The Transfer of Arms and the Diffusion of Democracy: Do Arms Promote or Undermine the “Third Wave”?

SHANNON LINDSEY BLANTON
Southern Illinois University

The post–Cold War world has witnessed a proliferation of countries governed by democratic rule. Consequently, optimism has arisen about the prospects for the spread of freedom along with democratic peace and prosperity. Along these lines, many democratic countries have made the active promotion of democracy an explicit goal and a condition for third world countries’ assistance. However, such intentions may be threatened by the ever-present arms trade. Not only do arms transfers play a key role in the foreign policies of many democratic countries, but many developing countries continue to purchase arms from abroad at a steady rate. From the perspective of the developing recipients, this study seeks to empirically assess the impact of the arms trade on democratization. To this end, this paper utilizes an exploratory data technique, locally weighted scatterplot smoother (LOWESS) to examine data for developing countries between 1982 and 1992. By exploring graphically the patterns and distributions revealed by these indicators, the implications of the international arms trade for the spread of democracy are assessed.

Stemming from the 1970s, two trends have emerged and captured the attention of policy makers and scholars. One is the diffusion of democracy across the globe, and the other is the proliferation of arms. The present study explores the question of whether these two trends intersect and interact. More specifically, through the use of relatively simple analytic models, it explores the data on arms transfers and democracy in an effort to

*Direct all correspondence to: Shannon Lindsey Blanton, Department of Political Science, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois 62901-4501. Telephone (618) 536-2371.

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determine whether the import of arms has consequences for the building and maintenance of the institution of democracy within developing countries.

THE SPREAD OF DEMOCRACY—AND ARMS

Over the years, an impressive number of countries throughout the world have made the transition to democratic rule. According to the Freedom House survey, in 1991 “there were 91 democracies and another 35 countries in some form of democratic transition—a staggering 126 out of 183 nations evaluated—compared to 44 democracies in 1972 and 56 in 1980” (McColm, 1992, p. 47). Indeed, democracy has seemed to be spreading as it has touched virtually every region of the world. For instance, western Europe became entirely democratic in the mid-1970s with the redemocratization of Greece, Spain, and Portugal. “Since 1979, the politics of Latin America have been transformed by the longest and deepest wave of democratization in the region’s history” (Remmer, 1990, p. 315). And in 1989, most of the countries in eastern Europe underwent a rapid transformation to democracy as the Cold War came to an end. An Asian trend toward democracy emerged in the 1980s in South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, Mongolia, Nepal, Burma, and Bangladesh. In Africa, the leaders of Côte d’Ivoire, Benin, Gabon, Zambia, Tanzania, and Zaire had all, by 1990, made concessions to democracy (Ray, 1995). Even in the Middle East, which may arguably be the region most resistant to the push toward democracy, talk has taken place about devising models of Islamic democracy (Huntington, 1991). Thus, both regionally and globally, there has been a diffusion of governmental transitions toward democracy (Starr, 1991, 1995).

Within this same time frame, the international trade in arms also expanded and spread around the world. The volume of the arms trade increased, the number of states participating in the market grew, and a shift in its concentration to the developing world occurred. Indeed, at least since the 1980s, arms sales to developing countries have comprised, on average, about two-thirds of all arms sales made internationally. Even with the decline in real terms of the value of arms transfers at the beginning of the post–Cold War period, this pattern has persisted.1 As noted by the U.S. Congressional Research Service (Grimmett, 1994), “In 1993, both arms transfer agreements with and arms deliveries to the Third World continued to comprise roughly two-thirds of all such arms trade activity worldwide.”

The existence of these patterns provokes the query of how the diffusion of democracy and the spread of arms are related. Are the developing countries that import arms the same ones that experience a transition to democracy? Or are arms transfers from abroad concentrated in a select few developing countries, ones that remain resistant to the “third wave” (Huntington, 1991) of democratization?

