Conflict specific capital: the role of weapons acquisition in civil war

by

Nicholas Marsh

International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO)
Biography

Nicholas Marsh is a research fellow at PRIO. He is currently working on a four year project on arms acquisition and civil conflict mainly funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Defence. In addition, he runs the NISAT databases on transfers of small arms and light weapons, and has undertaken a wide variety of policy work connected with small arms control.
Abstract

This article presents a correspondence between the mode of weapons acquisition by armed opposition groups and the form of a civil war. The mode of arms acquisition is affected by two factors – availability and control over the acquisition process. Variations in the mode of arms acquisition corresponds to three types of insurgency: lead by a single and organised group, warlordism, and disorganised armed bands. The article discusses how weapons acquisition is considered in the existing literature on arms and civil conflict; and examines the definitions of arms availability. It provides new insights on the availability and control of weapons in civil conflict and provides examples from Nepal, Iraq and Afghanistan. The article concludes with an examination of the policy implications of its findings.

Key words

‘civil war’ ‘arms’ ‘armed groups’
**Introduction**

In order to understand a civil conflict we must study the mode of weapons acquisition, which is affected by two factors – the availability of weapons and control over their acquisition. Variations in the modes of availability and control correspond to three types of insurgency – lead by a single disciplined armed opposition group, warlordism, and disorganised armed bands. Countries in which weapons are freely available to all are associated with fractured heterogeneous insurrencies; while those where only a well organised party can obtain sufficient weapons are associated with a single and disciplined armed opposition group.

Obtaining weapons is the most important task for an armed opposition group if it is to engage in military operations. Its ability to acquire arms influences the form, intensity and duration of civil war. In particular, the need to obtain arms is a significant barrier, which prospective insurgents must overcome if they are to engage in an armed struggle.

A comparison between Iraq and Nepal provides a useful illustration. In Iraq, arms most useful for an insurgent, such as assault rifles, explosives, ammunition and rocket propelled grenades, were distributed throughout the country by the Baathist regime. Opposition groups, potential combatants and private citizens have been able to easily access sufficient quantities of weapons and the insurgency is characterised by a multiplicity of armed actors. In Nepal, weapons were a scarce commodity and the main sources were those captured from government security forces, or from sympathisers abroad (especially India). Only an organised and disciplined group was able to capture government stockpiles, and the insurgency has been lead, and dominated, by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).
Hitherto, research on civil war has tended to overlook weapons acquisition by armed groups. That which has been carried out has focused upon availability. However, this research has been characterised by two amorphous descriptions of weapons being either scarce or abundant, and a conceptualisation that is more relevant to criminality than armed conflict. This article critiques these approaches before providing a more nuanced conception of availability. It is then used, along with the control of the acquisition or weapons, to provide an analytical model of the correspondences between arms acquisition and civil conflict.

The term correspondence is used deliberately. This is the first article to present these linkages between availability, control and conflict. More research is needed to assess the specific causal mechanisms that are at work. This article presents some interesting and relevant correspondences that will provide the framework for further scholarly enquiry.

Existing research on weapons acquisition by armed groups and civil war

As noted in Harbom and Wallensteen (2005:625), civil war has, since the 1960s, been the most prevalent form of warfare.\textsuperscript{1} However, research on civil war has generally focused upon factors which influence the motivation of combatants and structure of groups which include (among a long list) governance, geography, resources, population, identity, financing, legitimacy, the motivation of the leadership and/or combatants of opposition groups, or popular support for the government or their opponents.

However, as noted by several writers on insurgency, military factors are an often overlooked but crucial factor in explaining the duration, form and outcome of an intra-state conflict.\textsuperscript{ii} For example, Young (1996:179-180) states that military factors,
such as the capability of the insurgent armed forces, have ultimately determined the eventual conclusion of some recent African insurgencies. He concludes that “movements that have been popularly supported have not necessarily succeeded and, conversely, those which have succeeded have not enjoyed widespread support.” Similarly, Wickham-Crowley (1992:320), in his study of Latin American insurgencies between 1956 and 1990 observes that revolutionaries only came to power when rural guerrilla movements received strong peasant support and developed a substantial military capability.

Weapons have a somewhat ambiguous place in academic research on civil conflict. On the one hand, they are central to our conceptualisation of war and violent conflict. As Bowyer Bell (1998:138) states “The very word gunman is a meld that makes the armed struggle work.” A similar symbiosis appears to be present in much of the language used to describe civil conflict. As noted by Mitchell (1981:17), a situation of conflict exists when one or more parties perceive that they have incompatible goals. If such a situation deteriorates into warfare, it is known as ‘armed conflict’. Similarly, in addition to being known as ‘rebels’ or ‘insurgents’ the (non-state) parties involved in a civil conflict are often known as ‘armed actors’ or ‘armed groups’ (again, it is the possession of weapons that differentiates them from being just ‘actors’ or ‘groups’). Weapons are also integral to our metaphors for conflict initiation and termination, at which point parties ‘fire the first shot’, ‘resort to arms’ or agree upon a ‘cease fire’.

On the other hand, research concerning weapons and armed groups involved in civil war has been somewhat disjointed. The only general book length studies on the subject are Boutwell and Klare (1999), Sislin and Pearson (2001), and Bourne (2004). In addition, smaller studies, such as Sislin et al (1998), Klare (1995), Bevan
(2005) and Khakee and Florquin’s (2005) comparison of weapons sourcing in six conflicts, provide useful insights drawn from general lessons. Also available are a large number of reports and book chapters that have focused upon a particular group, conflict or region – highlights include Florquin and Berman’s (2005) study of armed groups and weapons in West Africa, Demetriou’s (2002) account of arms proliferation in Georgia; and Cragin and Hoffman’s (2003) report on arms trafficking in Colombia. Similarly, weapons acquisition is mentioned in passing in many histories of individual conflicts, or in general studies on civil warfare. Therefore, a researcher has considerable material to draw upon (some of which is presented in this article).

