

Doing research on ‘sensitive topics’: Studying the Sweden–South Africa Arms Deal

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Abstract

The conventional arms trade is a sensitive topic that is often shrouded in secrecy. As with most aspects of so-called ‘high politics’, processes connected to conventional arms trade habitually take place behind closed doors between a relatively small and tightly knit group of individuals. Gaining access to such people is an enormous challenge for any researcher. Moreover, building rapport with key decision-makers takes a long time, and it requires considerable effort and resolve. This article recapitulates the approach and method of a study done on conventional Swedish arms trade with South Africa. It provides insights into several substantive issues related to such research, in particular, aspects connected to elite interviewing and research ethics. The bulk of the article covers matters related to research design, access to elites, the limitations associated with elite interviewing, and the interview process that was adopted during fieldwork. The discussion on research ethics is closely, but not exclusively, connected to elite interviewing, and here the article reflects on various ethical considerations as well as the harsh reality of researching sensitive topics, such as conventional arms trade.

Keywords: arms trade, foreign policy, sensitive topics, elite interviewing, Sweden, South Africa

Introduction

Reflexive accounts of the challenges associated with researching highly politicised policy domains remain rare. Such accounts are particularly scarce in studies on so-called ‘sensitive’ topics that adopt ‘elite’ interviewing as the primary method of data gathering. As Lancaster² recently observed, “there has been little examination of the particular challenges associated with ‘elite’ interviewing [...] encountered by policy researchers”, and “the ways in which this research is conducted”. The present article adds to the small but established body of literature on elite interviewing regarding ‘sensitive’ topics by providing a reflexive and methodological account of the processes, practices and challenges associated with researching one highly politicised policy domain, namely conventional arms trade. I draw on examples from a study that was designed to explore ideals and interests (and their interrelationship) in foreign policy. An in-depth case study of this issue examined Sweden’s 1999 JAS-39 Gripen³ fighter aircraft deal with South Africa.⁴

Theoretically, the study responded to the long-standing debate in foreign policy analysis about whether ideals or interests drive foreign policy. Speaking directly to research that has aimed to bridge the ideals–interests divide, the investigation set out a framework of analysis that encompassed both ideals and interests as well as the relevant contextual forces that affect foreign policy behaviour. Empirically, the study provided an in-depth account of what the policymaking elite in Sweden was thinking and doing regarding the export of the Gripen to South Africa in the aftermath of the Cold War. It was argued that the Gripen deal with South Africa is an interesting case study for two reasons: It involves long-standing, deeply held ideals in Swedish foreign policy behaviour towards a country in the so-called ‘Global South’ as well as compelling (consequential) interest-driven calculations regarding the political economy of arms trade. Overall, the investigation illustrated how these aspects driven by ideals and interests stood side by side in this scenario and were dealt with and reflected in Sweden’s foreign policy regarding its decision to sell advanced fighter aircraft to South Africa.

There exists extensive literature on the Swedish arms trade, and there is documentation publicly available for investigating this subject matter, *inter alia*, parliamentary protocols; acts, bills and statutes; government statements and communication; reports from government agencies; and reports by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). However, very little attention has been paid to the actual practice of selling advanced weapons products to the Global South in the post-Cold War era – increasingly Sweden’s main area of export concern.⁵ More specifically, the Swedish policymaking elites’ motivations and (often unofficial) actions driving these arms trade processes have yet to attract significant analysis in contemporary academic literature.

In conjunction with preparatory theoretical and empirical work and review of the literature related to the Sweden–South Africa Gripen deal⁶ – including broader aspects related to Swedish foreign policy and arms trade – I undertook 64 semi-structured elite interviews between October 2012 and May 2016.⁷ Due to the particular focus of this study, the interview process targeted individuals with in-depth knowledge of weapons manufacturing and/or trade and foreign policy-related matters. Most of the interviews were conducted with current and former elites in government, parliament, the wider arms industry, trade unions, the military, and some special advisors for government. The present article provides a retrospective discussion of the strategies used for the investigation and draws into full view some of the challenges I encountered with this research.

The article proceeds as follows: the first part discusses the research design, and here justifications are provided for why the single case study design was adopted. In the second part, the discussion turns to the type of methods used to obtain empirical evidence. It is argued here that, while documentation on Swedish foreign policy and arms trade is available, there is insufficient data concerning the actors, their rationales and their relationships with other actors in these processes. It is for this reason that semi-structured elite interviews acted as one of the main primary data sources of the study. The third part reflects on aspects regarding research ethics and the harsh reality of investigating arms trade, while the fourth part concludes the article.

Research design: Single case study of foreign policy behaviour

Case studies can be useful to understand complex social phenomena,⁸ and the single case design can be particularly helpful to generate a deep understanding of the complexity of a social phenomenon.⁹ While most social phenomena are complex, examining conventional arms deals is extremely challenging, which creates difficulties for constructing parsimonious explanations. The social, economic and political implications connected to conventional arms deals are not only enormous; they also intersect and diverge in complicated ways. As Ikegami-Andersson¹⁰ noted, researchers interested in the weapons industry and arms trade and its intersections with varied actors and/or structures (national, transnational and international) are often discouraged from setting up any comprehensive explanations because such practices are so complex. Nevertheless, a single case study of a significant foreign policy decision, event or process (such as arms trade or other matters of so-called ‘high politics’) can generate in-depth knowledge and provide a better ‘general’ understanding of analytical propositions.¹¹

The choice of a single case study design in this study was motivated by two interrelated factors:

- the under-researched Swedish component of the South African Arms Deal, and the wider foreign policy implications of that arms sale;
- getting the direct accounts of decision-makers regarding ‘sensitive’ foreign policy-related issues is a valuable source of information and can produce rich depth, but ultimately, interviewing is a time-consuming, delicate and expensive process.