The two international phenomena are seemingly at odds with one another. Such intuition is embodied in many efforts directed at slowing the flow of international arms. For instance, U.S. legislation to establish a “Code of Conduct” proposes to restrict U.S. arms exports to governments that, among other things, come to power through undemocratic means (McKinney and Rossiter, 1995; Hartung, 1994). Yet at the same time, as suggested by the diffusive trends, arms transfers and democratization exist side by side. Indeed, arms sales remain an important aspect of the foreign policies of many democratic
countries, countries that simultaneously proclaim interest in promoting democracy. Again citing the United States as an example, in 1993 President Bill Clinton embraced a policy of democratic enlargement, proclaiming that the international community was faced with “a unique opportunity to build a community of free nations, diverse in culture and history but bound together by a commitment to responsive and free government” (cited in Christopher, 1994, p. 3). However, in 1993, a large portion of the weapons sold by the United States also went to undemocratic governments (Hartung, 1994; Kegley and Blanton, 1994).

In a world where arms appear to be sold indiscriminately to developing countries and where the developing countries appear to purchase arms at the price of neglecting more vital human needs (Matthews, 1980; Russett, 1969, 1970), the hope of enlarging the community of liberal democracies is questionable. Yet, spurred on by the dramatic events of the late 1980s, a widespread normative consensus emerged internationally in favor of the active promotion of democracy. This global support for democracy was brought about in part by the apparent failure, both politically and economically, of alternative forms of government (Fukuyama, 1992). A major challenge of the post–Cold War era has been to design a comprehensive policy framework which reconciles potentially contradictory trends to that of democratization, such as the proliferation of weapons. However, for sound policy to be created, there must first be a solid empirical basis upon which it is grounded. To aid in this endeavor, this study examines whether arms imports are associated with the regime type of developing countries. Perhaps by ascertaining whether arms have an impact on conditions of and transitions toward democracy within developing countries, we can begin to understand the consequences arms pose to the very countries where the hope of expanding democracy has yet to be realized. Only then can the role of arms transfers be adequately taken into account in policies in which the goal is the promotion of democracy.

THE ADVANTAGES OF DEMOCRACY

Accompanying the diffusion of democracy, there has been a renewed interest among scholars as to the implications of democracy for international conflict and peace (Dixon, 1993; Merritt and Zinnes, 1991; Morgan and Campbell, 1991; Morgan and Schewbach, 1992). Among the many important findings has been the robustly supported contention that democracies do not go to war with other democracies—though there is evidence that, overall democracies are as likely as nondemocracies to go to war with nondemocratic governments (Bremer, 1992; Chan, 1984; Doyle, 1986; Maoz and Abdolali, 1989; Maoz and Russett, 1992; Weede, 1992) and to engage in conflicts of lesser intensity (Forsythe, 1992; Kegley and Hermann, 1994). In a somewhat different vein from these studies, the present study is concerned with democracy as an internal consequence of the international arms trade. Such a condition most certainly has implications for relations at the international level. However, the focus here is on examining democracy with regard to its internal dimension in developing countries.

To the extent that democratic government is concerned with the desires and needs of the people, it functions as an agent of human security. In other words, “the form of government or regime in power is . . . an essential part of the domestic security coping
mechanism” (Azar and Moon, 1988, p. 80). Indeed, democracy has been praised as a form of government that “improves a society’s standard of political life through popular and regular elections, open political parties, freedom of the press, and so forth” (Merritt and Zinnes, 1991:207). Moreover, the structural characteristics of democracy, “such as competitive elections, limited government power, and public expression of preferences” (Dixon, 1993:44; also see Bollen, 1991; Dahl, 1971; Lipset, 1959, 1994), enhance the ability of democratic government to both avoid and, when need be, peacefully overcome threats to internal security. Hans Morgenthau (1948) explains that as a “good” form of government, democratic regimes are more likely than nondemocratic ones to maximize intangible sources of national power, such as public support. Conversely, as democratic governments are responsive and held accountable to their constituents, they themselves are less likely to pose threats to internal security. In turn, democracies typically have a strong security base and are likely to be associated with high levels of human security.

A SEARCH FOR LINKAGES

Clearly, there are trends toward both democratization and arms proliferation in the developing world. Yet while policy makers may link the two, widespread agreement is lacking as to the exact nature of the relationship. The possible association between arms transfers and democracy will here be examined by identifying potential linkages as depicted within the literature and by subjecting measures of democracy and arms imports to empirical examination. This investigation is exploratory and inductive in nature, and does not attempt to develop a complete model of the determinants of democracy and the factors that inhibit democratization. Rather, its purpose is to examine the extent of the bivariate relationship between arms imports and democracy, and to describe the strength and direction of the relationship, in order to approach and capture what is a very complex issue, influenced by many conditioning factors.