Klare (1995) notes two reasons why the wider academic community has not prioritised research on weapons acquisition by armed groups. First, the considerable body of work on arms has focused upon the acquisition of ever more sophisticated (and expensive) weapons by governments. Fields such as Defence Economics are concerned with issues such as how government expenditure on arms affects economic development or spending in other areas (such as health or education). Similarly work on the relationship between weapons and war has been concerned with the consequences of governments’ acquisition of ever more sophisticated technology – for an example see O’Connell’s (1988) \textit{Of Arms and Men. A history of war, weapons, and aggression}. The state centric focus of many scholars is summed up in Buzan and Herring’s (1998:2) statement that for the discipline of Strategic Studies “Some sub-state entities, like separatist or national liberation movements or terrorist revolutionary groups, are substantial enough to register, but the main actors are states, and non-state actors are mostly studied as problems to be dealt with by states.”

Second, a perhaps more important factor is that, as Chris Smith (1999) also notes, small arms and light weapons, the arms often used by armed groups “were, and
still are, impossible to measure with the precision which the research community came to expect” (see also Klare 1999). Data on the arms trade published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers (NISAT) database or the ‘Grimmett’ reports produced by the US Congressional Research Service focus almost entirely upon government purchases of weapons. Researchers, therefore, lack the readily available datasets necessary to perform their analyses with the rigor that they have become accustomed to when studying arms acquisition by governments.

Availability

This section is concerned with the availability of weapons, which has been cited by many authors as influencing the incidence and intensity of violent conflict. They have correctly identified that the availability of specifically small arms and light weapons as being an important factor in an insurgency, at least in its early stages. However, if insurgents seek to win decisive military engagements against government forces they will need to augment their forces with heavier weapon systems.

More importantly, writing on the subject of availability has drawn from a criminological model (also referred to as accessibility) concerned with the number of weapons present in a society, and more specifically the ratio between arms and people. This model is not appropriate to the study of armed groups. Authors have also presented radically opposing views on the level of availability of arms for insurgents – some stress an abundance of weapons while others emphasise their scarcity. The final part of the section presents a more nuanced conception of availability which is much more suited to the analytical enquiry of armed groups involved in civil war.
Availability of what types of weapons?

While governments generally try to procure ever more sophisticated and expensive arms, technologically unsophisticated weapons are often adequate for insurgents. Indeed, much of the expensive high technology equipment procured by modern militaries is unsuited for the task of fighting an intra-state conflict (see for example Joes (1996:191-2) and Jordan and Lobenstein (1986:106-107)). van Creveld (1991a:297-310, 1991b:205-212 and 1996:394-408) notes that such high technology weapons are designed primarily to destroy other machines, but in an insurgency it is precisely the most powerful weapons and weapon systems which are “the most useless, being either too expensive, too fast, too indiscriminate, too big, too inaccurate, or all of these” (1996:397). Such weapons are unable to “make much of an impression against an enemy who is extremely dispersed, or indistinguishable from the civilian environment, or intermingled with friendly forces” (1991b:208).

Instead, as noted by Byman et al (2001:93) any insurgency’s defining technology is small arms and light weapons. A similar assertion has been made by Capie (2004:1) who states that “civil wars and inter-communal conflicts are fought largely, sometimes exclusively, with small arms and light weapons.” These claims are supported by Sislin et al (1998:402), whose survey of arms acquisition and use by ethnic groups finds that “Light weapons, only, were present in 27 of the 38 cases for which we had information on arms acquisitions. Heavy weapons were involved in 11 cases.” Similar findings are reported by Sislin and Pearson (2001:36).

This general picture needs some clarification. Insurgents operating in peripheral areas and relying upon mobility will rely upon small arms and light weapons. However, if an armed opposition group intends to hold territory or even launch an attack on the capital it will need to achieve at least a local level of military
parity with the government it opposes. In industrialised countries, achieving military parity would be very difficult. However, in less developed countries, government forces are often badly equipped and trained, and few in number. In such a context, a cohesive force of well equipped rebels may be able to achieve local military balance with, or general superiority over, government forces. As noted by Young (1996:189), in the final phase of conflict (often an attack by the armed group against the capital) “Weapons procurement is often more important than the politicisation of the masses. What is most important, however, is not that the weapons are terribly sophisticated, but that they are at least equal to their enemies’ (i.e. the governments).” He goes on to quote Museveni (president of Uganda and successful insurgent): “All one needs to defeat the unpopular forces of repression, provided one has grasped the science of a people’s war, is basic infantry weapons and artillery, namely, field artillery, anti-armour pieces and anti-aircraft missiles.”

Research on availability

Many publications on the diffusion of small arms and light weapons have used the concept of ‘availability’ of arms. Availability is often reduced to the number of weapons present in a society. Moreover, availability is often seen as a dynamic process in which continued supplies increase the number of weapons in circulation (leading to higher levels of availability). Such a conception of availability probably owes much to Klare’s (1995) description of the ‘new paradigm’ of diffusion, which concerned the dispersion of small arms and light weapons within communities (and the consequences of this diffusion for intra-state conflict and criminality).

This emphasis upon the number of weapons circulating in a country appears to be influenced by notions of ‘accessibility’ drawn from criminology (a relationship
explicitly made in the *Small Arms Survey 2001* (Muggah 2001:200-201)). In such a context, accessibility concerns the number of individuals that have access to weapons (an often used measure being the number of households that contain firearms).

However, while such a general level of weapons diffusion at a societal level is very useful for generalised criminological studies, it is not very useful to the study of armed groups engaged in civil war. Thousands separate of incidents of homicide or other violent crimes can be correlated with the numbers of individuals that have access to firearms. However, the total number of arms present much is less useful concerning civil war (as will be discussed below in greater detail).