The Swedish component

The broader 1999 South African Arms Deal¹² has been extensively researched over the past twenty years. With more than ten thousand newspaper articles, dozens of journal articles and several books on the topic, it is arguably one of the most written-about events in the post-apartheid era. Most of the research on the ‘Arms Deal’ has focused on the South African rationale for purchasing sophisticated conventional weapons worth billions of dollars (USD) both in terms of micro-level empirical investigation and macro-level conceptual analyses. The majority of the accounts have, in one way or another –

- examined the decision-making processes within the post-apartheid political apparatus;
- critically assessed why national (conventional) security was favoured over human security;
- explained how a small network of power elites unduly benefited from the procurement processes; and
- evaluated the various social, economic and political effects of the Arms Deal on South African society at large.

What have been underexplored thus far are the rationales of those European states that sold the weapons to South Africa (especially France, Italy, Germany and Sweden). The Swedish case was particularly interesting for three reasons.

First, the purchase of 26 Gripens from Sweden was the most expensive and lucrative of all the Arms Deal's contracts, constituting a fifth of the overall price.¹³ However, it was also one of the most under-researched cases in the academic literature – particularly from a Swedish foreign policy perspective. Although some previous studies highlighted the strong historical relations between Swedish political and societal elites and the post-apartheid African National Congress (ANC) government in the context of the Arms Deal,¹⁴ they did not provide a comprehensive and systematic account of the rationales of the Swedish policymaking elite for the Gripen deal due to their primary focus on South Africa's incentives for buying the Gripen.

Second, by investigating the Sweden–South Africa Gripen deal, it became apparent that such a study would fill an important gap in the academic literature on Swedish foreign policy towards post-apartheid South Africa. As one of Sweden's largest trading partners in Africa¹⁵ – and one of its most adored allies – it was interesting that no in-depth analyses had been conducted regarding strategic issues related to, inter alia, trade, security and development and/or technological cooperation after the transition to democracy in 1994. While this study did not aim to fill such a substantial gap in its entirety, it did seek to provide unique insights about a significant foreign policy decision vis-à-vis post-apartheid South Africa. After all, the export of major conventional weapons, as Andrew J Pierre once noted –

[I]s far more than an economic occurrence, a military relationship or an arms control challenge – *arms sales are foreign policy writ large (original italics)*.¹⁶

Third, the Swedish component of the South African Arms Deal was thought-provoking because it involved two previously assumed distinct logics in Swedish foreign policy behaviour: small-state realism (an emphasis on national interests) and liberal internationalism (normative commitments to duties beyond borders). It is often argued that these two foreign policy traditions have served distinct purposes over the years.¹⁷ Small-state realism reflects the Swedish government's geostrategic interests in Europe – marked most notably by armed neutrality, which is maintained, among other things, by a substantial military system that has the capability and impetus to manufacture and export conventional war material. Liberal internationalism, on the other hand, reflects the Swedish government's progressive foreign policy ideals, which have traditionally manifested strongly in the Global South. This second tradition has materialised in many different shapes and forms, but one of its prominent legacies is the 'special relationship' that was formed with South Africa. While it is often said that countries share a 'special relationship' – Britain and the United States being a good example – the bond between Sweden and South Africa is unusually strong.

The 'special relationship' was primarily shaped by events that occurred between the 1960s and 1994 when Sweden supported the liberation struggle movement against

apartheid in Southern Africa. Support of the ANC-led struggle against apartheid largely reflected domestic values, and the belief that was garnered during this protracted period was that Sweden had a moral obligation to extend solidarity beyond its borders to those who were oppressed and disenfranchised.¹⁸ As the study on which this article reports suggested, Swedish–South African post-apartheid relations cannot be fully understood outside of the abovementioned historical framework or the ongoing ideological process that it engenders. These underlying factors meant that a study of the Sweden–South Africa Gripen deal had to be placed in a broader historical context and not only considered for a ‘snapshot analysis’. Such an empirical and conceptual move is essential because as Merle Lipton reminds us, history is, after all, an important part of the consciousness of any society. It contributes to the beliefs of society, shapes its understanding about itself and the world, and provides some indication of who its friends and who its enemies are.¹⁹

There are, of course, competing accounts and significant pushback against binary interpretations of Swedish foreign policy as being ‘realist’ in the so-called Global North and ‘idealist’ in the so-called Global South. From these and other critical interpretations follow the argument that support for both liberation struggle movements and armed neutrality entailed elements of realism and idealism.²⁰ Yet, despite persuasive critical interpretations of Swedish foreign policy as involving idealism and realism over time, little attention has been paid to how these aspects have systematically played out in Sweden’s post-Cold War foreign policy behaviour regarding conventional weapons trade. While Sweden’s post-Cold War military policy has received serious scholarly attention – in particular, its military activism in the context of international solidarity and multilateral security cooperation – far less attention has been given to how bilateral conventional weapons trade with developing countries in the Global South can be understood and interpreted in this evolving post-Cold War foreign policy context.

In its broadest sense, this single case study aimed to make a contribution to knowledge by arguing that Sweden’s arms trade with the Global South should not be understood in the widely used (and often implicit) explanation that it represents a shift from foreign policy ideals to interests. Instead, such a process reflects something more profound, namely a dual strategy that is consciously pursued by elites where ideals and interests are mutually constituted. Such a dual foreign policy stance – consisting of cosmopolitan and statist objectives as it relates to the production and circulation of advanced weapons products – distinguishes Sweden from most cognate non-aligned and neutral states, such as Ireland, Austria, Finland and Switzerland.