Little theory addresses directly the relationship between arms and democracy. However, several rival propositions regarding the nature of the relationship between arms transfers and democracy can be drawn from the literature. Those examined by the present study are:

1. arms acquisitions on the part of developing countries may be linked to nondemocratic government.
2. arms imports by developing countries may result in democratic government.
3. there may be no relationship between arms transfers and democracy.

General arguments for each proposition are reviewed and presented below.

A Negative Relationship Between Arms and Democracy

Within the literature on the third world, a number of themes have emerged concerning the internal dynamics of social change and military rule that suggest that arms transfers may be linked to the rule of nondemocratic government within developing countries. The
line of reasoning that supports the argument that arms transfers “help prolong military rule in Third World states” (Maniruzzaman, 1992, p. 734) begins with the assumption that both society in general and politics in particular are extremely conflictual in most developing countries. Huntington (1968) makes the case in point, arguing that in developing societies “no political institutions, no corps of professional political leaders are recognized or accepted as the legitimate intermediaries to moderate group conflict” (p. 196). Due in part to this lack of political order, a sense of distrust and insecurity exists which in turn prevents the people of developing countries from developing the ability to collaborate with one another in the affairs of government (Boseman, 1976; Maniruzzaman, 1992; Morse, 1964; Pye, 1985). Moreover, as a legacy of their colonial past (and unlike their European counterparts), the formative stages of the state-building process in developing countries have generally not included an “internal forging of mutual constraints between rulers and the ruled, development of extensive bureaucracy of fiscal surveillance, the representation of wronged interest via petition and parliament, and the reinforcement of the local community as a fundamental unit of government” (Tilly, 1985, pp. 83–84).

In the absence of democratic foundations, the military has typically been one of the stronger institutions in developing countries. According to Gino Germani and Kalman Silvert (1976), the introduction of the military into the political power structure is a sure indication of the relative inability of other social institutions to deploy power effectively (p. 31). As to the role of arms, “by strengthening the armed forces, arms transfer facilitates and accelerates the process of military takeover of the powers of the state” (Maniruzzaman, 1992, p. 738). This strengthening of the armed forces takes place in a number of ways. For one, arms imports increase the means for violence that the military has available. For another, as sophisticated weapons are acquired, a need for advanced training arises. Through the establishment of military schools and improved training, military personnel become increasingly specialized, identification with the military intensifies, and institutional loyalties to the military grow. These factors contribute to the increased professionalization of the military, which subsequently produces a substantial share of the individuals who come to be members of the political elite (Corbett, 1972; Lowenthal, 1976; Stepan, 1971). Consequently, the political systems of many developing countries are significantly influenced by individuals with a military background.

Obviously, the existence of military forces does not in itself preclude democratic government. However, a strong military does create a number of problems for new democracies such as those found in many developing countries. Through the process of democratization the structure of the political system is altered. However, the military still exists within the polity and there is often articulated military opposition to new democratic leaders (Gills, Rocamora, and Wilson, 1993). Moreover, the military commonly retains its prerogatives, creating difficulties for democratic management of the military. Alfred Stepan (1988); see also Giddens, 1987) notes that in democratic theory, there is free contestation through elections for the control of state power. Yet when the military has significant control over the management of violence, an intrinsic dimension of the modern state is removed from the scope of democratic politics. Thus, while there are likely numerous intervening factors that affect the regime type of a government in any particular country, there are nevertheless reasons to suspect that arms imports may be negatively associated with democracy.
A Positive Relationship Between Arms and Democracy

If the above contention is true, that arms imports are negatively associated with democracy, then how does one explain the parallel global trends of the diffusion of democracy and the spread of weapons? Can it be that only nondemocratic states account for the increased volume in arms trade to developing countries? Or is it possible that arms imports may be positively associated with democracy?