Moreover, there are radically opposing views among researchers on the ease by which to groups engaged in armed conflict can obtain weapons. Some authors have asserted on a general level that the world witnesses an unprecedented diffusion of arms which is responsible for destabilising countries and fuelling civil conflict, while others, from a very different perspective, have claimed that for armed groups weapons are scarce and precious resources. These two conflicting images of scarcity and abundance are discussed below.

*Weapons as scarce resources*

Many writers on insurgency describe weapons and ammunition as being crucial but scarce resources. For example Bowyer Bell in *The Dynamics of the Armed Struggle* (1998:138) states that:

More than any other factor, any other liability, a secret army is apt to feel the inevitable scarcity in arms. Arms matter more than anything else – not more than the truth or the faithful, but more than any thing. ... The enormous
importance given to arms within the underground during a campaign is based upon logic: they are crucial, hard to acquire, difficult to maintain and dangerous to use.

In the imperial era, European militaries could generally count upon their opponents in Africa, Asia or the Americas possessing vastly inferior weapons. Guns, along with germs and steel, formed a third of Jarred Diamond’s (1999) triumvirate of factors which allowed European control over much of the world. Even when their opponents obtained firearms, European colonisers could frequently count upon a great qualitative advantage. Simon Callwell, a British theorist of ‘small wars’ wrote in 1906 that while some opponents could approach parity (such as the Boers), most opponents were armed with “spears and knives” (1906:30). Even when they obtained guns, those used by most opponents of British imperial rule were “seldom formidable. The material is usually obsolete. The ammunition is ineffective. The fuses are almost always useless” (1906:156).

The classic guerrilla authors also emphasised the scarcity of weapons and ammunition. For Mao (1936) a major weakness of the Red Army, and a reason why it had to engage in guerrilla tactics, was that it “has no sources from which to replenish its arms and especially its ammunition”. Guevara (1961) notes that “the greatest problem of the guerrilla band is the lack of ammunition”, and that often there are “insufficient arms for all who want them” and that “A dead soldier of the guerrillas ought never to be left with his arms and his ammunition. The duty of every guerrilla soldier whenever a companion falls is to recover immediately these extremely precious elements of the fight.”
Writing much more contemporarily, Anderson (1992:86-87) notes the difficulty that armed groups face in obtaining weapons and states that “though people can provide guerrillas with food, shelter, intelligence, and recruits, they usually can’t provide guns and ammunition – all the military equipment necessary to carry on the struggle.” For this reason he states that most guerrillas need a foreign patron to supply them with the necessary military material.

Examples of scarcity of weapons affecting combatants in civil conflicts abound. In Guatemala the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) were unable to provide many of their new recruits with weapons (to the extent that they had to ask some of the volunteers to return home). The lack of arms had a dramatic consequence as the URNG was able to mount little effective resistance to the mass killings of rural populations by security forces that took place in the early 1980s (which led to the URNG leadership being severely criticised by the population they purported to be fighting to defend). Even in Colombia, a country often described as being awash with weapons, Cragin and Hoffman (2003:30-31) note that the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) have experienced difficulty in providing recruits with firearms, and lack enough ammunition to train them.

Ample supplies of weapons

Many other writers have maintained that weapons are available to armed groups in abundance. In particular, many have stressed that globalisation, and the transfer via international markets of vast ex-Soviet Cold War stockpiles, has resulted in “A global flood of small arms” (Small Arms Survey 2001:199).

Similar claims have also been expressed in Boutwell, Klare and Reed (1999:9). In particular, the ‘New Wars’ literature has emphasised the role of
globalised black markets as characterising contemporary conflicts. Kaldor (1999:96-102), and Klare (1997:58-59), both assert that such illicit networks have played a key role in supplying insurgents; and that a loosening of control over ex-Cold War weapons stockpiles (particularly in East and Central Europe) was a key source of increased supply.

In addition to such scholarly attention, governments and NGOs have both stressed that the world has witnessed an unprecedented increase in the supply of weapons (particularly to war zones), at least since the 1990s. This has motivated governments and international organisations to attempt to restrict the supply of arms, particularly via black markets. Since 2001 there have been two major UN processes, and several regional and multilateral agreements, aimed at improving control and regulation over arms transfers to prevent the diversion of weapons into illegal hands, and to restrict black markets.⁵

Concomitant to these governmental initiatives have been numerous NGO campaigns concerning the trade in conventional weapons. Perhaps the most high profile (in 2006) is the Control Arms campaign, which is led by Amnesty International, Oxfam and IANSA (the International Action Network on Small Arms). This campaign, which involves hundreds of NGOs across the world, has called for a legally binding treaty governing the international arms trade. The campaign has stated that “Guns especially have never been so easy to obtain. Their increased availability threatens life and liberty in communities and cities around the world. Including yours.”⁶

*Explaining the two views*
The two views are not wholly contradictory. Instead, the reasons for their apparent differences is explained, before, in the next section, a new definition of availability is presented.

First, it is important to note that the descriptions of scarcity and abundance have been made from different perspectives. The authors that emphasise scarcity use the perspective of armed groups. Insurgents are clearly aware of how a lack of arms and ammunition can inhibit their activities. Therefore they are likely, in many cases, to describe an environment of scarcity (even when they have enough weapons to continue their struggle). Moreover, groups often need a continual supply of new arms. Despite a gun’s theoretical life of decades (or even hundreds of years) they wear out or are degraded by a harsh environment and bad treatment by poorly trained combatants. More importantly, ammunition can quickly be used up (and in any case has a limited life before it becomes unstable). Even in Afghanistan, in which there were vast stockpiles of weapons in the 1990s (see Karp 2003), armed groups (and government forces) continued to import large quantities of weapons and ammunition.

Conversely, concern about the abundance of weapons is generally expressed from the perspective of governments or international organisations, NGOs, and researchers concerned about the prevalence of warfare. For them, any supplies of weapons to armed groups are evidence that there is too little control over supply.

