
Sweden's Weapons Exports Paradox

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5.1 Introduction

The increased willingness by successive Swedish governments to export advanced conventional weapons has been a contentious and heatedly debated topic for several years. Many in academic and lay circles alike are perplexed and dismayed by what they perceive as an inconsistent Swedish foreign policy: On the one hand, championing peaceful, ethical, and altruistic practices on an international stage, and on the other, promoting increased militarization and upholding the interest-driven preferences of the arms political economy. Critics maintain that conventional weapons trade – especially to countries in the Global South – contradicts Sweden's oft-cited internationalist values, that is, normative commitments to duties beyond borders. After all, the Global South has historically been Sweden's ideals-driven area of concern regarding a wide range of social, political, economic, and environmental issues (as several chapters in this volume detail). In short, opponents argue that arms trade is antithetical to Sweden's professed foreign policy ideals and crucially undermines emancipatory and transformative processes in developing countries in various ways.

Evidently, Sweden's weapons exports raise a host of important and suggestive questions about so-called Swedish "exceptionalism." Yet despite provoking considerable debate, 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. More specifically, the Swedish policy-making elite's personal motivations and (often unofficial) actions driving these arms trade processes have yet to attract significant analysis in contemporary academic literature. The latter, however, is not entirely surprising. Arms deals are usually shrouded in secrecy and negotiations habitually take place behind closed doors between a relatively small and tightly knit group of elites.

Using the Sweden-South Africa JAS-39 Gripen fighter jet deal as a case study, this chapter sheds light on the paradoxical logics embedded in the policymaking elites' rationale for exporting advanced conventional weapons to the so-called developing world. In its broadest sense, this chapter argues 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, drawing on Aggestam and Hyde-Price's (2016) insightful analysis of Sweden's post-Cold War military activism, it is argued that these processes reflect something more profound: A dual strategy that is consciously pursued by elites, one that is driven both by the Swedish internationalist tradition of "doing good" and "being good" in the world and for instrumental purposes.

The empirical findings are based mainly on sixty-four semi-structured elite interviews and archival work that were conducted between October 2012 and May 2016 in Sweden and South Africa. Due to the particular focus of this study, the interview process targeted individuals with in-depth knowledge of weapons manufacturing/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.¹

The chapter proceeds as follows: The next section provides a contextual overview of the case study to familiarize the reader with some of the most pertinent empirical aspects related to the Gripen deal, as well as the major criticisms of that weapons sale. The purpose of such a synopsis is to "set the scene" for the remainder of this chapter. In the two following sections, the analysis considers how the Gripen deal transpired in the context of "doing good" and "being good," respectively. These discussions aim to highlight some of the professed "softer" values, beliefs, and symbolic factors that were connected to the decision and how both insiders and outsiders perceived them. Thereafter, the chapter maps out the awkward strategy of "enlightened interests" which was pursued by the policymaking elite. Such a discussion illustrates how Sweden's

¹ It was decided to conceal the identity of my respondents 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 informant. While I do mention the type of actors interviewed during the research process, I do not make reference to any particular individual or their affiliation in the empirical discussion. Instead, interviews are numbered.

weapons exports to South Africa transpired in the context of continuity and change because it stood at the intersection of traditional normative commitments and a strategy that was born out of necessity. The chapter then proceeds to reflect the consequential material calculations regarding Sweden's weapons exports and why these were considered equally important for Sweden's overall foreign policy interests. In the concluding section, the wider implications that follow from the case study findings are identified and consideration is given to how we can think about these aspects conceptually and analytically.

5.2 Contextualizing the Sweden–South Africa Gripen Deal

On December 3, 1999 the government of South Africa signed a Strategic Defense Procurement Package (SDDP) with the Swedish aerospace and defense company (SAAB AB), and the Swedish government for 26 Advanced Light Fighter Aircraft (ALFA) JAS-39 Gripen. An SDDP differs from routine arms purchases in the sense that it is a rare and extremely expensive acquisition (Sylvester and Seegers 2008). The 26 Gripens cost the South African government approximately 1.5 billion US dollars,² which, at the time, was the most expensive foreign arms deal in both South Africa and Sweden's history (Eliasson 2010; Resare 2010). Conventional weapons acquisitions are habitually long-drawn-out affairs and the Sweden–South Africa Gripen deal is no exception. Even though the official contract was signed in 1999, the final payments for the Gripen deal only concluded at the end of 2019.³ Moreover, because of the lifespan of fighter aircraft – typically 30–40 years – continuous agreements are negotiated between the buying and selling party.

Due to the social, economic, and political implications of an arms transfer of this nature, the Gripen deal (like most arms deals with developing countries) was subject to intense scrutiny and criticism from the outset. A weapons deal with South Africa was considered particularly controversial given Sweden's special relationship with that country. The special relationship was primarily shaped by events that occurred

² DefenceWeb. 2013. "A dozen SAAF Gripens in long-time storage." Available at www.defenceweb.co.za.

