularly low score of 6 out of 100 in 2019. Qatar is one of the least transparent countries in the world for military spending, having provided no information whatsoever on such spending since 2003 (even a total amount). Qatar is an absolute monarchy, where military affairs are essentially entirely at the discretion of the ruling emir, with no information provided to the public or parliament regarding defense policy, budgets and spending, or procurement. National procurement and tender laws do not apply to defense procurement. There is no oversight or scrutiny of defense matters, whether from parliament or national audit institutions. Procurement does not appear to follow any clear procedures or strategy, and is frequently made by direct single source arrangements with a chosen

company. Essentially, it would appear that the Emir can make such purchases as he chooses, under whatever arrangements he sees fit.³⁶

Red flags can also be raised regarding the suppliers of two sets of planes, BAE Systems and Dassault. BAE have a long history of corruption, including one 1996 deal with Qatar, where the company made a GBP 7m payment to three Jersey trust funds controlled by the then Qatari Foreign Minister. An investigation by the Serious Fraud Office was dropped in 2002, but Qatar agreed to pay Jersey GBP 6m for “perceived damage”. Dassault, for its part, was given an “F” rating for anti-corruption policies and procedures in the TI Defence Companies Anti-Corruption Index in 2015, and has been engaged in numerous corruption cases. In 2017, Dassault were fined EUR 134m by Taiwan in relation to a 1992 deal for Mirage aircraft, for example. The late company President, Serge Dassault, who died in 2018, was himself convicted in relation to one such arms deal, and was suspected of vote buying as part of his political career in France.³⁷

None of this in itself constitutes evidence of corruption. Pertinently, at present, there is no information available as to the mechanics of the deal; for example, use of agents or the role of offsets is uncertain. However, the general lack of transparency or rationality in the Qatari procurement process, together with the complete absence of military justification for the three aircraft deals, do raise major red flags. Meanwhile, whatever other motivations for the deal may exist, they are deeply entwined with the political relationships involved, and Qatar’s efforts to buy allies to secure their precarious regional position. While there are red flags for the buyer, for the sellers, and for the deals themselves, it is impossible to disentangle any potential corrupt motivation from the wider political-strategic relationships at this stage. I would argue, however, that deals of this nature, that are so lacking in transparency and rationality, require a much deeper level of scrutiny from both the media and public authorities to ensure that they are not the subject of corruption.

Conclusion

Corruption should be seen as an integral part of the international arms trade, deeply intertwined with political, economic, and security relationships, and the drivers of the business. It is a feature, rather than a bug in the system, and often a policy deliberately pursued by governments and companies, instead of being the result of a failure of due diligence. Combating corruption in the arms trade therefore faces an uphill struggle against entrenched interests in both recipient and supplier countries.

A great many arms deals involve high level political bargaining, and major arms import decisions are rarely simply a technical matter of evaluating competing bids against objective criteria (on the basis of value for money). Thus, many deals may raise red flags, but disentangling potential corruption from the broader set of motivations is difficult.

Nonetheless, there are many specific warning signs that can indicate a particularly high likelihood of corruption. These relate to the buyer, in terms of levels of transparency and accountability, and robust laws, procedures and institutions. Seller warning signs manifest themselves in terms of past record and, finally, the contents of the deal itself can signal corruption. Supplier and deal warning signs are often the most difficult to ascertain from outside, unless information comes from whistleblowers or investigations by national authorities. Some of the most critical areas for potential corruption are the use of agents, who frequently act as conduits for corrupt payments, while offering a level of deniability to the seller company. Offset packages, perhaps, provide an even greater level of distance between the exporter and possible corrupt benefits to favored individuals and companies in the buyer country. In both cases, it is critical to question whether politically well-connected individuals in the transactions are acting as conduits to key decisionmakers and/or as potential beneficiaries to be rewarded by their patrons.

Ultimately, the arms trade is a political business, and corruption in the arms trade even more so. Understanding and assessing corruption risks should be seen within this framework.