Second, as Bourne (2004:31-32) points out, the images of abundance are often amorphous. A global market in weapons (both licensed and illegal) is seen as responsible for abundant supplies of weapons across the world; but this amorphous image significantly simplifies the actual picture. Instead, as is noted below, there are considerable regional and temporal variations in the availability of weapons.
Last, the extent to which arms supplies have become more abundant after the end of the Cold War is difficult to measure. Certainly, some groups that were dependant upon government supplies during the Cold War moved to more commercially orientated sources during the 1990s (Lock 1997:124). However, given the massive transfers to proxies in Africa, Asia and Latin America by the USA, USSR and their allies in the 1970s and 1980s, it is unlikely that overall international arms transfers to armed groups in the 1990s and beyond were actually reduced (a point also made by Killicoat 2006).

**Developing a better understanding of availability**

This article provides an alternative to conceptions of availability based upon the total number of arms circulating in a country. This will both avoid the problems of reductionism and amorphousness identified above, and provides a much better analytical tool.

This article presents a new conception of availability which is understood to be the extent to which a group’s objectives are not constrained by a lack of specific weapons and ammunition. Thus, in a situation of low availability, recruits will not receive weapons, or a group’s arms will be significantly inferior to their opponents’. Ultimately, a lack of weapons will prevent a group from implementing its chosen strategy. Conversely, in a situation of high availability, a group will have unfettered supplies of weapons, and their quantity or type will not limit its ability to reach its objectives (though other factors such as leadership, mobilisation, lack of discipline or the strength of the opposition may serve as constraints). A group with adequate means to acquire weapons will operate in a context of high availability. Such means should be described widely and flexibly (see below).
Availability is not just a function of the number of weapons in circulation within a country. A group may have a requirement for specific types of weapons. The existence of a large number of pistols or hunting rifles in private homes in a country will have little benefit to a group that requires anti-aircraft missiles to counter government air-strikes, or mortars, assault rifles, machineguns or grenades to counter the army (and also their ammunition). Similarly important is the location of weapons. Arms present in caches in the mountains may not benefit a group operating in urban areas. In large countries, moving weapons hundreds of kilometres through government controlled territory may pose great difficulties to insurgents.

In addition, who possesses the weapons will influence the ability of a group to obtain them. Arms present in society, but owned by a competing ethnic, religious or political segment of the population, will be much more difficult to obtain than those owned by a group’s supporters. More importantly, in many conflicts the arms held by state security forces are the only ready supply of arms either in sufficient quantities or military specifications (it is much more useful to purloin 100 Kalashnikovs from an arsenal than one shotgun from a farmhouse). Therefore the most important factor in determining the availability of weapons to insurgents is the ability of state forces to defend their arms stockpiles.

In the initial stages of an insurgency an armed opposition group may only comprise a few tens or hundreds of people. Even after the conflict has escalated, insurgent armed combatants, in many cases, will only amount to a very small proportion of a country’s population. For example, the FARC in Colombia is estimated to have 15,000 to 17,000 combatants (Cragin and Hoffman 2003:5), while the total population of Colombia is 43 million (many of which possess firearms as evidenced by the average of 17 600 homicides committed with firearms each year),
and its armed security forces number 267,700. Armed groups may therefore hold a very small proportion of the weapons held in the country. Instead of the total number of arms, a much more fruitful question concerns who has them, and how difficult it is for armed opposition groups to obtain them.

The factors which influence the availability of weapons to insurgents are both internal and external to an armed group. An armed opposition group, or its supporters, can often readily adapt much of their existing resources to supply insurgent armies with recruits, food, drink, clothing and intelligence (Anderson 1992:86-87). However, it is much more difficult for them to supply weapons and ammunition in the required quantities. Certainly, some indigenous ‘craft’ production of firearms exists (for more information see Abel (2000:85-87) or Batchelor (2003:26-36)). However, it is generally on a small scale and unable to provide sufficient quantity, or sophistication, required by an armed group engaged in a war. As Sislin and Pearson (2001:47) note, production by armed groups, or their supporters “can be a mainstay for small-scale and guerrilla operations, but only one, and indeed a minor one, of a combination of methods used in more massive and sustained military operations.” Similarly, weapons used for hunting or recreation will not be sufficient to sustain a long running military campaign. Instead, such sustained military operations require arms and ammunition produced in industrial quantities.

An armed opposition group will therefore need to acquire arms which have been manufactured elsewhere. The internal factors which determine its ability to do so have been noted by Bevan (2005:185-188) who states that armed groups’ acquisition of weapons is limited by the resources (money, sellable goods, or logistical capability) that a group is able to mobilise; and influenced by whether a group has long term or short term goals (the former requiring much better organisation than the latter). This
list provides a useful starting point. One could add to it the bravery, *élan* and level of organisation of the group in question and its leadership.\textsuperscript{ix}

External factors may be more important. First, these concern the organisation, motivation and strength of government forces – in particular whether they are able to prevent the opposition group from capturing arms controlled by security forces. The importance of capturing weapons is underlined by Byman *et al* (2001:94) and by Che Guevara in his classic text *Guerrilla Warfare* (196), “The arms of the enemy, his ammunition, his habits must be considered; because the principal source of provision for the guerrilla force is precisely in enemy armaments.” Second, the ability of a group to attract supplies from sponsors and supporters located abroad (such as governments or diaspora communities, see Byman *et al* 2001 for more information) will influence a group’s ability to escalate a conflict.