Within the arms trade literature, there is a body of work that focuses on arms as instruments of influence. Arms have frequently been utilized as a policy tool by supplier countries for the purpose of making recipients comply with supplier wishes (Pierre, 1982; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 1971; Wheelock, 1978). Often arms-influence attempts have been aimed at altering the domestic policies of developing countries. In particular, the manipulation of arms has on numerous occasions been undertaken with the goal in mind of changing the nature of the recipient government so as to make countries less militaristic and more democratic. For example, in the late 1980s, arms transfers from the United States were temporarily suspended to the developing countries of Haiti and Panama in an effort to foster democracy in those countries. While sanctions that withhold arms are commonly the means by which arms are used to influence developing countries, there are cases where increased arms transfers are promised in an effort to bring about the desired behavior on the part of the recipient. For instance, President Ronald Reagan pledged “that if the Philippine elections of 1986 were fair and the winner promised to initiate reforms” (Sislin, 1994, p. 668), he would try to increase military transfers to that country.2

Both types of policy initiatives are targeted at countries that do import arms as opposed to those that do not, operationally reinforcing the proposition that there may be a positive relationship between at least a minimal level of arms imports and democracy. Further theoretical support for the proposition is found in that as poorer countries are expected to be those most open to arms influence attempts (Sislin, 1994), and the present study focuses on such countries, a positive relationship between arms and democracy will be uncovered. Thus, there are arguments that suggest there may be a positive relationship between arms imports and democracy.

No Relationship Between Arms and Democracy

There are also arguments within the literature that suggest that there may be no statistical relationship between arms imports and regime type. Addressing the potential for a negative relationship between arms and democracy, Huntington (1968) contends that there is no convincing evidence that military assistance leads to an increased proclivity of the military to become involved in politics. He also argues that neither have attempts to indoctrinate military personnel with ideas of civilian supremacy reduced the likelihood of the military to intervene in government. In other words, the acquisition of arms may very well “neither encourage nor reduce the tendencies of military officers to play a political role” (Huntington, 1968; see also Powell, 1965; Putnam, 1967). Thus, in effect, as arms imports may not increase the military’s political efficacy, there may be no relationship between arms and regime type.
Morris Janowitz (1977) seconds the contention that arms acquisitions may not be related to a country’s form of government, arguing that it “appears that foreign military assistance programs are not decisive or even influential in accounting for a military regime’s ability or inability to consolidate its rule” (p. 48). His argument is equally applicable to democratic regimes, suggesting that there may be no positive relationship between arms and the consolidation of democratic rule. Despite the assumption by many policymakers that arms are an effective form of influence, considerable debate exists among scholars as to whether such a premise is valid (Sylvan, 1978). For every successful arms influence attempt by a supplier, there is an unsuccessful one as well. Moreover, it has been found that getting a recipient to alter its domestic policy, particularly with regard to being more democratic, is extremely difficult (Sislin, 1994). Thus, it may be that democracy is not linked to the arms acquisition behavior of developing countries.

DATA SOURCES

The Independent Variable

Within the community of scholars who regularly analyze the international arms trade, there is dissatisfaction with available arms transfer data. Notable problems of reliability and validity exist and, in sum, study of the arms trade is “hampered by the limited amount of transparent, comprehensive data” (Happe and Wakeman-Linn, 1994a, p. 3). Yet despite such shortcomings, there is general consensus that data on the arms trade is rich enough to support meaningful examination of a wide range of attribute-related questions about the arms trade. Indeed, given the compelling need for research on the arms trade, it is argued that “the luxury of waiting for all of the longstanding data problems to be solved” (Laurance and Mullen, 1987, p. 81) is one that cannot be afforded.

In this study, the independent variable is operationalized through the use of arms import data obtained from the ACDA’s World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers. While this data source suffers from methodological limitations, for the purposes of this study it is superior to other available data in a number of ways. Not only are arms transfers clearly defined as including “weapons of war, parts thereof, ammunition, support, equipment, and other commodities designed for military use” (ACDA, 1994, p. 153), but small arms such as infantry weapons, nonarmored military vehicles, and communications and electronic equipment are included as well. This is particularly useful for the present study since “small arms are essential to understanding the domestic impact of weapons transfers” (Gerner, 1983, p. 16).