Notes

1. See WPF (2017). The Compendium of Arms Trade Corruption (<http://sites.tufts.edu/corruptarmsdeals>) was first published online in May 2017. New entries have continued to be added up to July 2019 and existing entries continue to be updated as new information becomes available about the cases. The Compendium, and its component entries, is nonetheless referred to throughout this article as WPF (2017), based on the original date of publication.
2. Bribery scandal: See e.g., Solomon and Linville (1976); Jones and Berry (1977). Arms deal: Holden (2020). Arms trade: Roeber (2005).
3. The widespread and severe prevalence of corruption in the Chinese military sector is well-attested and discussed in an essay attached to WPF (2017), "China's crackdown on military corruption".
4. Conclusions: Perlo-Freeman (2018). FCPA: For the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, see Department of Justice (2004). For a discussion of U.S. export control legislation as it relates to corruption, see Goodman (2019). Legal corruption: Discussed extensively in Smithberger (2018).
5. Motivations: Perlo-Freeman (2018). Existential need: Soubrier (2020). Patronage: Liang and Perlo-Freeman (2018). Retrocommissions: Retrocommissions may also be frequently used to enrich senior executives in the seller company, as the agents through who the bribes are paid may be required to cut the executives who appointed them into the deal. This is discussed in Guisnel (2011), but there is less clear-cut evidence of this in the cases covered in the Compendium.
6. Transparency International Defence and Security (2020).
7. Recent survey: TID&S (2015a). New survey: TID&S (2020). As of 24th March 2020, 19 countries have been covered in the new survey.
8. Liang and Perlo-Freeman (2017).
9. Beliakova and Perlo-Freeman (2018); OCCRP (2017).
10. Example cases of these red flags are illustrated in: Beliakova and Perlo-Freeman (2017); Sayne, Gillies and Watson (2017), in relation to the extractive industries sector; Anderson and [NAKO] (2018).
11. At the time of writing, the Act is at the Committee Actions stage with the Senate. See GovTrack (2019).
12. Current index: TID&S (2015b). New index: Dixon *et*

al. (2018). Draft questionnaire: TID&S (2018); The questionnaire contains 60 questions relating to 10 areas: Leadership and organizational culture; internal controls; support to employees; conflict of interest; customer engagement (including political donations and lobbying); supply chain management; third parties (including agents); offsets; high-risk markets; and additional items applying to state-owned enterprises. Some of the items, such as publishing details of agents and intermediaries, as well as of offset brokers and offset obligations and transactions, that seem (to this author) unlikely to be met by any major arms company. Thus, it is likely that certain of the red flags identified by this index are likely to apply to most companies.

13. Perlo-Freeman (2019).

14. Stanford Law School (2020).

15. Liang (2020).

16. List: Lockheed Martin (2018). Agent role: Fish and Man (2016).

17. Holden (2018).

18. U.S. House of Representatives (2020); Directorate of Defence Trade Controls (2020).

19. Goodman (2019).

20. For a general discussion of the role of offsets in the arms trade, see Brauer and Dunne (2004). Offsets are a type of arrangement in international trade deals (most commonly arms deals) whereby the supplier company agrees to various spending and/or investment commitments in the buyer country to offset the foreign currency cost of the purchase. These may include:

Countertrade, i.e., the direct purchase of goods and services (typically commodities) from the buyer country;

Subcontracting of components or services for the equipment being supplied, to companies in the buyer country;

Investment in companies and industries in the buyer country (this may be in the arms industry or unrelated industries);

Licensed production or final assembly of some or all of the equipment supplied in the buyer country;

Transfer of technology and source code for the equipment to the buyer country.

Offsets are described as *direct* when they are directly related to the main deal (e.g., subcontracting, licensed production), or *indirect* otherwise (e.g., countertrade,

investment in unrelated industries).

21. Holden (2020).

22. For rebranding example, Holden (2018). Allocation: WPF (2017), “German Submarine Sales to Portugal.”

23. One ex-employee of a major U.S. arms company told the author that this company operated “in fear” of the FCPA in relation to direct corruption, but that offsets were how corruption could still happen—the allocation of offsets was often in the hands of the client, and the company did not need to know if some of these offset transactions were corrupt.

24. Liang (2020).

25. Some of these risks are discussed in a Fluker *et al.* (2012).

26. Holden (2020).

27. Quotation: Kolodziej (1979).

28. As can be seen from the data in the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, for example. (SIPRI, 2020).

29. Reciprocity: Kolodziej (1979). Proximity: See preceding discussion, and Liang and Perlo-Freeman (2018).

30. Perlo-Freeman (2019).

31. Rafales: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, SIPRI (2020). F-15Q: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, (2020); Al Jazeera (2017). Typhoons: Young (2018).

32. Jennings (2018).

33. Comment: Knecht (2018). Assault: Then U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson claims to have talked Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman out of an attack in 2017. Al Jazeera (2018).

34. Wallin (2018).

35. It is possible that the Qatari government simply wanted to curry favor with as many western countries as possible, regardless of any specific future benefit, but this seems a fairly weak explanation on its own, and certainly does not exclude other, financial, benefits coming into the calculation.

36. “F” grade: TID&S (2020). Spending: SIPRI (2020). Arrangements: The Shura Council, which has 45 members, of which 15 are appointed by the emir, who can dissolve the Council and has the power to overrule its decisions. See TID&S (2020)

37. BAE: WPF (2017). Jersey payment: Campaign Against Arms Trade (2011); Burns and Pell (2007). Dassault “F”: TID&S (2015b); and Shukla (2015).

Taiwan fine: Altmeyer and Hepher (2017); see “Funding the Belgian Socialist Parties”, WPF (2017). Conviction: McPartland (2014); and WPF (2017): “Funding the Belgian Socialist Parties”.

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