³ The final cost of the deal is estimated to be significantly higher because the price of the aircraft was pegged to the prevailing exchange rate. Essentially, what this means is that the more the South African rand depreciates to the US dollar, the higher the cost to the South African government.

between the 1960s and 1994 when Sweden supported the liberation struggle movement against apartheid in Southern Africa. As the leading faction of the liberation struggle movement, the African National Congress (ANC) received by far the most Swedish aid during this period (in fact, the financial support the ANC-led liberation movement received from Sweden was the most offered by any country in the world).

In the lead up to the first democratic elections in 1994, the Swedish government and other organizations sharply intensified humanitarian aid and financial assistance “in recognition of the needs facing the ANC in order to establish itself inside [the country] and to be able to participate fully and effectively in the transformation of South Africa” (Sellström 2002: 828). Overall, through a series of social, economic, and political initiatives – including full-scale sanctions against the apartheid regime between 1987 and 1993 – Sweden’s support had a measurable impact on South Africa’s transition to democracy in 1994.

In the aftermath of the democratic transition, both the ANC-led government and the Swedish government acknowledged that one of the critical challenges for post-apartheid South Africa was to provide basic services and infrastructure to those who were disadvantaged by the apartheid system and to tackle the extreme income gaps between black and white. Hence, significant emphasis was placed on restitution, reconstruction, and development as part of a broader project of state-building in South Africa (SIDA 1998; SMFA 1999). It was because of these pressing issues that many critics questioned the logic behind the Gripen deal.

In both countries, civil society and religious groups, politicians from various parties, as well as numerous academics, analysts, and journalists, questioned the logic behind the Gripen deal by highlighting the contradictions of Sweden’s support for the struggle against apartheid and the promotion of weapons exports to South Africa – a country facing a so-called desperate crisis of poverty. NGOs were particularly concerned about the large or, as they termed it, “one-sided” emphasis that the Swedish government and industry placed on trade and industrial offset agreements (interviews #1, #2, #3).

In addition, the security rationale behind the Gripen deal was also heavily criticized for various reasons. The mainstay of these arguments revolved around the prioritization of narrowly defined state-centric security over human security. For example, with the inauguration of the democratically elected government in 1994, there was little reason for the post-apartheid state to fear regional military threats (cf. Harris

2002; Holden 2008; Feinstein 2009, 2012; Holden and van Vuuren 2011). Furthermore, despite South Africa's ageing Air Force and Navy equipment, it was still the military heavyweight in the region – possessing overwhelming defensive and offensive capabilities. Questions were thus raised whether conventional security threats outweighed other more credible security challenges for South Africa. Critics maintained that the real threats to South Africa's national security lay in nonmilitary fields such as HIV/AIDS⁴ and widespread poverty (ASC 1999).

5.3 The Intention of “Doing Good”

Owing to the widespread criticisms of the Gripen deal, former Swedish Prime Minister, Göran Persson, assured aggrieved parties who were concerned about the financial strain the acquisition would place on the new democracy that the Gripen deal would not detract from the “much greater” values-driven relationship between the two countries (Swedish Parliament, Protocol 1999/2000:38). Such rhetoric, based on the Swedish government's historic commitment to socio-economic and socio-political equality in South Africa, was common in Persson's Gripen deal rebuttals during Parliamentary sessions.

One of the key assumptions put forward by those elites who championed the Gripen deal in Sweden was that the Gripen program would transfer knowledge from the Swedish industrial base to South Africa through research, education, and training (interviews #17, #18, #19). Hence, the idea put forward by several respondents was that the Gripen program would “add value” to South Africa's broader development goals, especially the projected technology spillovers which would be beneficial for the wider South African industrial base (interviews #8, #19, #23, #54).

A senior defense official explained that Sweden's “generous technology transfers [connected to the Gripen deal] was mostly based on a paying it forward principle” (interview #56). Namely, it refrained from a hard protectionist and zero-sum approach by opting for a more internationalist long-term cooperative approach. As one defense advisor observed, “The way we were thinking about was that if you buy our plane then you get a lot of training, a lot of jobs, a lot of technology transfers, and a lot of broad-based development cooperation” (interview #45).

⁴ At the time, South Africa had some of the highest HIV/AIDS infection rates in the world (cf. van der Westhuizen 2005).