Additionally, the ACDA data distinguish between estimates of the value of items actually delivered during a particular year and those for the value of agreements that may result in the transfer of arms sometime in the future. This feature is useful as the most accurate indicator of arms transfer activities is the actual receipt of arms by a country, as opposed to simply anticipated arms acquisitions (Louscher and Salomone, 1987). The ACDA is also the only source that provides estimates in constant as well as current dollars (Happe & Wakeman-Linn, 1994b). This is critical as the use of constant-dollar figures in analysis of arms transfers takes into account effects of inflation, and largely avoids the tendency to reflect artificial growth.
Arms imports are employed as an indicator of arms trade activity for several reasons. First, imports are generally considered to have a more disruptive political impact on recipients than other indicators of participation in the international marketplace, such as exports (McKeown, 1991). Additionally, data for a commonly used alternative indicator, military expenditures, varies widely for developing countries due to different domestic definitions of security-related outlays (Ball, 1988). Moreover, a preponderance of developing countries remain dependent upon imports as their only source of armaments. Though some Third World countries now have the capability to produce conventional weapons themselves (Brzoska, 1989b), it is argued that the ability to produce weapons at home does not necessarily reduce the desire to import weapons or parts for them (Pearson, 1989).

The Dependent Variable

In defining democracy, many scholars concentrate primarily on the institutional dimension of democratic rule (Huntington, 1984; Lipset, 1981; Moore, 1966; Schumpeter, 1950; Vanhanen, 1990), while others emphasize political liberties as well (Dahl, 1971; Lenski, 1966; Poe & Tate, 1994; Therborne, 1977). In this study, democracy is conceptualized along the lines of Kenneth (Bollen’s 1993; see also Bollen, 1980, 1990), two-dimensional definition of “liberal democracy as the extent to which a political system allows political liberties and democratic rule” (p. 1208). Political liberties reflect the degree of freedom people have to participate in any political group and to express in any media an array of political opinions. Democratic rule indicates the extent to which a national government is held accountable to its citizenry, and the extent to which individual members of society are allowed to participate in government.

In order to represent this two-dimensional conceptualization of democracy, two separate indicators are utilized. The first taps into democratic rule by focusing on the authority structures of polities. This authority structure indicator is based on information about the characteristics of political institutions, decision-making structures, and political competition. The emphasis is on the institutionalization of open political competition and constraints on decision-making processes (Jaggers and Gurr, 1995; Gurr, Jaggers, and Moore, 1990), rather than the extent to which a government respects the political liberties of individual citizens. Thus, a second indicator of democracy is needed that assesses the political rights aspect of democracy.

The Freedom House index of political rights serves as the source for the second indicator of democracy. While not without its weaknesses (see McCamant, 1981; Scoble and Wiseberg, 1981), the index of political rights is considered by many to be an appropriate and satisfactory indicator of democracy (Bollen, 1993; Burkhart and Lewis-Beck, 1994; Poe and Tate, 1994). Not only does it evaluate a wide range of theoretically recognized political liberties, but measurement criteria for the indicator have improved substantially over the years so that criticisms of measurement problems of data for the 1970s are less relevant for data for the 1980s (Poe and Tate, 1994). Moreover, the Freedom House political rights index has been found to have the highest validity rating from among several different indicators of democracy. Thus, while the political rights index is not a flawless measure, it does contribute to a meaningful assessment of democracy when combined with alternative indicators.
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

In the 1970s, developing countries became major recipients of arms transfers. By the early 1980s, this trend had accelerated and solidified. This study focuses on the series of arms imports to developing countries from the years 1981 through 1991. Because there is likely to be a social and political incubation period between the time arms are acquired by a country and the consequences for democracy are realized (see Kemp with Miller, 1979), a 1-year time lag is incorporated into the analysis so that the effects of the independent variable upon the dependent variables can be treated. Thus data for democracy are collected for a time period extending from 1982 to 1992.

This study concentrates on the potential consequences of arms transfers received by developing countries throughout the world. Taking into account conditions of democracy in countries that lack arms is integral to ascertaining the macro pattern of these domestic consequences (see Most and Starr, 1989). Thus, included in the data set are countries that have received no arms as well as those that have. To take into account variation in the population and level of economic development of developing countries, the countries are grouped into distinct categories. Such classification is in accordance with Looney and Frederiksen (1985) who argue that the developmental homogeneity of developing countries should not be assumed, and that countries should be subdivided according to their economic characteristics. Three distinct categories are formed based upon different levels of GNP per capita in developing countries. Low-income economies include countries with a GNP per capita of 650 dollars and below. The middle-income category includes countries with a GNP per capita ranging from $651 to $6000. The third category, high-income economies, is comprised of countries with a GNP per capita which exceeds $6000.

