
THE REALITIES OF THIRD WORLD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

By

DR. ANDREW K. SEMMEL

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What is the role of foreign procurements, particularly U.S. arms sales and security assistance, in qualitative trends of Third World weaponry and military capability?

This is not an easy question to answer, It would be far easier to focus on quantitative trends in weapons development or weapons acquisition since we can measure the appropriate indicators with a greater degree of accuracy and confidence. However, even quantitative indices of national defense spending or foreign weapons procurements should be viewed with caution. National accounts statistics, as is well known, are notorious for their unreliability, to say nothing of their validity. And, quantitative trends do not translate easily to qualitative trends.

To address the question, I'd like to summarize a set of messages, or thoughts, about the role of military assistance in the Third World.

Message #1: What should be measured?

Measuring and assessing the qualitative trends in weapons systems and military capability in the Third World should not be confined to dollar cost or dollar-equivalent trends. While dollar trends, even adjusted to constant terms, give us a rudimentary feel for increasing or decreasing value--maybe even volume--of foreign or internal acquisitions by Third World nations, and may even tell us something about the relative cost to the purchasing nation, they tell us very little about military capabilities. They may not give a clear picture of costs either. For a host of reasons, more dollars do not necessarily buy more capability. The key issue is how Third World countries make what they acquire work for them.

At the bare minimum, the number and types of weapon systems being procured should be analyzed in country-specific terms. Even then, actual deliveries, not agreements to buy, are better indicators of qualitative trends. Even the numbers and kinds of weapon systems delivered are only rough indicators of capabilities. The serious analyst would also look at intangibles, such as training, technical assistance, command and control, organization, and operations and maintenance, which are equally, if not more, important measures of capability. Regrettably, these indicators do not lend themselves to precise measurement.

This is the conundrum of the social scientist--the most important variables are often the most difficult to measure. Sophisticated weapons add to military capability, but only if the recipient nation can use them effectively. Ordinarily, it is a better investment for a Third World nation to improve its human and management skills than to put its limited resources into advanced weapons . . . assuming, of course, it is in no immediate danger.

Message #2: Conflicts in the Third World.

Contrary to some widely held views, Third World countries have security problems too. Indeed, a basic, perhaps predominant, function of every state is to protect itself and its people, whether in the Third World or elsewhere. In fact, most conflicts since World War II have taken place in the Third World, with or without major power involvements. This is not likely to change for the foreseeable future. Post-colonial stresses, vague boundaries, irredentist claims, religious and ethnic divisions, and the pressures on political authorities to cope with simultaneous demands for more economic distributive justice and greater political participation have spawned instabilities and invited external exploitation, intervention, and meddling in these vulnerable societies.

I call attention to these obvious points because, whether we like it or not, Third World countries have one thing in common with the more advanced countries--a tendency to fight when threatened, humiliated, or deprived of something they value, or to resort to arms when opportunities arise to settle old scores, to acquire something they covet, or to spread some ideology.

In so doing, these nations, or rather the people and leadership in them, will fight with what they can get, with what they already have, and with what they can get to work. Wars in the Third World are "come as you are" wars, and they are plentiful because these societies are vulnerable internally and externally. And, when in trouble, they will seek the help of their friends and allies, usually in exchange for something else, because nations, almost by definition and by behavior, are not altruistic organizations. Enter the supplier nations.

The key message here is that political and strategic considerations rather than economic factors--up to a point--tend to drive defense expenditure and arms procurement decisions. Economic rationality, as in other societies, will often take a back seat to immediate security and political necessity.

Message #3: There are economic benefits in military transfers.

Defense expenditures and foreign procurements--however difficult they are to measure and understand--do not invariably detract from the pursuit of other economic and social goals. In some cases, they may, but in others, they may not. Many people espouse a zero-sum conception between defense expenditure and everything non-defense. All resources going into the defense sector and weapons procurement are denied an equal allocation to the social and economic, i.e., human needs, areas. It is not always so clear. It is certainly more complex than that.