The final external factor concerns black market arms supply networks. Arms trafficking can take place on several levels. The so-called ‘ant trade’ is small scale; it involves the movement of small numbers of weapons (perhaps smuggled in the back of a car or on someone’s person) across borders or within countries. Such trade affects almost all countries to some degree, but in some areas is responsible for the cumulative movement of large numbers of weapons (Cragin and Hoffman 2001:22-39). A very different form of trafficking concerns using illegal arms dealers and brokers (often in exchange for cash or conflict goods) to transport large numbers of weapons using ships or aircraft. For example, a UN Security Council investigation into violations of the embargo concerning Liberia noted that a series of five deliveries by air contained 210 tonns of munitions, including 500 automatic rifles and 3 787 270 rounds of ammunition (United Nations Security Council 2003:18).
Variable availability

Killicott (2006) notes considerable variations in black market prices paid for Kalashnikov assault rifles – the minimum reported price being USD 12 and the maximum being USD 6,000. Notwithstanding differences in quality, these prices illustrate the considerable variation in availability of weapons to armed opposition groups. In contrast to an amorphous global black market asserted by some (see above) as Khakee and Florquin note (2005:173) “geographical proximity does not necessarily imply that countries are tapping into similar international trafficking networks. Natural and other resources, foreign political backing, and local histories can overshadow the geographic factor.” In addition to these geographic differences, the availability of weapons in one region is subject to great temporal variation – armed groups may change their acquisition strategies over time and so access more or less plentiful sources. Khakee and Florquin (2005:173) again make a valid observation that “where conflicts become more drawn-out, insurgents are often able to diversify their sources of small arms. This development may take place alongside the growth of a supporting war economy, as noted in the cases of Colombia, Liberia, and Tajikistan. Tackling conflicts early is crucial to preventing weapons procurement patterns from becoming increasingly sophisticated and entrenched”.

To sum up this section, in many cases, an armed opposition group’s ability to acquire weapons is not directly linked to the number of recruits it can mobilise, or even its financial resources. There is therefore considerable variation in the availability of weapons, both geographically and temporally, which would not be the case if they could be freely traded. In their influential World Bank report *Breaking the Conflict Trap* Collier *et al* (2003:70) state that “A private military organization needs to acquire armaments and ammunition. This is normally extremely difficult: even
criminals seldom have access to armaments more powerful than handguns. Access to armaments varies enormously between countries and over time.” The consequences of this variation are explained in the later part of this article.

**Control**

In contrast to availability, the control over the acquisition process has received scant attention from researchers. However, as is noted below, control is a key factor influencing the form of an insurgency. Here the focus shifts to a further source of variation – not *what* is being acquired, but *who* controls the acquisition process.

Some authors have written on control within armed groups. Policzer (2002:15-16) makes a distinction between groups with a high degree of internal monitoring and control and those in which fighters operate largely autonomously. He contrasts the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), whose leadership “exercises an extremely high degree of control over a very tightly organized and disciplined cadre” with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) which operated in Sierra Leone and whose leadership was “able to exercise only minimal control over its cadre. Indeed, in many cases it is difficult to know exactly whom the cadre consists of.” Policzer further develops a framework in which the quality and quantity of information that the group leadership possesses determines its control over the cadres. Similarly, Mueller (2004:85-109) contrasts disorganised and thuggish armed groups with disciplined organisations (for the latter he cites the example of the LTTE in Sri Lanka and the Chechens).

Bevan (2005:192-199) develops Policzer’s framework and makes a distinction between groups with short term and long term objectives. While the former may be somewhat chaotic, the latter are more disciplined and structured. Both Bevan and
Policzer’s distinctions are helpful, but they both concentrate on control of how arms are used by combatants not how they are acquired.

Concerning weapons acquisition by armed groups, a key distinction is made by Bourne (2004:214), who differentiates between acquisition of weapons by combatants themselves, and by the leadership of an armed group. This article builds upon this distinction and asserts that there is a correspondence between control of arms acquisition, and availability, by three categories of insurgent and three types of insurgency (all three cases are facilitated by a sufficient availability of weapons). The correspondence highlighted in this article is summarised here:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control over acquisition</th>
<th>Type of insurgency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A single armed group’s leadership</td>
<td>A single opposition group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By regional commanders</td>
<td>Warlordism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual combatants</td>
<td>Fractured with numerous armed bands</td>
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In particular, the ability of combatants to autonomously obtain on their own, with little effort, weapons and ammunition dramatically increases the likelihood that relatively small groups of fighters may coalesce around various charismatic leaders. In such a circumstance, it would be much harder for a single, and highly disciplined, armed group to control an insurgency. Instead, the bands of fighters in Sierra leone described by Policzer or the “packs, often remarkably small ones, of criminals, bandits, and thugs” described in John Mueller’s (2004:1) *The Remnants of War* may well owe much of their existence to the ability of individuals to obtain weapons independently of the command structure of an insurgency.
Three short illustrative cases, concerning insurgencies in Iraq, Nepal and Afghanistan are presented. They illustrate the correspondence, noted above, between three modes of arms acquisition and three forms of insurgency.

Nepal

Control of arms acquisition by the leadership of a single armed opposition group can be seen in Nepal. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN) initiated its 1996 armed uprising in an environment in which firearms were very scarce. Boyden et al (2002:27) note that in Nepal “Customarily the possession of guns in this country has been narrowly confined to small numbers of people who use their weapons only within specific situations, such as wedding celebrations or for hunting.” Initially, the Maoists were primarily armed with kukris (traditional Nepalese knives) and, it is claimed, just one .303 rifle (Pandey 2005:65-6). Attacks upon police stations allowed the CPN to loot the old .303 rifles (and ammunition) used by the police, and these weapons were used in further attacks against police stations (which yielded yet more arms). Sharma (2006:50) states that “The main objective of the Maoists’ attacks upon the police was to capture arms and to displace police posts, and in this they were successful.”