Another important motivation was offsets, which are often referred to as industrial participation programs. Such an arrangement requires the seller country (Sweden) to reinvest weapons sales proceeds in the purchasing country (Brauer and Dunne 2004a, 2004b). These so-called “offsets” purportedly offer significant benefits to developing countries in various ways, the most common being: (i) promoting and investing in industrial activity; (ii) counter-trade – an agreement to buy components from local manufacturers in exchange for the required defense hardware; and (iii) reducing the overall procurement cost of the buying country. SAAB proposed an initial offset under-taking until 2011 with a total cost of 8.7 billion US dollars, of which 7.2 billion were National Industrial Participation (NIP) and 1.5 billion were Defense Industrial Participation (DIP); that is, direct military offsets (Axelson and Lundmark 2010: 14).

Aligning with South Africa’s broader national development plan, the Swedish offset package specified that it would create approximately 27,000 jobs in South Africa (interview #2) and that skills would be transferred via a Skills Transfer and Technology (STTP) initiative, which would have a significant impact on the way future manufacturing would take place in South Africa’s defense industrial base (cf. van Dyk, Haines, and Wood 2016). These competence development schemes highlighted above were habitually cited by government, defense industry, and trade union officials as key factors connected to the broader Gripen program. For example, elite respondents asserted that “Sweden was pushing for incremental socio-economic change in South Africa with the Gripen deal” (interview #13) and “developing the concept value of the Gripen program as a public good for the South Africans” (interview #16). As one politician explained: “We wanted to create capacity in South Africa. We wanted to make a change. We wanted to make South Africa a better and more modern country” (interview #51).

At the same time, the policymaking elite in Sweden also tapped into a very sensitive socio-economic and political phenomenon in post-apartheid South Africa: Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). BEE is a racially selective program that was launched by the Nelson Mandela government to redress the inequalities of apartheid in the business sector. An important part of the justification for the Gripen deal with South Africa was that it would specifically benefit black Africans (interview #6). Similar arguments were made in Sweden’s Parliamentary debates. The motivation for the government’s decision to export the aircraft was, it was suggested, ultimately in line with South Africa’s broader development goals, which involved developing black talent (Swedish Parliament

Protocol, 2000/01:106). The assessment that the Gripen program would benefit black Africans also directly aligned with South Africa's national reconstruction program that started in 1996 – the aim of which was to rectify the socio-economic imbalances created by apartheid.

To further satisfy Parliament and other dissenting voices in Sweden, guarantees were made by the Persson government that BEE-owned companies would benefit significantly from the Gripen deal (interviews #9, #15, #20, #22). SAAB officials also used the BEE component to justify the export of the Gripen aircraft and the proposed offset projects that would benefit South Africans (interviews #17, #18, #19, #23). In doing so, they too appealed those parties who were critical of the Gripen deal by promising job opportunities for poor black South Africans and financial gain for BEE-owned companies.

Interestingly, many elite respondents in favor of the arms procurement package also put forward the notion that the Gripen deal would help uphold and even advance democracy in South Africa in various ways. In fact, most respondents indicated an ideological inclination to see South Africa's democracy prosper and succeed or, as a senior politician put it, "survive and strive" (interview #25). Asked how the Gripen deal would uphold or advance democracy, one respondent explained the following:

If you look at our foreign policy over the years towards South Africa, most of it was based on democratic principles. We supported the liberation movement because it was fighting for democracy. We helped build their institutions and we trained their people so that they could run South Africa in a democratic manner. But there are many ways to support democracy, I have just explained a few. Another way of doing that was by giving South Africa the JAS [Gripen] so that it can help to uphold a democratic state. We wanted to try all possible ways to ensure that South Africa's democracy succeeded. You could say that selling the Gripen was a symbol of democracy building in South Africa. (interview #4)

The quotation above seems extraordinary, considering Sweden's oft-cited semi-pacifist international image. However, such aspects were routinely rationalized by the policymaking elite as being part of Sweden's own ideational assessments of democracy, in particular, notions surrounding the sanctity of sovereignty. Overall, these examples reveal that there was a strong belief reverberating through government and business corridors alike that the Gripen deal had various "good" implications – aspects that aligned with Sweden's broader internationalists foreign policy ideals toward South Africa.

5.4 The Utility of “Being Good”

The belief that Sweden was a “good” partner for defense cooperation or considered “better” and “more moral” than other arms-exporting countries was frequently echoed by various respondents. Moreover, being perceived as nonaggressive and generous was considered vital for exporting the Gripen abroad. As one interviewee noted, “there was deep fear in the Swedish business community and in government circles not to be seen as an aggressive partner who uses coercive tactics” (interview #48). In other words, being different from the “Americans, British, and French” was vital for Sweden’s arms exports to South Africa (interviews #23, #25, #45, #49).

