

Are Canadian Arms Exports A Good Value Proposition?

by Ralph C. Martin

“They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore.” Isaiah 2:4

Every year, Canada’s export sales of military weapons, commonly known as arms, may be as much as \$16 billion. Are we getting value for our money?

Project Ploughshares <http://ploughshares.ca/>, based on the Biblical quote above, is an excellent organization with a vision of “a secure world without war and a just world at peace.” They track arms sales.

In the summer of 2014, in the Ploughshares Monitor, Ken Epp published a paper, “Canada’s arms exports” and noted that “no one - including government - knows the total value of Canadian arms exports. Some estimate that non-U.S. military exports totalled \$2.8-billion over the 6 years of 2006 – 2011. However, the report to Parliament stated that (non-U.S.) military export permits authorized over this period were at \$31.5-billion (more than 10 times the previous estimate). Based on their searches, Ploughshares staff assume that military exports to the US are double non-US arms exports.” It is not clear what happens to arms sold to the US.

It appears that Canada may annually export up to \$5.25 billion worth of arms outside the US and thus up to \$10.5 billion in arms to the US. The total military exports would then be at most, \$16 billion per year. This is a lot of money and yet less than one percent of our \$1825 billion Canadian economy.

It’s not uncommon to hear mutterings about the inevitability of the global arms trade. It is lucrative. So who has lucre to buy arms?

In his book, *The Shadow of the Sun*, R. Kapuscinski states that African warlords in disintegrating states, with private bank accounts, can buy arms easily. “They are cheap and plentiful.... The law in force is: whoever has weapons eats first.... They take from the poor to enrich themselves and their gangs.” Even if only a portion of Canadian arms, sloshing in the global arms pool, reaches warlords and Middle East conflicts, that portion is unknown and tragically too large, at whatever size.

Is one percent of our Canadian economy worth the carnage and injustice suffered by those at the wrong end of exported arms? One might argue that our arms do not go to warlords. How do we know where they go, if we don't even know how many are exported from Canada? Who does know? Are we the ones who don't want to know? Whose interests are served by keeping the global arms trade murky?

In of Canada's most famous political debates, in 1984, John Turner argued he had no option about patronage appointments. Brian Mulroney retorted "That is an avowal of failure..... You had an option, sir. You could have done better." This might also be an appropriate retort to those who say arms exports are simply business as usual and inevitable.

A repudiation of all Canadian arms exports, in the worst resulting economic scenario, would mean less than a 1% decline of our overall economy. Could we absorb the hit? It is reasonable to ask the question.

There is the argument that if we don't export arms, other countries will. Most parents have a rejoinder for this line of thinking. If Canada is to gain credibility and moral suasion to lead negotiations to slow and eventually stop global arms sales, it would be appropriate to set an example by doing the right thing.

Pierre Trudeau, while Prime Minister, advocated for a "strategy of suffocation" of the arms race, which he unveiled at the United Nations in 1977. Geoffrey Pearson notes this strategy (www.peacemagazine.org/archive/v17n1p07.htm) included a comprehensive test ban, a ban on the flight testing of new strategic missiles, a stop to the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, and reductions in defence spending. Trudeau also set up the Canadian Institute of International Peace and Security, in 1984, to assess arms trading, and ironically, it was later shelved by Mulroney.

A Canadian policy to cease all Canadian arms exports does not have to result in a permanent gap in GDP. We could engage in other economic activities instead. What if we spent \$16 billion per year to provide long term assistance with Canadian resources, as appropriate, and well trained Canadian agriculturalists and peace builders to work with local communities to improve resilient agricultural capacity where war lords now exploit regions of destabilized governance? Child soldiers might have less incentive to join marauding troops, if food is more available, while options for adequate livelihoods emerge.

The global arms trade may appear to be inevitable because the ongoing non-intervention of governments in rich countries allows it. Is this what citizens of Canada and other countries want of their governments?

Ralph C. Martin, Ph.D., P.Ag. is the Loblaw Chair, Sustainable Food Production and Professor, Ontario Agricultural College, University of Guelph. Comments welcome at rcmartin@uoguelph.ca