A second phase occurred in November 2001 when, at the abrupt end to a ceasefire, the CPN attacked barracks and headquarters of the Royal Nepal Army. According to Pandey (2005:74) in one attack on the city of Ghorahi fourteen soldiers were killed in one day, and “Hundreds of modern weapons, including SLRs (self-loading rifles), SMGs (Sten machine guns/carbines), LMGs (light machine guns), light pistols, mortar grenades and several thousand rounds of ammunition were captured.”
The CPN’s main source of weapons has been from the very government it opposes. Indeed, weapons captured from the Nepalese security forces have provided the CPN with sufficient arms to prosecute a major insurgency – there are few reports of the CPN using black cross-border arms supplies (Marks 2003:37). There are though indications that weapons have diffused into the Nepalese population as a result of the conflict. According to Kumar (2005:13) “The militarisation of the civilian sphere, unfortunately, is reflected in the military pursuit for arming the unarmed under the Unified Command. The decision announced on 4 November 2003 for the creation of a “selfdefence force” in villages and districts by distributing arms to citizens has created a condition for widening conflict possibly with misuse of arms.”

In Nepal at the start of the insurgency, weapons were a scarce and largely unavailable to individuals. The only significant source of arms was the Nepalese security forces. The CPM was able, due to the organisation and bravery of its cadres, to mount attacks upon police stations (and later the army) and obtain increasing stocks of looted weapons. The context of few arms being available among the general population, but which were available to an armed group able to attack security forces, corresponds to one in which the insurgency is carried out by a single armed group.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan during the Cold War presents a very different picture. There the main source of arms supplied to the Mujahideen fighting the armies of the Soviet Union and the Republic of Afghanistan came from outside the country – specifically an arms pipeline operated under the auspices of the CIA. Weapons were sourced from across the world, and in cooperation with (among others) the UK, China and Saudi Arabia.
were delivered to Pakistan from whence they were distributed to Afghan commanders.

Yousef and Adkin’s (2001) somewhat colourful personal account indicates that the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence agency delivered arms supplies to Mujahideen commanders, and exerted a considerable degree of control over which commander received the weapons:

During General Akhtar's eight years as Director-General of ISI it was the policy, on which he rightly remained unmoveable, that ISI decided who got the weapons, how many, and what types. By this I mean that, after the formation of the Alliance [sic], the detailed allocation to each Party was our responsibility. […]

My giving assurances that a certain operation would be backed up with extra weapons or more missiles, and that success would lead to further supplies, was sometimes the only way I could obtain cooperation. I had a carrot to offer. My stick was to withhold the weapons. Had the ISI not retained this prerogative my task would have been hopeless. (Yousef and Adkin 2001).

In Afghanistan, then, certain Mujahideen commanders possessed the means to acquire adequate quantities of weapons (as long as they remained in the favour of the ISI). Moreover, arms were distributed via commanders and not to any central leadership, and not directly to combatants. The Cold War conflict, and its aftermath, was characterised by warlordism which corresponds to control over weapons acquisition within Afghanistan being exercised by regional commanders.
Iraq

The Iraqi insurgency emerged from the general lawlessness that characterised the fall of the Baathist regime following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Saddam Hussein’s government had placed extensive arms caches all over Iraq and these proved to be easily accessible to all and sundry. The quantities available in Iraq are clearly sufficient for the (current) insurgency to engage in attacks against Coalition and Iraqi targets. Cordesman (2006:50) asserts that “While the Coalition and Iraqi forces did capture large numbers of weapons and supplies, few experts – if any – felt that the insurgents faced any near term supply problems given the numbers of weapons looted from Iraq’s vast arms depots during and after the fighting that brought down Saddam.” Klingelhofer (2005:2) similarly states that in the autumn of 2003 US military commanders estimated that between 650,000 and 1,000,000 tons of munitions were still at large in Iraq, even after the Coalition forces had discovered and destroyed some 10,000 cache sites located across Iraq. Such have been the supplies available in Iraq that insurgents have not needed to import significant quantities of weapons. Instead they have limited international supplies to high value equipment such as night vision and communications equipment, sniper rifles, and sophisticated detonators (Cordesman 2006:127).

In sharp contrast to Nepal, the Iraqi insurgency is characterised by a amorphous multiplicity of armed groups, augmented by individuals who conduct attacks in return for payment. It has no centre of gravity, no clear leadership or organizational structure, does not attempt to hold territory, and has no unified ideology (Hoffman 2006:115). Hashim (2006) identified 18 groups but notes that “There are a remarkable number of insurgent organizations. They vary widely in
levels of skill, functional specialization, professionalism, number of personnel, modus operandi, targeting and longevity. Some come and go, some change names and some claim to have merged with one another to form larger and supposedly more effective networks.”

There is a correspondence between large stocks of weapons which are widely available to individual fighters in Iraq and the form of the insurgency. In Iraq, there are few, if any, material barriers to any person or group which intend to initiate armed attacks. Furthermore, group leaders are unable to use the distribution of arms and ammunition as a means of imposing discipline and rewarding loyalty in their organisations.

**Availability, control and armed conflict**

In all three cases, Nepal, Afghanistan, and Iraq, insurgents were able to obtain adequate supplies of weapons (from the Nepali state, foreign donors or dispersed caches). However, arms availability to insurgents (or potential insurgents) is very variable (see above) and there is a complex interrelationship between availability and control.

In Nepal the dominance of one armed group occurred in a context in which arms availability for the general population was low, but where an organised and disciplined group was able to capture weapons from the state. The type of insurgency corresponded not just to the means of arms acquisition by the CPN, but also to the difficulty any other group would face in obtaining weapons (unless they too were able to attack police and army installations). Conversely, in Iraq, arms were (and are) easily available to both the existing fighters, and to any individuals or groups which may wish to start fighting.
Situations in which there is low availability of arms to both insurgents and the general population would represent a significant barrier to aspiring insurgents. Sislin and Pearson (2001:80-81) for example find that “rebelling groups generally have prior access to significant arms supplies, though not always from outside sources. Ethnic groups that do not rebel generally are not well armed.” Certainly, it is possible that limited availability of weapons may be an important factor when people debate whether or not to resort to arms. Unfortunately, no evaluation of the extent to which decisions not to resort to violence are influenced by weapons availability has been done. Therefore, this remains a tantalising suggestion.