Following on from the quotation above, trust was considered one of the most important ingredients when engaging in sensitive defense cooperation. That is to say, the Gripen aircraft, the Gripen program, and the “Swedes” symbolized trust. Trust is important in foreign policy “because without trust you have nothing,” as one former Swedish politician remarked (interview #49). Moreover, trust is an important ingredient in business because “business is always based on trust. If you already have that, then it is much easier to do business, especially an arms deal” (interview #56). In fact, many respondents considered the South African Gripen deal, with its associated industrial offset contracts, as “a symbol of trust.” It was, as one Swedish politician remarked, “probably the most visible point of trust that you can have. Because the South Africans trusted us, all we needed was a handshake and that was the deal. And that is how it was” (interview #20).

The absence of a colonial history in Africa seems to have been one of the key principles of Sweden’s “trust image.” As a South African government official stated, “Doing an arms deal with Sweden is not like doing an arms deal with France or Britain with their colonial histories in Africa. These big powers cannot really be trusted after what they have done to our African brothers and sisters” (interview #34). Another interviewee noted, “The fact that Sweden does not have a colonial history in Africa was very important for us” (interview #36).

The perception of Sweden’s “good international conduct” over the years, as one senior Swedish politician observed, “has created a situation where most countries around the world see us as a country that is driven by a moral identity. Generally speaking, this is our great strength, it is also very good for business of course” (interview #22). The eleven trade officials interviewed for this study all echoed similar views than their

political counterparts. For example, arguing that, "Sweden's moral identity provides it with leverage in trade deals" (interview #46); "Sweden is a moral power because it represents a specific course of history and this affords it a special license to trade" (interview #5); or the assertion that "Sweden's moral identity has helped it to create very close political and business relationships with countries in the Third World" (interview #31).

In practical terms, Sweden's "good" identity was useful for gaining access to and aligning with the policymaking elite in South Africa. The high regard the South Africans held for the Swedes explains, at least in part, the extraordinary access Swedish government and trade union officials, as well as business personnel, had to the political top structures in the lead-up to the Gripen deal. A South African government official captured this experience rather well when he asserted, "The Swedish Ambassador enjoys better access to top government people than most other Ambassadors to South Africa. This is because he is the Swedish Ambassador, not because he is necessarily a nice person" (interview #37).

Reflecting on their extraordinary access to the policymaking elite in South Africa, Swedish elites connected to the Gripen deal claimed, in one way or another, that they were received warmly by top ANC government officials; they were treated much better than other groups marketing defense products; and they were listened to and taken seriously (interviews #23, #44, #46, #51, #57, #59). Because of Sweden's favorable international image, and in South Africa, several Swedish elite respondents mentioned how ANC government officials did not distinguish between different Swedish actors but rather viewed Swedes or Sweden as a monolithic unit which stood for something "different" and "special" (interviews #15, #44, #47, #51, #57, #63).

The quotations above clearly illustrate that the mechanism that connected transnational actors in the Gripen deal was not only individual identities or personalities but also the collective image of a nation. However, a significant finding that emerges from this study is how this national image was also perceived in terms of status and prestige symbols regarding the Gripen aircraft itself.

Notwithstanding that several defense analysts often referred to the Gripen as the "IKEA plane" – given that it can be easily maintained with minimum personnel and no sophisticated tools needed (interview #19) – many respondents indicated that Sweden's ability to manufacture the Gripen provided it with a "good" image in the international domain. For

example, the notion that the Gripen has become a mark of national prestige because “only a handful of countries in the world have the capacity and impetus to develop such an aircraft” (interview #7). Hence, being able to develop a highly advanced fighter such as the Gripen “is a great accomplishment and says quite a lot about a country” (interview #8). As a former foreign policy advisor to the Swedish government observed, “our defense industry has become very good at making high-tech and niche products. It is part of who we are. Like it or not, a product like the Gripen has become part of Sweden’s national identity” (interview #61). Yet, the Gripen seems to occupy a special place in Sweden’s national identity inventory. It is one of the few weapon systems with which Swedish elites comfortably identify. The following expression by one of the leading security experts in Sweden provides a rare insight into this mindset: “Politicians are more comfortable with sales in the aeronautics sector because it is not problematic. It is much better for our Prime Minister to sell the Gripen than selling canons. He does not want to stand in front of a canon and look happy. I mean canons or small arms are a more clear sign of selling death” (interview #54).

Curiously, when asked about the nature of such a weapons product and the human cost connected to its use, many respondents resolutely asserted that the “Gripen is a plane made for peace and not for war,” or as one interviewee put it, “The Gripen is there to help, not to harm” (interview #14). What these and other examples in this section show is that the policymaking elite in Sweden was consciously vacillating between ethical convictions and weapons status symbols regarding Sweden’s international image. More importantly, these dual national images of “being good” were important for both outsiders and insiders to validate a Swedish weapons deal. There thus appears to have been an explicit recognition that purchasing fighter jets from Sweden did not only foster a long-term technical or economic relationship but also embodied a socio-political constructed meaning. After all, “every machine has a socially constructed meaning and a socially orientated objective [and] can never be fully understood or predicated independently of their social context” (Eyre and Suchman 1996: 86).