Getting the direct accounts of decision-makers

One of the stated aims of the study reported here was to look behind the official policy processes and investigate elites’ accounts of what they were thinking and doing. Such an undertaking was important because, as Glynn and Booth observe, public archives are often incomplete, and they tend to draw the researcher’s attention to the formal administrative process of policymaking rather than the substantive causes and effects.²¹

In the present study, interviews were preferable to surveys because it provided an opportunity for finding out “how people frame their views, why they hold those views and how they make connections or demonstrate disjunctions among discrete opinions”.²² As was indicated above, most of the interviews were conducted with high-ranking officials and experts in various organisations. These individuals may also be referred to as ‘elites’. When I refer to ‘elites’, I refer to people whom I chose to interview because of who they were (their social status) and the position they occupied in a particular organisation at the time. In other words, these people were not selected randomly or anonymously.²³ The cluster of elites, in whom this study was particularly interested, comprised configurations of actors who had substantial influence on and power over decisions regarding arms manufacturing and trade in the context of foreign policy behaviour.

Interviews with elites were particularly helpful since it provided me with unique insights into the subject under investigation – information that only a few possessed. Such individuals tended to have privileged access to information, understood decision-making processes and had personal experience of strategies and group behaviours. As Esther Nir²⁴ asserts, “interviews with members of the political, economic, or social elite provide valuable data that is typically hidden from public purview”. The reason for this is “information on how elites perceive situations and make key decisions provides a unique perspective that often cannot be obtained through other data collection methods”.

Lilleker,²⁵ among others, argues that interviews “can provide the means for expanding upon data and will add greater depth to scientific analysis of an event and phenomenon”. However, interviews should also be reinforced by other forms of empirical data. In the present study, I made use of data triangulation, which allowed me to look at the case from several different viewpoints. Data triangulation essentially helped me to provide a better picture of what was being researched, and ultimately, a more plausible causal analysis of Swedish foreign policy behaviour in relation to the Gripen deal with South Africa. Nevertheless, in this study, interviews were used for obtaining rich depth. By only appraising policy documents, one cannot get the personal accounts of people who are or were involved in arms contracts as was argued above. After all, to explain the motivations of actors, we need a deep understanding of the social situation, which would require an ex-post explanation where the analyst must immerse him- or herself into the subject. One crucial way of doing that is by interviewing those involved in the case under investigation.²⁶

Very few analyses on arms trade (in the context of foreign policy behaviour) provide in-depth interview material about the rationale put forward by the policymaking elite. However, there are good reasons for this: arms deals are usually shrouded in secrecy and negotiations habitually take place behind closed doors among a relatively small and tightly knit group of elites. Gaining access to such people is an enormous challenge for any researcher. Moreover, building rapport with key decision-makers takes a long time and requires considerable effort and resolve. Research methods literature often refers to elite interviewing as time-consuming and financially draining. Such observations are not ‘clichés’; they are accurate. As Seidman²⁷ importantly noted, “interviewing

research takes a great deal of time and, sometimes, money”. He qualifies this statement by acknowledging, “any method of inquiry worth anything takes time, thoughtfulness, energy and money. But interviewing is especially labour intensive.”

As a South African (that is, an outsider), I had cursory knowledge at first of Sweden’s culture, language, political system, and geography. Acquiring in-depth knowledge of such aspects took time, and these issues were important for carrying out in-depth research. A seemingly ‘simple’ trip to Stockholm often took several weeks to plan. Setting up interviews with key decision-makers often took months. Learning the Swedish language and political system took years. Gaining such knowledge was important because it smoothed the data-gathering phase. Although several policy documents in Sweden have been translated to English, there are still a vast number of protocols, bills, laws, government reports and parliamentary proceedings related to the South African Gripen deal that are still in the original language. Knowledge of the language, in particular, steadily improved the data-gathering process because it helped me to read this important primary material, which also helped me to think deeper about the interview process.

Knowledge of the Swedish language further provided me with manoeuvrability and confidence during the interviews. For example, respondents often changed to Swedish during interviews when sensitive issues related to defence and/or security were being discussed. Interestingly, in these situations, elite respondents rarely asked whether I understood the language or what was actually being said. Richardson²⁸ observed that, when the researcher’s command of the language in which the interviews are conducted improves, confidence in interacting with elite respondents also increases. This, he argues, produces in-depth knowledge of the subject under investigation.

One can, of course, make use of interpreters to carry out elite interviews, especially if the aim is to conduct a comparative study in cross-national and cross-linguistic settings. However, there are several drawbacks and challenges with such a choice. First, interpreters can threaten the validity of findings despite adequate preparation and validity checks. Kapborg and Berterö,²⁹ for example, observed how a researcher “may not know whether the interpreter has summarised and/or modified the responses” from interviewees. One significant problem in this regard is ‘gatekeeping’. Williamson et al.³⁰ argue that gatekeeping can occur “when an interpreter selectively fails to relay participants’ responses that are believed by the interpreter to reflect negatively on their ethno-cultural group.” Second, interpreters can undermine trust, especially when sensitive and confidential issues are discussed. As Hilary Drew³¹ points out, “the addition of this third person may undermine the trust and rapport that the researcher must work hard to secure”. Without being prompted, one of my elite respondents in the study reflected upon this exact issue during an interview when he argued, “without trust, you have nothing” (interview #49, October 2015)³². Finally, as most of the literature suggests, using interpreters are expensive. In this study, I did not have the financial resources to cover such costs. Nevertheless, the lack-of-resources argument can further be viewed through the lens of efficient resource use. All studies have limited resources, and one takes strategic decisions on how to make the most of them. Thus, it was not

exactly a weakness of my study that I lacked resources. On the contrary, the strength of this study was that I used the resources I had efficiently.