There are obvious situations, such as in El Salvador, where failure of the existing regime to strengthen its military capabilities to cope with attrition warfare or insurgencies will lead to further deterioration and disruption of social and human services and the economy. It has been, for example, the avowed objective of the Salvadoran insurgents to destroy the economic infrastructure of El Salvador. Preventing that can help contribute to improvements in economic welfare and social goals. In other instances, military-to-military relationships can bring into a country limited new technical skills, managerial knowhow, and organizational procedures, which, when blended with local mores and cultural idiosyncrasies, can contribute to the economic base and help bring about new patterns of expectations and behavior, including better human rights practices.

International licensing arrangements, coproduction, and offsets involving military production and procurement can be used as vehicles for creating jobs and meeting social and economic goals, even if the cost to the purchasing country goes up. Many countries, coping with the need to improve both their national defense and the lot of their people, are now insisting on a economic linkage to foreign procurements--in part, to defuse internal sentiment against more military imports. This may explain why foreign defense decision making increasingly involves more than defense ministries and often will include input from the finance ministries and others. Even so, most Third World countries are destined to produce mostly low-performance, older-generation, low-technology items. Some countries will seek an export market in order to sustain the production base, and if they produce items of good quality, at competitive prices, and in sufficient quantity, they may become limited suppliers to other Third World countries.

Message #4: Each Third World country is unique.

We should be sensitive to the uniqueness of Third World countries and avoid, where possible, the blind lumping together as if, somehow, differences in political structure, level of force modernization, size, cultural mores, and situational factors matter little. Put another way, the object of analysis of Third World military spending, including qualitative trends in weapon systems, should eschew sweeping generalizations which lead to general statements that are almost meaningless when applied to any particular country. Case studies or, better yet, comparative case studies--disaggregating the data--seem to me to not only of more interest to policy makers but also more germane to the questions posed here.

Message #5: National sovereignty.

Related to this point is the message that we ought to be more sensitive to the issue of national sovereignty and to the related issue of national culture. Like other countries, Third World nations try to set their national priorities as the leadership sees them at any point in time. We would respect those sovereign priorities and goals, and, if they do not violently clash with our own, should assist friends and allies to meet them, as long as it is in our perceived best interests to do so.

We should avoid what someone has called the "isomorphic mapping of our experiences," i.e., trying to shape other societies to be like us. This is extremely ethnocentric, arrogant, and narrow. In some cases, fundamental decency of human behavior should stand as a norm; blatant racism, genocide, death squads, and other stark violations of human right should be targets for change and should be part of the quids in exchange for U.S. quos. At the same time, impatience on our part for positive changes should be tempered by the realization that a given people and culture cannot change overnight, however desirable such change may be; this too, is cultural imposition and arrogance. It is also unrealistic.

Message #6: There are many motivations for acquiring arms.

Many Third World countries are still dominated by the legacy of the colonial period and post-colonial dependency. Their behavior at times may seem non-rational to those accustomed to cost-efficient thinking. The penchant for procuring modern weapons or the desire to develop a strong, effective military force, even at the expense of some other objectives, may reflect more that society's quest for legitimacy in a post-colonial world than its perception and reaction to its threat environment.

Political and military independence from the major powers, to the extent they are more attainable than economic independence, may get higher priorities for psychological, nationalistic, and symbolic reasons than for security needs. Hence, the drive for import substitution of low-level military supplies and the attempts to develop cooperative arms industries, such as the Arab Industry Organization before Camp David. This may cost participating countries more than straight foreign military buys, but, again, strict economic rationality doesn't always apply. At any rate, this notion should be explored more fully. The possible "halo effects" of the drive for greater military self-sufficiency or regional self-confidence on national budgets and national planning needs greater investigation.

Message #7: Arms sales countries differ from security assistance countries.

We should make a distinction between arms sales countries and security assistance countries.

Arms sales countries generally use their own national funds to procure defense articles and services and do not need technical assistance or training. Security assistance countries require not only training and technical assistance but also external financing to buy skills and military weapons and equipment.