5.5 Awkwardly Pursuing “Enlightened Interests”

Despite the ongoing ostensibly altruistic posturing by most state and societal actors in Sweden when South Africa was being discussed, there

simultaneously existed an unambiguous sense of return for Sweden's generous apartheid solidarity during most discussions on the Gripen deal. Curiously, many Swedish elites actually considered the Gripen deal as South Africa's solidarity toward Sweden. One respondent provided a fascinating account of how elements within the Persson government viewed the deal as inverted solidarity: "We were by their side during apartheid and now they had to find ways to work with us in various ways. I scratch your back and you scratch mine. For us it was a positive thing to do an arms deal with South Africa because that was a way for them to show solidarity with us" (interview #44).

To rationalize the aforementioned strategy, a former special advisor to the Swedish government argued that "there was nothing strange with the approach of wanting to get something in return for our support, there was nothing upsetting about it; it was actually quite normal for us to hold such a view" (interview #29). A similar opinion was echoed by a prominent figure at one of Sweden's most powerful trade unions: "When you put so much money down as we did, you want to get your money back somehow. That does not necessarily mean that our relationship was now dictated by realism. But we invested a lot of time and money in the ANC and we felt that they were now in a position to give something back in a practical way" (interview #59).

Being aware of the paradoxical logics at play regarding inverted solidarity through weapons acquisitions, respondents routinely reverted to the above-indicated tactic of justifying their actions in abstract ways. For example, referring to such a strategy as one that is "based on a different type of idealism – an idealism that has different scales and one that has evolved towards a practical application of idealism" (interview #47). Or, a strategy where "idealism and realism work together in a non-threatening way" (interview #44). However, the "working together" of Swedish idealism and realism extended much further than the inverted solidarity idea. In what follows, I demonstrate how it was consciously and actively pursued in broader economic and politically instrumental ways as well.

The most salient example of the "idealism-realism" strategy was on open display a month before the Gripen deal was signed in South Africa. In November 1999 a large delegation of Swedish government personnel (including former Prime Minister Göran Persson) and business delegates traveled to South Africa to "celebrate the special relationship between the two countries" (interview #64). The visit culminated in "a huge exhibition at Gallagher Golf Estate [in Johannesburg], which was

like a Swedish showroom, a promotion of Sweden and everything Swedish. We had everything from stuffed moose to fake snow and even human sized models of the JAS [Gripen],” as one trade official recalled (interview #21). On the one hand, the Swedish delegation “was in South Africa to celebrate the whole apartheid struggle thing with the ANC and to support the ANC’s policies. They were also promoting Swedish-funded development partnerships at that time” (interview #21). On the other hand, however, they were also “showing off Swedish industry and industrial cooperation projects connected to the Gripen program” (interview #52). A senior trade officer captures the dual strategy on display in November 1999:

Some people thought it was all a bit bizarre. I mean, here we are celebrating the struggle against apartheid and our special relationship with the black people of South Africa and then the next minute we are talking about selling one of the world’s most advanced fighter jets to the South Africans. But it makes sense when you look at it. The relationship was changing and the Gripen deal was actually a good way to bring the two countries closer together. But yes, let’s be honest, we went there to brag. We wanted to show them that we were very competitive on fighters, that we had the best business products and that they were buying the whole Swedish package when they buy these planes. That was part of the edge that we could offer. We had bragging rights on our moral image and we had bragging rights on our good products. It’s a fine line to walk of course, but it worked. (interview #31)

Two respondents who were directly involved in the negotiations for the Gripen deal eloquently summarized the dual purpose of the 1999 trip as well as some of the overall logics driving the wider arms deal: “Yes, we held hands for justice with them, but we had this great plane that we could sell to the South Africans” (interview #11). Swedish elites are, as the other noted, “a little bit schizophrenic when it comes to these matters” (interview #49).

Coinciding with the previously discussed marketing efforts was also an explicit understanding among the policymaking elite that a Gripen deal with South Africa would provide Sweden with an opportunity to influence a wider audience in various ways. For example, a defense ministry official noted that “a successful deal with South Africa would elevate the profile of the Gripen and make the plane more marketable to other nations” (interview #56). One of the reasons why a deal with South Africa would elevate the Gripen’s profile was because of South Africa’s

image in the international domain at that time. As a Swedish government official candidly remarked:

South Africa was a victorious nation where black people had made their way under the leadership of a very famous statesman, Nelson Mandela. So, in that sense it was an example of a victorious state wanting to buy weapons from Sweden. We thought about it like this: the sale of the Gripen to South Africa was a sale to a winner. The ANC was a winner. Selling such a product to a winner that fought against apartheid was a very good signal to other post-colonial countries because they would say: Look, Mandela's government wants to buy the Gripen from Sweden, maybe we should too. (interview #57)