Taken together, the aspects listed above influenced my decision to favour a single case study design over others. These ‘justifications’ may, of course, be subject to intense scrutiny. However, as with all scientific investigations, pragmatic decisions had to be made regarding the aim of the study. In this regard, Karen Ross emphasises:

[A]ll research studies are a complex mix of opportunism, compromise, serendipity and skill. Surely what is as, if not, more important is the motivation behind the study, the ethical stance which informs the design, the ideology and theoretical frames which determine the focus.³³

Semi-structured elite interviews

According to Seidman,³⁴ semi-structured ‘elite interviews’ are the most efficient way of obtaining information about policymaking. Such interviews tend to balance rigidity and flexibility, acting as a guide for setting questions in a structured format while still allowing for a situation where the interviewer can “prompt for more information” outside of the structured questions.³⁵ Many new and unexpected issues resulted from the interviews, especially when sensitive topics – such as weapons exports or security policies – were discussed. The semi-structured format was therefore preferable since I could not always anticipate which type of responses would be given to sensitive questions and had to be open to adapt and make changes as the interview progressed.

The critical reader may ask why 64 interviews were conducted. Why not 44 or 74? The reader may also enquire how one would know whether 64 interviews were enough. Seidman³⁶ contends that there are two important criteria for “enough”, namely sufficiency and saturation. Sufficiency considers whether there are sufficient numbers to reflect the range of participants and sites of the targeted population. As was indicated already, the sample for this study was rather varied and included a diverse group of respondents with a wide range of responsibilities and expertise. The point of saturation, to put it candidly, was reached when I began to hear the same information being reported and no longer learned anything new or extraordinary from the interview process. In what follows, I discuss aspects concerning access to respondents and the limitations I experienced in this regard, and I reflect on the interview process during my fieldwork.

Access and limitations

Interviewing high-ranking officials or experts can be a daunting task for a junior researcher with little experience of such practices. Such a task is even more daunting when the subject under investigation relates to sensitive matters regarding so-called ‘high politics’ (national security, trade or law), and the research is conducted in a ‘foreign setting’ and in a foreign language.

Setting up interviews with elites often took several weeks or months. However, once rapport with key individuals had been established the process accelerated. As

Bogner et al.³⁷ observe, elites tend to be well connected, and they regularly provide researchers with contact details of people in their professional networks. In some instances, they even initiate contact with others on the researcher's behalf. This type of sampling is often referred to as 'snowball sampling'— a technique frequently used in populations that are difficult for researchers to access.³⁸ There is substantial literature on the scope, significance, viability and failures of snowball sampling; however, most studies agree that this referral practice is a useful strategy for expanding the researcher's social network.

Being new to Sweden and possessing limited knowledge of the topic under investigation, my first sampling approach was to ask people in my professional circles to put me in contact with individuals who had knowledge of arms trade, weapons manufacturing processes and/or issues related to security and foreign policy. Consequently, in the opening stages of the research process, I contacted academics, journalists and persons working at civil society organisations.

Those initial contact sessions were invaluable because it helped me to sort out my ideas on the topic and gain useful knowledge before moving on to semi-structured elite interviews. It should be noted that, due to the unofficial and unstructured nature of these initial contact sessions, I did not include them in the official interview record appendix. In other words, they were considered 'off-the-record' discussions since these individuals did not occupy decision-making positions regarding matters relating to security, defence and/or foreign policy. Nevertheless, many of these individuals provided me with contact details of 'intermediary' persons who, in turn, would put me in contact with relevant people. The latter was a valuable process to get the ball rolling at the beginning of my fieldwork. The snowball sampling process noticeably changed after I had gained access to a relatively small number of elite respondents. What followed was a process where an 'intermediary' was no longer necessary because elite respondents would put me in direct contact with one or two of their close colleagues. Once I was in the so-called 'inner circle' of the political, military and industry elites connected to the matters related to the arms trade and/or foreign policy and/or security, the process accelerated.

Being a South African investigating matters related to Swedish foreign policy and security was most advantageous in terms of access. One of the most beneficial aspects was that several experts and high-ranking officials in Sweden admitted (somewhat surprisingly) that they would not have responded to my initial emails or telephone calls if I had a typical Swedish name or surname (despite being referred to them by a known colleague or studying at a prominent Swedish university). Being regularly inundated with requests for interviews, many elite respondents cited "interview fatigue" with Swedish journalists and scholars. Others considered my request "intriguing" and "unusual" because South African scholars are not typically known for studying matters related to Swedish security and foreign policy. Richardson³⁹ experienced something similar in his research on the significance of the disputed Southern Kuril Islands for post-Soviet Russian national identity. In his study, he reflected on a "certain curiosity from the [Russian] elite as to why a researcher from the United Kingdom [...] was interested in such a seemingly obscure topic". These and other examples seem to suggest that

being an ‘outsider’ can be beneficial and rewarding. As Karen Ross observed, being an ‘outsider’ can, at times, mean that you are “either non-threatening or exotic, or both”.⁴⁰

Coupled with what I experienced as these so-called ‘outsider’ and ‘exotic’ elements was South Africa’s special relationship with Sweden mentioned earlier. Discussions regarding the ‘special relationship’ often proved to be beneficial for gaining access to some high-ranking officials, especially those who were involved in the various anti-apartheid movements in Sweden over the years and those who had worked closely with the South African government and other NGOs since the democratic transition in 1994. Such personal experiences were also habitually discussed at length during interviews, and it usually acted as a useful platform for talks on a broad range of foreign policy issues.