There is some evidence to suggest that lack of availability in an important influence on when, rather than whether, a conflict is initiated. An opposition movement may delay, perhaps for years, the initiation of armed conflict as it builds its stockpiles of weapons. Ross (1995: 283-285) reports that the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico spent many years accumulating weapons before they launched their surprise uprising in Chiapas state on 1 January 1994. Similarly, Silber and Little (1996:105-118) report that before they declared independence from Yugoslavia, the federal governments of Slovenia and Croatia spent about a year clandestinely acquiring weapons.

Where an insurgency has been initiated in spite of a severe lack of weapons it is unlikely to be militarily effective. Demetriou (2002: 8-10) notes that in Georgia, before the dispersal of Russian military stocks in August 1991, militias were mainly armed with hunting rifles, and vintage weapons left over from the Second World War. The lack of modern arms made to military specifications severely limited the groups’ military capabilities (though they later obtained them from Russian military stocks and were able to intensify the conflict).
The correspondences between availability to armed groups and to the general population highlighted in this article are presented below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correspondence</th>
<th>Availability to an armed group</th>
<th>Availability to the general population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insurgency dominated by one group or by warlords</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurgency made up of diverse and fractured bands</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurgency not initiated, delayed, or has limited effectiveness.</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is also important to note that these conditions can change during the course of an insurgency. In particular, through deliberate policy, or gradual leakage from armed forces, arms may become increasingly present in the general population over the course of an insurgency. As noted above in Nepal, the government has deliberately supplied arms to village ‘self defence’ forces and so increased the diffusion of arms into Nepalese society.

**Escalation and intensity**

Availability and control also correspond to the escalation and intensity of civil conflict. Lack of arms (and especially ammunition) will inevitably limit a group’s ability to conduct military operations. In some circumstances, they may even agree to a ceasefire in order to secure new supplies of weapons. For example, as Chris Smith (2003:40) notes “when weapons or ammunition supplies are low, the LTTE has tended to sue for peace, only to reopen hostilities when the stocks have been restored.”
replenished.” A group which is unable to secure either supplies of weapons, or a ceasefire, is very likely to be militarily defeated by government security forces.

Bartos & Wehr (2002:112) note that an escalation of a conflict requires additional personnel and resources. A key resource is arms, and these may not be sufficiently available to allow an escalation of a conflict (even if personnel and finance are). A decision to escalate a conflict may prompt a group to change its acquisition strategy, in order to acquire more (or better) weapons. This process may involve dramatic changes in a group’s structure and even goals. For example, governments may successfully limit the extent to which a group is able to capture stockpiles belonging to security forces. Instead, a group may then have to seek supplies from international sources (from foreign government sponsors, international black markets, and/or diasporas or sympathisers).

In addition to Anderson (1992:86-87), other authors have also emphasised the importance of supplies from friendly governments (for example Joes 1996, Sloan 1992:13, Karp 1993 & 1994). While the high water mark of state support for insurgent movements may have occurred during the latter end of the Cold War, the practice certainly continued (Lock 1997:119). Surveys by Lumpe and Mathiak (2000) and Byman et al (2001 9-40) indicate that clandestine government supplies often go to groups in neighbouring countries (rather than distant ideological allies as was previously the case in the 1970s and 1980s). Some scholars have questioned the importance of government supplies – for example Wickham-Crowley who in his (1992:315) study of Latin American insurgencies did not find that government support played any essential role. The issue needs further comparative research.

Government supply is not the only option. Cragin and Hoffman (2003:27-42) note evidence of some government supplies to the FARC, but assert that it got most of
its arms through purchases on black markets financed with profits from drug trading. Similarly, Gunaratna (1999) notes that the LTTE has been able to establish a worldwide arms procurement network based upon financing provided by the Tamil diaspora.

To sum up, lack of availability of weapons is associated with at least a limitation on conflict intensity, and possibly with ceasefires and even defeat for an armed group. The need to obtain international supplies constitutes an important hurdle to armed groups. Obtaining supplies from a government sponsor may require that the group orientate, or re-orientate, its ideological, ethnic or religious identity to accord with a potential sponsor. Raising finance to purchase arms supplies via black markets will require either the development of a conflict economy (often based upon resource extraction) or tapping the resources of supporters abroad (often in diaspora communities), or both.

To sum up this section, there is not deterministic, or reductive, relationship between arms availability, and control over the acquisition process. It is possible to cite counter examples, or cases in which a group has been able to change the character of an armed conflict. For example, the post-Cold War Afghan civil war was characterised by warlordism. However, the Taliban (aided in no small part by significant arms supplies from Pakistan) was able to take control of almost the entire country. The term correspondence is used here because the causal relationships between the mode of acquisition and the character of an insurgency are clearly an area in which more research is needed.

Policy implications
John Keegan (quoted in Mueller 2004:171-2) laments that “the great work of disarming tribes, sects, warlords and criminals – a principal achievement of monarchs in the 17th century and empires in the 19th threatens to need doing all over again.” As noted above, the world in 2006 witnesses high profile NGO campaigns, a major UN Conference, and numerous intergovernmental agreements, concerned with the diffusion and proliferation of small arms and light weapons. In part, these initiatives are motivated by a perception that controlling the availability of (especially) small arms may reduce the intensity and incidence of armed conflict.

Availability is very variable and more importantly the state – either through capture or donation – is one of the most important sources of weapons for an insurgency. The key policy proscription developed from this article is that governments wishing to prevent, or counter, insurgency need to strictly control the arms and ammunition in their possession, and in their territory. The greatest impediment to insurgents seeking weapons would be strongly guarded government stockpiles accompanied by tight control over arms in civilian hands and effective control over national borders. The implications of this proscription are further developed below.