A similar sentiment was expressed by a former foreign policy advisor to the government:

To sell to South Africa was symbolic because you would be selling to this new nation which had been oppressed for so long. It was actually important for us to trade this weapon with a black government. To be honest, this was a very important factor for some people in the Social Democrats. You know, selling to a black government would be a huge achievement. (interview #60)

The marketing strategy cited above, extraordinary as it may seem, was echoed by several Swedish trade officials, other government personnel, and trade union officials. It was, as one respondent noted, "a strategy that was well thought through, quite thoroughly actually" (interview #30). The following striking example further illustrates how deeply entrenched these "enlightened interests" were in the policymaking elite's thinking regarding the Gripen deal:

We had the opportunity to train black people not only to work on the Gripen or manufacture parts for the Gripen, but also to become pilots and fly the Gripen. Imagine that, imagine having a black person fly the Gripen! Or even better, imagine having a black female fly the Gripen! That would be a great achievement for us. And of course, a great marketing strategy for the future. (interview #14)

In addition to aspects discussed already, there were, of course, also "enlightened interests" regarding security matters connected to the Gripen deal – issues that directly aligned with Sweden's post-Cold War military activism as well the legitimacy of the aircraft itself. For example, the Gripen deal, as one official asserted, "would confirm Sweden's commitment to the African continent. It was also a way for Sweden and

South Africa to cooperate on security matters in the international and multilateral arena” (interview #20). Such an assessment was echoed in 2003 by South Africa’s Deputy President, Jacob Zuma, who reiterated that Sweden and South Africa aimed to combat conflict in Africa and increase security cooperation to restore peace and stability.⁵

Hence, the Gripen deal was viewed by many elites in terms of the opportunities it provided to realize broader security goals of “peace in Africa” (Government Communication 2007/2008: 51). In that context, it was argued that the export of the Gripen to South Africa essentially acted as an extension of the Swedish government’s new and more active post-Cold War international security strategy.

5.6 Unflinching Realpolitik

As was noted elsewhere in this chapter, a major conventional arms deal with South Africa (and other countries for that matter) inevitably had important security and economic implications. This final empirical section highlights some of the explicitly cited interest-driven aspects related to Sweden’s arms political economy and foreign policy concerning the Gripen deal with South Africa.

Respondents routinely noted that the Gripen deal with South Africa aligned with a broader foreign policy reorientation regarding exports in the 1990s, especially arms exports. A senior politician in Sweden, who referred to himself as “the father of the Gripen project,” explained that during the “Cold War, the government calculated that we needed approximately 288 fighters to defend Sweden. We planned for 300 just to be safe” (interview #50). However, the end of the Cold War significantly changed the threat scenario for Sweden. As the previous respondent asserted, “The end of the Cold War changed everything. We no longer needed so many fighter jets. We only needed like 200 planes and not 300” (interview #50). The diminished need for fighter acquisitions after the Cold War posed unique challenges for the government, which, until then, was the sole customer of the Gripen program.

With the government’s defense procurement preferences drastically changing after the Cold War, there were genuine concerns that projects such as the Gripen would be discontinued if trading partners were not found. As one respondent recounted, “There was a real possibility that if

⁵ “Zuma Opens SA Fighter Plane Production.” *Mail & Guardian*, October 13, 2003.

we didn't sell the Gripen to foreign customers, then the Gripen program could have collapsed. That would mean the loss of thousands of jobs, which nobody in our coalition wanted" (interview #46). A Member of Parliament explained how important the jobs issue was in the South African Gripen deal, especially in the context of regional dynamics in Sweden:

The jobs issue was a huge aspect in the Gripen deal with South Africa. We as politicians care deeply about jobs, especially the Social Democrats. Many of the supporters of the Social Democrats live in places like Linköping where there are factories or other businesses connected to the defense industry. These places are often the largest employer in these regions. Look, you must understand that this JAS [Gripen] issue was important because it helped to create and pay for Linköping University, people's jobs, careers, people's lives. (interview #64)

In addition to the latter, there were also interrelated transnational commercial incentives for weapons exports in products such as the Gripen. Like all major weapons exporting countries in the post-Cold War era, "the defense industry and other heavy industries in Sweden are primarily focused on market access for their products," as one politician noted (interview #25). He continued by arguing: "The logic at play here is that you make niche products for your own consumption primarily. But because you have such a large industrial system creating these products, you must export the rest to make profit to survive. For that to happen, you must go where the money is. In 1999 South Africa was where the money was" (interview #25).