Although I gained access to former and current high-ranking officials in government, state departments, parliament and other relevant organisations in Sweden, getting these individuals to talk openly about weapons contracts was sometimes challenging. As Feinstein⁴¹ notes, getting respondents to talk about sensitive and ‘secret’ defence-related matters is a challenge for most researchers. Due to allegations of corruption and misconduct during the Sweden–South Africa Gripen deal, respondents were hesitant at times to comment on specific defence-related contractual agreements (more on this below). Yet, even in those instances where respondents contacted me afterwards and asked to retract an official statement or to change the wording of something they had said, it still meant that I had the background information. As Thomas observed:⁴²

[A]nything I receive is better than nothing; I may grind my teeth at not being able to report some data, but I would much rather know what I cannot say than to not know and then be forced to speculate.

Admittedly, such individuals were in the minority and, despite the challenges listed above, most respondents in Sweden were willing to speak about the Gripen deal with South Africa and broader issues related to Swedish foreign policy. Not only did I gain unusual access to elites in Sweden, but interviews tended to be longer (some lasting two hours or more), usually more in-depth and respondents were generally more forthcoming than those interviewed elsewhere.

In South Africa, for example, the process was noticeably different because access to people of importance was often denied or interviews cancelled at the last minute. In those cases where access was granted to high-ranking officials in government and other state departments, bureaucratic red tape habitually caused interruptions, inter alia, being subjected to comprehensive security checks at government buildings, which created considerable delays and often affected the interview process in a variety of ways. In other instances, respondents in South Africa agreed to meet on condition that the interview took place in public settings, such as cafés, restaurants, pubs and even casinos – not at their place of employment. Approximately half of the twelve interviews in South Africa took place in such public settings and sometimes late at night. Apart from a few occurrences, respondents in South Africa generally tended to be more reserved than

those in Sweden and often refused outright to comment on ‘sensitive’ security-related matters for reasons on which I will elaborate later.

Process

It was advantageous to start my elite interviews with informal discussions, which often lasted approximately ten minutes. So-called ‘small talk’ was helpful to ease into the discussion and assess the respondent’s demeanour. Respondents often talked more freely about themselves and work-related issues when informal questions were asked. Mosley⁴³ provides valuable insights into how “just talking to people” can be a useful tool in political science research. Not only did this create a relaxed environment during the interviews; it also revealed interesting and relevant details about the respondent. However, when more formal or sensitive questions were posed, the demeanour of the respondents often changed, and the tone of the interview became structured and reserved. During most of the interviews, I saved the difficult and sensitive questions until the end, when a degree of rapport had already been established with the informant.

Since elites tend to be busy and occupied with various important tasks, every effort was made to get background information from other sources before the interview took place. Hence, I was often over-prepared for interviews, especially towards the latter stages of my fieldwork. In the opening stages of my fieldwork, I often irritated respondents by asking them to repeat information that they knew was readily available elsewhere. Good background research did not only minimise irritation; it also assisted in accessing elites and often acted as a flattering technique. Elites were routinely impressed when I listed their record of accomplishments, which indicated that I had read their curriculum vitae, website, book, article, report or debate transcript, or I informed them that I had discussed their work or decisions with colleagues.

That being said, preparedness and expressed knowledge of a topic comprise an awkward balancing act and a fine line to walk despite the commitment to being prepared for interviews as discussed above. It was evident throughout the research process that a certain level of inexperience and naivety was beneficial at times. Asking deep questions about a sensitive topic in a manner that conveyed my ignorance often led to lengthy and comprehensive answers. In fact, some respondents even took the opportunity during such occasions to boast extensively about themselves and their role in a specific event. Furthermore, several respondents went into considerable detail, explaining so-called ‘secrets’ during moments when I professed genuine ignorance of a topic or event.

While most of my interviews were recorded, some respondents expressed their preference for not being recorded during the session. In such circumstances, I took notes. Taking notes can potentially put the interviewer at a disadvantage because it prevents one from fully focusing on what is being said. However, directly following an interview where the respondent did not want to be recorded, I would piece together what was said and, where agreed on beforehand, I would email the notes to the respondent to ensure that everything was in order. In those cases where I was unsure of a particular statement in Swedish – especially when the interview was not being recorded – I followed a process of oral verification during the interview or written verification afterwards.

Thomas⁴⁴ asserts that elites are often in favour of being recorded during interviews and, in my study, that was mostly the case (notably in Sweden). I also preferred to record the interviews for the reasons discussed below.

Recording interviews allowed me to focus completely on what was being said and how it was said. When one writes extensively while the respondent is speaking, one tends to leave out important information, focus on the wrong information (influenced largely by pitch and emphasis) or fail to assess the demeanour of the interviewee while he or she is explaining a topic or event. Body language and facial expression can, at times, be a good test of whether the informant is comfortable with the question and it can often signal whether the line of enquiry should become more surgical (that is, probing) or whether one should opt for more general questions.

Recording the interviews was also useful, as it tended to get respondents to speak a great deal – something I realised from the early stages of my fieldwork. Here I followed Seidman's advice about "listening more and talking less"⁴⁵ because getting respondents to describe or explain a topic in detail and having a full record of that detail is beneficial for various reasons. When respondents discussed a topic, concept, event or word with which I was not familiar, I did not necessarily need to interrupt them for clarification since I could revisit the recording several times to make sure I understood the context in which it was described. When making notes by hand, one cannot always revisit the interview and understand the context within which certain things had been said – especially several years after the interview had taken place. Besides, I preferred not to contact respondents afterwards to clarify what was being said during a recording unless it was absolutely necessary.