Arming civilians

A frequent tactic of governments facing an insurgency is, as in the above example of Nepal, to arm ‘civilian defence’ units. These militia or paramilitary forces are often used to augment uniformed security personnel. However, this is potentially a very risky policy. First, arms that are placed out of the strict control of government may further leak into the hands of insurgents. A policy of arming pro-government militias may inadvertently provide insurgents with a ready supply of arms and ammunition.
Second, after a peace accord, weapons distributed to civilians may be very difficult to collect and bring back under the control of the state. In addition to the risk that they may be used by potential insurgents, military style arms diffused into societies are also used to perpetrate criminal violence, including by armed gangs made up of ex-combatants. A policy of arming civilians during a conflict reduces government control over these weapons, and may have serious repercussions after a peace accord. In particular it may help to engender a more complex insurgency characterised by a variety of armed groups.

Cycles - arms and conflict termination and initiation

Significant stocks of arms in a post-accord period have the potential to provide readily available resources for any group intending to re-ignite an armed conflict. It is for this reason that many contemporary peace agreements have been followed by large scale Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration programmes, designed to remove weapons from ex-combatants and provide them with alternative livelihoods. According to a survey conducted by the School for Peace Culture of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, in the year 2005 alone 1129 000 people took part in DDR programmes in 20 countries, which cost an estimated USD 2 billion.\textsuperscript{xiv}

However, the effectiveness of DDR programmes in preventing further outbreaks of armed conflict may be compromised if only weapons held by armed groups are collected and disposed of. As noted above, during a conflict small arms become diffused from combatants into the general population. In such a context, potential new insurgents will find a ready supply of weapons from civilians even if weapons have been collected from ex-combatants. Thus, it is important that post-
accord arms strategies involve both the weapons used by military forces and those held by civilians.

**Trade**

Currently, the main focus of NGO and government campaigning on conventional arms is the call for an ‘Arms Trade Treaty’ which would formally introduce mandatory consideration of issues such as human rights in arms export licensing. Certainly, many reports\textsuperscript{ xv } have highlighted egregious transfers of weapons to governments with very bad records of human rights abuses (see for example Amnesty International 2004).

However, concern for preventing conflict initiation reducing the intensity of armed conflict would emphasise preventing groups from obtaining weapons. Responsible arms exports would only be made to those governments adequately secure the weapons used by their security forces, to those that closely regulate civilian possession of (at least) military style weapons, and those that do not have a record of supplying armed groups in other countries. These criteria are included in some regional agreements on the arms trade (such as the OSCE document on small arms and light weapons), however they have attracted much less attention than issues such as human rights. Moreover, the development of global standards proscribing the supply by governments of weapons to armed groups located abroad would help to restrict one source of supply.

*Enhancing the capacity of the state*

Initiatives to prevent or limit armed conflict should focus upon enhancing the capacity of the state to control the availability of arms. Effective management and security of
arms stockpiles held by the security forces is the most important priority. Also important are improving border control and customs services to restrict arms trafficking. Last, it is important to ensure that police forces and ministries of the interior have adequate capacity to regulate weapons possession. All these initiatives may have to be accompanied by legal reform. They are covered by the UN programme of Action on the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, and this document should be rigorously implemented.

Conclusion

Collier et al (2003:88) define arms as being ‘violence specific capital’ and this term underlies the facets of arms described in this article. They are an essential prerequisite to any military activity undertaken by an armed opposition group. The control over the acquisition of weapons, and their availability, are therefore two factors which have a profound influence over mode of an insurgency and its initiation, escalation and termination. This article has sketched some preliminary correspondences between the various modes of weapon acquisition and types of insurgency.

The term ‘correspondence’ is used deliberately. There is clearly a need for more research to highlight the role of weapons acquisition (as distinct from other factors) and the causal relationships between weapons and an insurgency. This article has presented some compelling links between civil conflict and the acquisition of weapons by armed groups. More work is required to provide a full explanation.
This article focuses upon armed opposition groups engaged in civil wars.

This observation was also echoed in Manwaring and Fishel’s (1992) general theory of counter-insurgency (see also Fishel’s (1994) commentary on Wickham-Crowley’s (1992) book).

Weapons are also integral to more formalised definitions of ‘armed conflict’. For example the PRIO-Uppsala dataset codebook defines ‘armed conflict’ as requiring:

“(1) Use of armed force: use of arms in order to promote the parties’ general position in the conflict, resulting in deaths.

(1.1) Arms: any material means, e.g. manufactured weapons but also sticks, stones, fire, water, etc. […]”

Private conversation with Wenche Hauge, Senior Researcher at PRIO; and author of a study of the Guatemalan conflict contained in Hauge (2002).

These include: the UN Programme of Action on the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons; the ‘firearms protocol’ of the UN Convention on Transnational Organised Crime; the EU Joint Action on small arms; the OSCE best practice guidelines on small arms; the Nairobi Protocol on small arms and light weapons; and the Inter-American Convention concerning illicit small arms. Many others could be added to the list.


Figures on population and numbers in the security forces from Langton eds (2005:329). The number of homicides was from Aguirre et al. 2006.

The existence, though, of arms caches left over from a previous conflict might allow a population to supply a group with weapons (see below).

These could also be viewed as ‘resources’, but of a very different type that are much more difficult to measure.

Mueller though exaggerates the thuggish element of contemporary insurgent groups. Certainly many other organised and disciplined groups could be added to his list of the LTTE and the Chechens. Moreover, in many cases thugs operate alongside more disciplined units.

A rebellion starting with just one gun is a recurrent theme. For example Khakee and Florquin (2005:165) note a claim that that the Malian Mouvement Populaire de Liberation de l’Azawad (MPLA) started its insurGENCY with a single Kalashnikov assault rifle.

The CPN also attacked several different targets, such as a jail, police stations, and tax offices.

It has been suggested that the caches were placed in anticipation of an insurgency. However Woods, Lacey and Murray’s (2006) research indicates that the caches were placed by a regime that believed that the Iraqi army would successfully resist the US and allied armies, and so distributed weapons in preparation for a prolonged conventional war.

Survey available at the School for Peace Culture’s web site at www.escolapau.org

Including by the author of this article.