As previously stated, this study is exploratory in nature in that the objective is to probe the data on arms transfers and democracy in an attempt to uncover empirical evidence indicating a linkage between the two. In exploratory data analysis it is often premature to assume unquestioningly that the relationship about which evidence is sought is necessarily a linear one. Therefore, measures should be employed which test for the existence of non-linear relationships as well. As a technique appropriate for exploratory data analysis, LOWESS (locally weighted scatterplot smoother) is a variable analytical tool as it is flexible and follows a wide array of patterns, including non-linear ones. In searching for evidence of a relationship between arms imports and democracy, LOWESS helps to provide a foundation for future analysis by providing a graphical summary of any dependence between democracy and arms through the placement of a smooth curve through the data points. As William Cleveland (1985) explains, “The curve is graphed by connecting successive smoothed values, moving from left to right, by lines” (p. 169).

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

In this study, LOWESS curves based on both the authority structure index and on the political rights index are presented for developing countries as a whole, as well as for each economic group. Figure 1 depicts the relationship between arms imports and democracy for developing countries in general, with no distinction made as to the respective levels of GNP per capita. With arms imports calculated on a logarithmic scale to correct for
skewness,

the LOWESS curves in both the graphs reveal that in countries that import no more than $20 million (in constant 1991 dollars) of arms, there is a negative relationship between arms imports and conditions of democracy. For countries importing between $20 million and $150 million (3 through 5 on the logarithmic scale) of arms on the authority structure graph and between $20 million and $400 million (3 through 6 on the logarithmic scale) on the political rights graph, there appears to be little relationship between arms and democracy. Thus, for most of those countries whose level of arms imports falls along the lower end of the arms imports scale, the import of arms appears to have little or no impact upon conditions of democracy within the recipient country. However, for those countries that import higher amounts of arms, the LOWESS curves depict a clear negative relationship between arms imports and conditions of democracy. That is, countries that are recipients of arms ranking high in dollar value tend to be characterized by a subsequent decline in their level of democracy.

Breaking the pool of developing countries down into three economic groups based upon their yearly GNP per capita reveals variation among the countries with regard to the impact of arms imports on conditions of democracy. Figure 2 depicts the LOWESS curves for developing countries with a GNP per capita of less than $650. As can be seen, there appears to be very little relationship between a country’s import of arms and subsequent conditions of democracy. Thus, the pattern of the LOWESS curves suggests that for low-income countries, arms imports have little effect upon governmental authority structures. A slightly more complex pattern of association between arms imports and the extent of political rights within a country is revealed. Just as for developing countries as a whole, for countries that import less than $20 million worth of arms, there is a negative relationship between the import of arms and conditions of democracy. Between $20 million and $650 million worth of arms imports the LOWESS curve shows there to be little relationship between arms imports and the level of democratic political rights in arms recipient countries. An upward turn in the LOWESS curve appears at the extreme values, in excess of $650 million, of arms imports. Thus, for countries that import the greatest dollar amounts of arms, the acquisition of arms is associated with increases in the degree of political rights allowed.