Recording the interview also allowed me to have the exact wording of what was said. This meant that I did not have to summarise, paraphrase or even correct grammar. The exactness of what was being said was important since it assisted me during the coding and processing stage, and it allowed me to take advantage of the important differences between interviewees' responses. If I only had a summary of a concept or event mentioned in the interview, with no further explanation to refer back to, I would forfeit the richness of diversity.

Recordings were also beneficial because they allowed me to capture the precise way certain topics or events were explained. For example, a pause, a throat clearing, a sarcastic comment, a joke, an unexpected muttering, a hesitation, a stammer – these were all helpful in capturing the moment in its full richness and diversity.

One limitation of the interview process in Sweden, however, was a slight language barrier. Although I have a decent grasp of the Swedish language, there were misunderstandings at times, which often occurred due to my lack of understanding of some regional accents. Several interviewees were kind enough to speak in English, but this inevitably meant that certain meanings and nuances were lost or left out during the interviewing process. In those situations where communication in English became problematic, I encouraged respondents to speak in Swedish. However, as I mentioned

previously, many respondents also routinely switched to Swedish when sensitive issues were discussed.

In South Africa, the language barrier was less problematic, even though some respondents spoke English with a ‘thick accent’ – something to which I have become accustomed over the years. It is rather disconcerting to admit that I conversed with Swedish respondents (both in Sweden and South Africa) in their native tongue – a language I have been exposed to for only a few years – but could not converse with many South African respondents in their native tongues – languages to which I had been exposed for most of my life. One can, of course, only speculate, but it is interesting to contemplate how much more could have been achieved in the study had I been able to conduct some of my interviews (or initial contact) in isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho or Setswana among others.

How questions were asked

The main purpose of the interview questions was to capture how ideals and interests shaped Sweden’s foreign policy behaviour regarding the Gripen deal with South Africa. To that end, questions were asked based on the analytical framework guiding the study. It was acknowledged from the outset that there can be no guarantee that one is asking the ‘right’ questions. Questions also have much to do with the type of relationship one forms with the respondents. As Robert Weiss points out:

What is essential in interviewing is to maintain a working partnership. You can get away with phrasing questions awkwardly and with a variety of other errors that will make you wince when you listen to the tape later. What you cannot get away with is failure to work with the respondent as a partner in the production of useful material.⁴⁶

My general strategy was to approach respondents in a relaxed, outgoing but professional manner. Due to the secrecy involved in arms trade and the associated corruption scandals frequently related to such practices, respondents were often tense or defensive at first. Following Christopher Williams’s⁴⁷ advice on how to interview powerful people, I routinely eased these apprehensive atmospheres by telling a joke, talking about the weather, discussing the architecture of the building, enquiring about the pictures and/or photos on the wall in their office or providing an opinion about the quality of coffee or food we were consuming during an interview, among other things. As was stated earlier, ‘just talking to people’ is a valuable tool in political science research. Starting with informal questions or discussions was essential for ‘breaking the ice’. High-ranking officials typically told me that I only had 45 minutes or one hour for the interview. Then I would get them to talk about themselves or their achievements, and that one hour often became two hours or a beer after work or supper that evening.

It was useful to memorise my questions as much as possible, and not look at my question sheet while the respondent was talking. In the opening stages of my data-gathering phase, I often did the latter. However, I noticed that this was unproductive

because it created an artificial or mechanical process in which the respondent did not feel valued or being listened to but rather as just another number on my interview list. In addition to aspects already mentioned, I also had an internal strategy for asking questions – one which I based on the format of a rugby match:

I always started with a broad question where I allowed the respondent to speak at length (this was the ‘warm-up phase’). I then moved to ask questions that were more clearly in line with my study (this was the first 30 minutes of the rugby game – the phase where one assesses one’s opponent). I then followed the previous procedure but incrementally channelled my questions towards my analytical framework (this was the three-quarter mark of the match, a crucial period in any rugby game where tactical decisions and the execution of strategy become vital). In the penultimate phase of questioning, I would ask explicit and probing questions directly related to my analytical framework in conjunction with relevant follow-up questions – often in quick succession (this was the final fifteen minutes of the rugby match – the so-called make or break phase – where one exhausts all of one’s resources to get the required result). In the closing phase, I would shift back to asking a broad question or two (this was the ‘cooling-down phase’). The closing phase was often the most rewarding and revealing because respondents would answer the broad question but often return to a previously asked probing question and then, as an afterthought, elaborate on that in more detail as the atmosphere was more relaxed at that stage.

The rugby match strategy suited me well and allowed me to guide my questions in a specific manner. It also provided me with adequate scope to adjust my questions as the process unfolded. The important point to make here, however, is that as the research progressed, the relative importance of questions changed, and the formulation of questions became sharper. The questions primarily became more defined throughout the research process because I regularly alternated between data collection and analysis; that is, I did not conduct interviews over a four-year period and then analysed all the data retrospectively. I examined and reflected upon the interviews in consignments throughout the process. Such a method was vital for reformulating my interview questions in order to obtain new but relevant data as far as possible. It should also be noted here that documentary work was conducted throughout the research process and in conjunction with the interviews. Although interviews acted as one of the main sources of original primary data, they were often conducted in order to double-check and/or clarify information from written sources and to obtain new information about direct participation in matters related to defence and foreign policy.