Most respondents considered South Africa as a favorable destination for trade in products such as the Gripen because it would also open possibilities for trade with other African countries. As one trade official explained, "Many of us considered South Africa as a trade steppingstone to the rest of the continent. In other words, getting our foot into the South African market could act as a springboard into the rest of Africa" (interview #44). More specifically, "setting-up shop in the region's dominant power provided Sweden with the opportunity to build trade relations with other countries that were dependent on South Africa" (interview #21). SAAB's recent marketing efforts to sell the Gripen to Botswana illustrate this point. As one respondent explained:

Look at how we are approaching the Botswana case. SAAB already has facilities in South Africa, which could be used to support Botswana's Gripen aircraft. It would make servicing easy and we could export

products for their Gripen directly from South Africa to Botswana. It fits into a trade model, which we thought about long ago. South Africa was, and continues to be, important for our future operations in the region. (interview #58)

Ultimately, an arms deal with South Africa “created a mass mentality in Sweden’s relatively small but highly engaged business community. People realized that they could trade more with South Africa and other African countries because of this deal as well as move their businesses there” (interview #44). The “Gripen deal opened up a lot of possibilities and everybody wanted to join the party,” as one respondent candidly remarked (interview #47). Hence, “the Gripen deal was one of the most salient examples of how a massive investment was used to ignite a hugely expensive and expansive trade deal” (interview #52). Because of business interests connected to South African Gripen deal, “you had a massive influx of Swedish companies into the country. Three hundred plus Swedish companies entered South Africa in a very short period” (interview #31).

The transnational economic activities highlighted above had direct implications for political influence because the Gripen deal with South Africa allowed the government to have a larger say in the affairs of South Africa. The latter was not necessarily viewed as coercive diplomacy or the subjugation of the so-called underdeveloped “South.” Instead, the policy-making elite viewed it as a vehicle through which to achieve pragmatic goals. As one government official noted:

The Gripen deal helped Sweden to have a larger say in the affairs of South Africa because we took over a large part of their domestic defense industry. We may not be like the British or the Americans when it comes to these things, but we want to be important and we want to be influential. A way of doing that is by exporting weapons and cooperating in security and defense with other countries. (interview #24)

The quotation above speaks to and confirms a long-held assumption in arms trade literature, which is that a major incentive for arms trade from the supplying state is to gain influence in the domestic affairs of the receiving state (Neuman and Harkavy 1980; Pierre 1982; Krause 1992). These findings also align with Sweden’s post-Cold War military activism, which clearly highlights the policymaking elite’s ambition to strengthen Sweden’s voice abroad, be influential, and have a say in the affairs of other states (Aggestam and Hyde-Price 2016).

The dual assessment of the policymaking elite, however, was that Sweden would also be politically weakened internationally if it did not

develop, manufacture, and export high-tech conventional weapons systems such as fighter jets. One government official argued, "If we did not produce our own weapons and exported it to countries like South Africa, we would not be trustworthy." He clarified the latter by arguing that Sweden's "security policies would be illegitimate because what is Sweden when we say we are non-aligned, but we are dependent on foreign deliveries for our armed forces?" (interview #51). His colleague went further and asserted that despite Sweden's post-neutrality reorientation in the post-Cold War era, and the increased globalization of the weapons industry, Swedish arms production and exports were vital ingredients of the country's legitimacy profile (interview #50).

In terms of legitimacy, there was also a vested interest that the South African Air Force (SAAF) uses the Gripen on military operations in Africa because it would enhance the profile of the aircraft. For example, asked whether Swedish interests regarding South Africa and Africa's security needs were a guiding principle as opposed to mere rhetoric, one respondent remarked, "No, it was really in our interest that South Africa uses this plane and that it was not only a product for show. So much of the security interests were connected to the fact that South Africa actually uses the Gripen on their security operations in the region" (interview #56). Asked why it was so important for South Africa to use the Gripen for operations in Africa, several interviewees explained that South Africa's military operations in Africa would provide the Gripen with a sense of legitimacy in the international domain because fighter aircraft are usually judged by their record of accomplishment in conflict situations. Before the Gripen deal with South Africa, the Gripen had not been tested in combat, which created some difficulties in justifying its credibility.

As Åke Svensson, former president of SAAB, publicly acknowledged, "the success of future negotiations with other countries depends on the performance of the aircraft in South Africa."⁶ A defense ministry official similarly noted that "the Gripen deal with South Africa had huge long-term implications. As the old saying goes, first impressions last. A successful deal with South Africa would elevate the profile of the Gripen and make the plane more marketable to other nations" (interview #56).

⁶ J. Erasmus (2010). Gripen first for SA woman fighter pilot. South Africa Info. Available at www.southafrica.info.