Figure 3 depicts the relationship between arms imports and democratic conditions in the middle-income countries. The graphs for both the authority structure and political rights measures of democracy reveal an initial negative relationship with arms imports. In dollar values, the downward turn is apparent for countries that acquire no more than $20 million (3 on the logarithmic scale) of arms imports. A slight leveling effect is evident in the LOWESS curve for midrange values of arms imports. For the authority structure graph, these values range from 3 to 4 on the logarithmic scale ($20 million to $50 million) and for the political rights graph, these values range from 3 to 5 on the logarithmic scale ($20 million to $150 million). Thus, for countries whose acquisition of arms falls somewhere within these ranges, conditions of democracy do not appear to be affected by the import of arms. A negative relationship between arms and democracy that becomes increasingly accentuated as greater amounts of arms are imported exists in countries whose arms acquisitions surpass, on the authority structure graph, $50 million in value, and on the political rights graph, $150 million. That is, for middle-income countries whose arms imports fall along the upper end of the scale, the acquisition of arms is associated with consistently worsening democratic conditions.
Figure 4 graphically summarizes the relationship between arms imports and democracy in high-income third world countries. At the low end of the arms scale, highly democratic countries are recipients. That is, in countries that import few arms, the conditions of democracy are comparatively high. However, this state of affairs changes dramatically as arms imports increase in volume. For countries that import up to $150 million worth of arms (5 on the logarithmic scale) on the authority structure graph and up to $50 million worth (4 on the logarithmic scale) on the political rights graph, increases in the dollar value of arms imported are associated with sharp declines in the conditions of democracy in recipient countries. For countries that import arms in excess of these values, the existing relationship is a bit more complex. The LOWESS curves show that for countries whose arms imports fall between 5 and 6 on the logarithmic scale ($150 million to $400 million) on the authority structure graph and between 4 and 5.5 ($50 million to $250 million) on the political rights graph, there is virtually no relationship between arms acquisitions and internal democratic conditions. For countries importing between 6 and 7 ($1 billion) on the logarithmic scale on the authority structure graph, and between 5.5 and 7 on the political rights graph, the negative relationship between arms imports and level of democracy resumes. Virtually no relationship between arms acquisitions and democratic conditions is again evident for countries that acquire more than $1 billion worth of arms.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Spurred by observance of two global trends—the spread of both arms and democracy to the third world—the objective of this study was to uncover, if possible, a linkage between the two. The empirical analysis conducted in this study has proven fruitful in that evidence has been obtained that indicates that there is in fact a relationship between arms imports and the recipient country’s level of democracy. In general, the LOWESS curves have revealed nonlinear relationships between arms imports and conditions of democracy within countries of different economic standing, as well as for developing countries as a whole. Yet the relationship between arms and democracy can not be strictly characterized as positive or negative in nature. As revealed by the LOWESS curves, the association between arms imports and conditions of democracy changes with the level of arms imports and the level of economic development. To generalize, it appears that the import of low-level amounts of arms is linked to declining conditions of democracy in recipient countries. With the exception of low-income countries, the acquisition of high amounts of arms is also linked to declining conditions of democracy. No relationship between arms imports and democracy is expected at points on the LOWESS curve that fall within a midrange level of arms imports.

From a theoretical and policy evaluation perspective, the findings of this study are complex as well. Overall, the results suggest that large amounts of arms transfers to developing countries impede efforts to enlarge democracy. Rather than enhancing democratic development, the results of this analysis support the proposition that arms transfers serve to strengthen the military as a political actor. In turn, the presence of a strong and politically active military generally tends to inhibit the diffusion of democratic political processes and the internalization of democratic values within developing countries.

With regard to midlevel amounts of arms imports, the acquisition of arms neither inhibits nor enhances a country’s efforts to democratize. Thus, the pattern suggests that for
countries that import mid-level amounts of arms, as opposed to high or low levels, arms transfers have no identifiable influence on the proclivity of the military to become involved in politics (see Huntington, 1968; Janowitz, 1977). It may be that a plateau is reached at midlevel arms imports, where the military establishment has become an identifiable political actor but has not become so strong and influential as to eclipse democratic governance.

From the perspective of the supplier, the implications of the impact of midlevel arms transfers are twofold. On one hand, the transfer of weapons may enhance the economic standing of the supplier at no notable cost to the democratic development of the recipient country. Therefore, in transferring weapons to these countries, there is no conflict of interest for suppliers concerned with both participating in the international arms trade and simultaneously promoting global democracy. On the other hand, the results of this study suggest that, in support of prior research (Kegley and Blanton, 1994; Sislin, 1994), policy aimed at positively influencing a country’s conditions of democracy through the manipulation of arms transfers is questionable at best. In most cases, efforts to supply weapons with strings of democratic reform attached have little success in actually realizing the enlargement of democracy.

In conclusion, the overlying purpose of this study has been to explore the data on arms imports and democracy in order to uncover evidence of a relationship between the two variables. The results of this probing of the data have shown that, at least with regard to middle and high-income developing countries, a relationship of sorts does exist. It follows, then, that the patterns revealed suggest that the current diffusive trends of both arms and democracy to developing countries are somewhat contradictory to one another. While both democratic and nondemocratic countries alike import midrange levels of arms, it is primarily non-democratic countries that import large amounts of arms. Therefore, from both a recipient and supplier point of view, if the goal is to promote democratic conditions and to refrain from undermining current attempts at democratic governance, policy is best formulated that controls the volume of arms transferred in and limits the exchange of high levels of arms to any one recipient.