The impact of time on validity

The Sweden–South Africa Gripen deal was a complicated affair covering some 18 years – arms deals are normally long-drawn-out affairs. Even though the official contract was signed in 1999, the final payments for the Gripen deal only concluded in 2019. Moreover, due to the lifespan of fighter aircraft – typically 30 to 40 years – continuous agreements were negotiated between the buying and selling party. For these reasons, reporting on the exact details of the events was sometimes challenging.

Given the historical nature of this case study, respondents were asked (and expected) to provide details about events that had occurred a long time ago. This lapse in time meant that there was a possibility that important information might have been left out or altered during the interview process.

As time passed between the events and the interviews, there was also a possibility that circumstantial factors might have coloured the recollections of some of the respondents. A practical example of this is the negative publicity the Sweden–South Africa Gripen deal received in the aftermath of the contract being signed. As discussed throughout the study, the Gripen deal had been subject to intense scrutiny and criticism both in Sweden and South Africa (and internationally, for that matter). Respondents were well aware of these criticisms and some often went to great lengths to profess their innocence or non-involvement in corrupt practices. These criticisms frequently influenced the manner in which some answers were provided. Furthermore, respondents frequently admitted that they would not have spoken to me if I were investigating the corruption scandals connected to the Gripen deal (more on this below). Although the latter was not unusual, there was a possibility that some answers were tailored and channelled towards particular events and/or actions and not others.

Despite these challenges and drawbacks of the interview process, it nevertheless provided me with a rare insight into what elites and policymakers were thinking and doing. Besides, the interview sample of this study was rather substantial (64 interviews), and the use of data triangulation was a useful tool to establish the potential gaps between words and deeds. In addition, having the direct wording from the policymaking elite helped me to assess the oft-stated economic-technical matter of fact aspects and problematise the common-sense assertions provided by respondents. However, even if some of the responses were coloured by *ex post* factors, the interview material provided in this study was very rich and diverse. In several parts of the study, extraordinary statements regarding foreign policy decisions were frequently made by the policymaking elite – aspects that have not been reported in previous research. Such material provided a unique insight into how people in positions of power think and act.

Research ethics and the harsh reality of investigating the arms trade

As a researcher, I have a general duty to avoid harm, tell the truth and show “principled sensitivity to the rights of others”.⁴⁸ I also need to take into consideration aspects concerning my own well-being and safety. Arms procurement processes, as was argued already, are sensitive topics for both the respondents providing valuable information during interviews as well as the researcher who is entrusted with this delicate information. It would be incorrect to think that elites or the institutions they represented do not deserve the same ethical considerations as any other research respondents or institutions. To conduct ethical and safe research, I carried out the process in line with the Ethical Guidelines of the Swedish Research Council for social science research (Vetenskapsrådet).

The first objective of an ethical and safe research process was to communicate the aim and purpose of the study with respondents before they participated in interviews and to obtain informed consent. It was not my intention to deceive respondents about the true nature of the research carried out in this study even when it meant that some individuals would turn down requests for participation.

Second, it was decided to conceal the identity of my respondents in order to avoid any possible harm that may arise after publication. According to the Chatham House Rule, one can make such arrangements since the researcher is not required to identify the individual or the affiliation of the respondent. While I did list the type of actors interviewed during the research process in an appendix document, I did not refer to any particular individual or his or her affiliation in the empirical sections of the study. Instead, interviews were numbered and dates for the interviews were provided. For example, a direct quotation or general statement would be cited as (interview #34, May 2015) or (interview #7, May 2013). Where necessary I used the terms ‘senior’ or ‘high-ranking’ to provide some indication of rank or position, but this was kept to a minimum. The decision to conceal the identities of my respondents opened this study to further scrutiny and it was acknowledged that such a move had significant implications for the conceptual framing and research design of the wider investigation. But given the sensitive nature of conventional arms trade, it was a decision that had to be made in order to gain the trust of my respondents⁴⁹ – many of whom provided me with confidential information, much of which I was not able to report.

Third, I acknowledged and respected the fact that experts and high-ranking officials were often constrained by organisational processes and legal practices that aim to guard the interests of these against public scrutiny. When respondents did not want to comment on specific topics, I respected their preferences and moved on to another topic. These ethical considerations potentially had an effect on the scientific rigour and validity of the study. However, due to the nature of the event under investigation, the latter was a trade-off that I was willing to make.

In this study, I encountered little formal or informal gatekeeping practices from institutions and individuals – a practice often experienced by researchers interested in ‘sensitive’ policy processes. There were instances where I had to communicate the aims and purposes of my study with a senior official’s colleague, secretary or spokesperson, but this rarely influenced access and did not have any measurable effect on participation. Although I was extremely fortunate in that regard, I did, however, encounter something more profound: overt and covert threats from third parties.

During the data-gathering phase of the study, it became clear that there are forces in both Sweden and South Africa who want to silence researchers and critics interested in matters concerning arms trade. Several people – known and unknown – warned me throughout the research process to take caution when investigating arms trade matters. At times, these warnings materialised as explicit verbal threats. For example, following a presentation of my work on the South African Gripen deal in Uppsala, Sweden, an unknown person approached me, removed his name badge, enquired about my personal

details and said, “[d]o you enjoy your job? Because if you continue like this, your job and your life in Sweden will be destroyed. We can make sure about that.”

A similar incident occurred during a formal gathering in Stockholm. At this event, an unknown person approached me and said:

There are people out there who will not like this kind of research, not at all. If I were you, I would look for something else to write about. If you don’t, they will make sure that you are discredited.