It is the latter set of countries that we worry about the most. These countries have experienced the most conflicts, have been victimized by outsiders the most often, are subject to instability, and generally are in need of the most outside help. This is why we have a foreign aid program that includes military assistance. At the same time, the aid levels we provide enable only a very few countries to buy advanced weapons in sufficient numbers to make a difference; most U.S. military aid is used for buying sustainment, spare parts, and support.

Message #8: Supplier-recipient influence.

Supplier nation influence on recipient nations is vastly overrated in the literature on arms sales. It is overrated by critics of military assistance who say we don't utilize our "top dog" status to impose reform or other changes in recipient Third World countries dependent on us. It is overrated by proponents of military assistance and by those who believe our supplier relationship should yield more quids for us.

Influence or leverage is presumed to exist by liberals, who paradoxically criticize U.S. intervention policy abroad and yearn for internationalist administrations at home, but see the role of this country as having a modern-day, benign civilizing mission. This sentiment may be dubbed as an "intense imperialist regret," i.e., the saddened feeling that our exports haven't been used to better the world, while still retaining a strong preference for a world without manipulation.

Conservatives, too, expect too much from the supplier-recipient relationship. They tend to believe that the heathens out there can't do anything right, have the wrong work ethic, are incapable of protecting modern military technology, and should be kept at the end of the supply pipeline, as long as it is in our national interest to do so.

Military assistance--providing weapons, services, support, training, spares, and military construction--does provide opportunities for influence, but influence derived from arms exports tends to be episodic, uncertain, and short-lived. And it varies from bilateral relationship to bilateral relationship.

It seems to me that we have the least opportunity to influence those states with an advanced military force and almost as little influence in those societies that have the least developed military structure. Those countries in between these extremes may offer the most likely opportunities to shape and influence their force structures and planning; but that is subject to multiple limitations, one of which is the tendency of recipient nations to diversify sources despite the difficulties and economic costs of doing so.

Message #9: Not all arms sales include weapons.

Finally, a very basic message most of you should know. U.S. arms sales to Third World nations do not consist mostly of sophisticated, top-of-the-line military technology.

It is true that when we sell major weapon systems to Third World countries, we sell them the latest item, sometimes stripped of sophisticated hardware, software, or ordnance. Part of the reason for this is that we don't have many older systems to sell because they are no longer in production, and we don't, with very few exceptions, produce for the export market. Most U.S. sales consist of support equipment (cargo planes, trucks, jeeps, tents, boots, canteens), spare parts (engines, spark plugs, tubes, tires, etc.), and military services (military construction, training manuals, etc.). Less than 40 percent of all U.S. government-to-government sales to all countries has involved weapons and ammunition--the lethal things that kill and maim.

The reasons for this pattern of exports are many--problems of absorba- bility of high tech equipment, limitations on releasability and availability in the United States (we won't sell), high costs of military technology, long lead times, political difficulties, inadequate external financing, and others. Most individual sales cases involve small items--90 percent of all foreign military sales cases are under \$1 million, but the sales picture is dominated by the big, splashy sales, typically combat aircraft and other major items such as missiles. This is ironic, especially for security assistance countries, because if you look at actual country aid levels from year to year, only a small hand- ful of countries can buy sophisticated equipment in sufficient quantities to make any force structure difference--Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Greece, and maybe a few others.

For those countries requesting our assistance and our advice, we do attempt to inform them of weapons capability, cost reliability, etc. Most Third World countries need training, technical assistance, and spares. Hence, the heavy emphasis on non-weapon system sales by the United States. This is not the prevailing practice for the Soviet Union, which is more prone to ship weapons systems, hold back spares, and assign large numbers of advisers/technicians to recipient countries. It is the small, non-visible items, including training, that contribute to capability and to increases in Third World military modernization. We should focus more closely on these trans- fers, if we are to understand changes in the qualitative trends in the Third World.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Andrew K. Semmel, currently a staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was Chief of the Analysis Division, Defense Security Assistance Agency when this article was originally published in Defense 85. He has taught as an Associate Professor of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Cincinnati. Dr. Semmel received a BA degree from Moravian College, a MA degree from Ohio University, and a PhD degree from the University of Michigan.