NOTES

1. Joanna Spear (1994–95) argues that, moreover, “this slump in the trade may be short-lived” (p. 8). Referring to the decline in the arms trade experienced early in the post–Cold War period, she sees the desire of countries to obtain new technologically advanced weapons, along with persistent conflicts in the Middle East and Asia (where defense spending is increasing), as factors that will lift the arms trade out of its depressed condition.

2. Both the example of positive sanction and that of negative sanction suggest that developing countries may experience a rise in arms imports after they make a transition to democracy rather than before. The research design of the present study, which does not attempt to assess arms-influence attempts, measures arms one year prior to democracy. While the depicted temporal relationship is reversed, both frameworks allow for an impact of arms on democracy.

3. For a full discussion of these issues, see Brzoska, 1982; Fei, 1979; Happe & Wakeman-Linn, 1994a, 1994b; Kolodziej, 1979; and Louscher & Salomone, 1987.

4. Arms imports are measured in terms of millions of U.S. constant 1991 dollars.
5. It has been suggested that an alternative indicator to dollar-value measures of arms transfers is needed in order to more precisely measure arms. By focusing on the quantity and characteristics of weapons, not only would arms transfers be depicted as multidimensional, but problems of valuation, deflators, and exchange rates would be avoided (Baugh and Squires, 1983). However, serious difficulties in the practical application of such measures arise. Not only are efforts at operationalization problematic, but perhaps more importantly, the linkage between weapons characteristics and political behavior is not strong enough to be uncovered through examination of minor differences in weapons systems. Furthermore, the decision makers of recipient countries are not likely to discern distinctions in weapons characteristics (Schrodt, 1983). Therefore, dollar-value measures of arms transfers should not be discounted out of hand—findings based on the data should simply be interpreted with care.

6. The data source for this indicator is the Polity data set. For a full discussion, refer to Jaggers and Gurr, 1995.

7. Some studies that focus on democracy have utilized Freedom House’s civil liberties index as well. Indeed, the important political freedoms of speech and press are included in that index rather than the political one. As part of a larger project which examines democracy and human rights as distinct phenomenon, the present study employs only the political rights index.

8. In Bollen’s (1993) analysis of the variance of indicators of democracy, the Freedom House political rights index was found to have a validity rating of 93%, only 7% of total variance explained by method factor error, and no variation explained by random measurement error. Moreover, in statistical analyses conducted by Poe and Tate (1994), the Polity II index of institutionalized democracy, the Freedom House political rights index, and Vanhanen’s (1990) index of democracy were found to be “so highly correlated as to be virtually substitutable (with) few substantively interesting differences” (p. 857).

9. The coded order of the Freedom House ratings is inverted in this study to increase readability, so that the democracy rating ranges from a low of 1 to a high of 7.

10. Excluded are the countries of Andorra, Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Belize, Bhutan, Brunei, Comoros, Djibouti, Dominica, Grenada, Kiribati, Liechtenstein, Maldives, Monaco, Montserrat, Namibia, Nauru, Saint Christopher and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, San Marino, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, Vatican City, and Western Samoa. The ACDA does not provide data for these countries as it considers them generally small and not militarily significant.

11. Classification of developing countries according to the income aggregates is obtained from the UN Human Development Report 1994, pp. 224 and 225.

12. For a more detailed discussion of how LOWESS works, see Cleveland, 1985.

13. The dots in the graphs throughout this study represent plotted data points.

14. It is quite common that positive data, such as those used in this study, are skewed to the right. In other words, some values often “bunch together at the low end of the scale and others trail off to the high end with increasing gaps between the values as they get higher” (Cleveland, 1985, p. 84; also see Hamilton, 1990, chap. 6). Such a condition typically causes acute resolution problems on graphs. The common solution for this basic skewness is to take logarithms. Such has been done for the arms import data in the graphs throughout the rest of the study.

15. Arms imports are depicted in the graphs in this study on a natural logarithmic scale. To interpret the values on the logarithmic scale in terms of dollar amount, the antilog is calculated.
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