When I asked whether he was such a person, he smirked and walked away. In South Africa, I was also regularly reminded to “tread carefully” and to “avoid certain questions” that could land me in “trouble with the authorities”. While I took the necessary precautions during my fieldwork, I did not allow these overt and covert threats to deter me from carrying out the empirical research for this study. Whether these threats could eventually materialise is a matter of speculation and a risk I was willing to take.

In 2013, the ANC-led government proposed a so-called Protection of State Information Bill (colloquially known as the Secrecy Bill). This bill aims to prevent investigations into sensitive government actions with the purpose of guarding state officials against answering questions relating to so-called ‘state interests’. Investigations into the broader 1999 Arms Deal fall under such activities. The purpose of this legislation is ultimately to curb and protect the dissemination of state information. The leaking of official state documents, which are determined to fall under the category of ‘sensitive information’, can lead to severe legal penalties. Investigators caught with such information could spend up to 25 years in jail in South Africa. This is mainly relevant to cases where state corruption or ineptitude is revealed.⁵⁰

The so-called Secrecy Bill has broad definitions of security, national security and state security – none of which is particularly clear. In addition, the bill is ambiguous about what constitutes confidential or top-secret information. For these and other reasons, the empirical investigation in this study did not focus on corruption as a research aim. The assumption was rather that corruption was and is fundamentally built into the global weapons trading industry.⁵¹ Most of the 1999 South African Arms Deal studies thus far have focused on matters of corruption in one way or another. While it is important to highlight such issues as a public duty, the studies have caused some complications for researchers interested in examining strategic decision-making regarding matters related to defence and foreign policy where South Africa is involved.

Of all the verbal and written post-publication criticisms directed at this study on the Sweden–South Africa Gripen deal, the lion’s share focused on my lack of researching (or bringing more critical attention to) corruption. In light of that, I want to use this opportunity to clarify why corruption was not an overarching research aim in the study. My reasons for not researching corruption were not only driven by ethical, legal and safety concerns; there were important conceptual and methodological reasons as well.

Corruption in the conventional arms trade is (or can be) an intervening variable. It is not an independent variable. The global arms trade is indeed a notoriously corrupt business, but corruption is not the driver of the conventional arms trade. Consider it like this: corruption cannot explain *why* countries such as Sweden, Germany or Italy, amongst others, manufacture and export highly advanced conventional weapons products. It can, however, explain *how* elements of a particular arms deal contract were secured. In other words, corruption is a *how* feature of arms trade because it can only describe (parts of) how a deal might take place. It does not and cannot explain the wide array of preferences and logics of the political economy of arms trade, that is, the deeper underlying forces that drive foreign policy decisions regarding the export of conventional weapon systems. Besides, the focus on corruption as an independent explanatory variable of the conventional arms trade is reductionist because the relevant processes involve a host of complex foreign policy concerns where issues such as “security, human rights and international order interact most directly with economic concerns such as trade, jobs and profits”.⁵² Considering the above-mentioned and other comments, I tried my utmost to focus on strategic decision-making aspects regarding the political economy of arms trade in the context of foreign policy behaviour.

Conclusion

The study on which this article is based, aimed to provide a reflexive account of some of the strategies used and challenges faced when investigating a highly politicised ‘sensitive topic’, namely conventional arms trade. Studies on this topic but also on related topics rarely bring into full view the processes and practices involved in such research, especially aspects regarding elite interviewing. Lancaster importantly notes that reflexive accounts of these research processes are “essential for better understanding the dilemmas of research which are too often sanitised or lost in other methodological descriptions”.⁵³ Some might consider such reporting as ‘a risky enterprise’ because it “may leave researchers exposed and vulnerable”.⁵⁴ However, I argue that, while the findings of social scientific investigations are important, we, as researchers, also need to reflect honestly and openly about the methodological choices we make (and for which reasons), the strategies we adopt during fieldwork, and the multitude of complex challenges we face during our research.

ENDNOTES

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- ³ The Gripen is often referred to as 'Griffin' in English. The Swedish acronym JAS (jakt och spaningsuppdrag) translates to "hunting, attack and reconnaissance".
- ⁴ See WS Coetzee. *Ideals and interests in Swedish foreign policy: Explaining the South African Gripen deal*. Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2018.
- ⁵ See WS Coetzee. "Sweden's weapons exports paradox". In K Bjørkdahl & A de Bengy Puyvallée (eds), *Scandinavian humanitarianism in the 21st century: Do-gooders and the end of aid*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021 [forthcoming].
- ⁶ These included, inter alia, official speeches and statements, policy documents, government reports, journal articles, newspaper articles, books, other electronic sources, etc. The Arms Deal Virtual Press Office (<http://www.armsdeal-vpo.co.za>), a website dedicated to archiving virtually every Swedish, British, German, French, Italian and South African newspaper article, legal document and journal article run on the broader Arms Deal (12 002 at the last count), was perhaps the most important source of information in this regard. The Arms Deal Virtual Press Office is maintained by members of the public whose main purpose is to disseminate information related to the broader 1999 South African Arms Deal.
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- ¹¹ For a good discussion regarding analytic generalisation in case study design, see Yin *op. cit.*, p. 15.
- ¹² The 'Arms Deal' also included the purchase of sophisticated weaponry such as training aircraft, corvettes, helicopters and submarines from Germany, Italy, France and Britain by the South African government.
- ¹³ The 26 Gripens cost the South African government approximately 19 billion rand, or approximately 1,5 billion US dollars. At the time, it was the most expensive foreign arms deal in both South Africa and Sweden's history.
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