Based on Sweden's security doctrine over the years, there was also a view that the Gripen could act as a strategic deterrent to potential aggressors in the region (interviews #22, #24, #54). This view, it was often argued, should be understood in the context of Sweden's own assessment of the role of its armed forces and military equipment internationally. The following quotation demonstrates this point rather well: "It was important for us that South Africa had these fighter aircraft. We wanted them to be a strong regional power. Having a fighter like the Gripen is a symbol of their power and stability. For them to have sophisticated fighters sends a strong security message to other nations" (interview #55). Another senior politician provided a more candid interpretation: "Our way of protecting our sovereignty is through having very advanced weapons. Say what you want, that is how we protect it. Yes, there are international laws blah blah blah [sic]. But us selling the Gripen to South Africa actually mirrors who we are and what we believe in" (interview #15).

Several high-ranking officials in government reiterated the deterrence rationale above. To put the Gripen deal into context, one respondent, who was involved in Swedish politics for 40 years, argued that, "We view weapons manufacturing and exports as a way to show our deterrence and to show our capability. The Gripen deal with South Africa was part of that thinking" (interview #57).

5.7 Conclusions

By analyzing the South African Gripen deal as a case study, this chapter provided some crucial insights into the paradoxical logics embedded in the Swedish policymaking elites' rationale for exporting advanced conventional weapons to a country in the Global South. Overall, the Gripen deal with South Africa demonstrates how the policymaking elite in Sweden consciously pursued a dual policy, that is, a strategy that was driven both by the Swedish internationalist tradition of "doing good" and "being good" in the world, but also for instrumental purposes. Each of these processes was evident in (i) circumstances that can be immediately connected to the Gripen deal and were consciously considered by the decision-makers and (ii) more contextual circumstances related to the larger economic and geopolitical structure which affected the broader orientation of policymaking.

The paradoxical nature of Sweden's post-Cold War arms exports to South Africa is a clear example where traditional national interests such

as national sovereignty (Gustavsson 1998), national survival (Makko 2012), and broader commercial and security interests (Huldt 2005) are conflated with cosmopolitan ideas of a shared humanity based on ethical commitment to international cooperation and justice, solidarity, human rights, peace, and democracy (Lawler 2013; Bergman-Rosamond 2016). 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 nonaligned and neutral states such as Ireland, Austria, Finland, and Switzerland.

While aspects related to “doing good” and “being good” were perhaps expected findings in a study involving Sweden, it was how they were connected to weapons exports that made for interesting reading. The wider implications of these findings are that the manufacturing and export of advanced weapons products have become embedded societal symbols of Swedish identity – a phenomenon that also serves to conflate the operations of a militarized state with the perceived ideals of Swedish mediation, honest brokering, and overall as a significant contributor to frameworks of promoting ethical and peaceful methods on a global stage.

One of the major messages of this book is that the Scandinavian brand is an entity composed of external presentation and reputation building, and domestic self-presentation and identity building. As Browning notes, analyzing branding strategies “enables us to see that foreign policy is not simply about interreacting with others but also entails communicating values and identity narratives to citizens” (2015: 196). As this chapter detailed, conventional arms trade is far more than just procurement for military hardware because the supplier is not just selling a product, it is selling a broad-based “national package.” More specifically, when Swedish elites sell the Gripen fighter jet, it is selling more than an aircraft; it is selling an idea – in this case a quintessential idea of “Swedishness,” which is perceived and projected by both insiders and outsiders as something better and different from others. In other words, where, how, and by whom a conventional weapons product is manufactured seems to be just as important as its functionality and price tag.

An important finding of the present study was how the notion of trust played a significant role in the decision to export and buy the Gripen. For example, many respondents considered trust as one of the most important ingredients for engaging in sensitive weapons industry cooperation. The wider implications of such a finding are that it speaks directly to one of the significant ingredients of nation branding practices. For example, Anholt (2010) points out how trust raises expectations of integrity and

competence of a nation brand; van der Westhuizen (2003) demonstrates how trust allows nation brands to reverberate globally; Browning (2015) notes the importance of trust for creating “safe” nation brand identities; and Giddens (1991) argues that trustworthiness is important for managing a general sense of ontological security.

In relation to the latter point, the deeper relevance of the current findings also demonstrates that inasmuch as weapons such as the Gripen provide a sense of order and physical security in an ever-changing world, such products are also conceived as an ideological lynchpin for securing and even bolstering self-identity as well as build a sense of self-esteem, dignity, and legitimacy. These aspects, I argue, reinforce the taken-for-granted notion that conventional weapons are somehow the bedrock of state-building, and procurement of such weapons systems is justified because they represent symbolic power. Yet Sweden’s impartial image on the international stage still seems to support its ability to pass as an inherently well-meaning and generally peaceful exporter in the global arms industry. While Sweden’s weapons exports are considered a public good both at home and abroad, these initiatives are also the product of more calculating processes relating to Swedish elites’ engagement with the international community by leveraging that country’s so-called principled national identity.

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