



Up in arms: Warring over Europe's arms export regime

by Sophia Besch and Beth Oppenheim

9 September 2019

The European Union's poorly co-ordinated arms export regime is undermining its foreign policy and ambition to become a credible defence actor. That is the key conclusion of new analysis by the Centre for European Reform entitled '[Up in arms: Warring over Europe's arms export regime](#)' which finds serious shortcomings in the EU's current regime.

Combined, the EU's member-states are the second largest arms exporter in the world after the US. Despite this, the Union's arms export regime is inadequate. The EU might have a common arms export policy on paper, but in practice, European countries operate their own, often conflicting policies, driven by national commercial and political concerns. Member-states consider defence a matter of national sovereignty, and are unwilling to surrender any of their autonomy to Brussels. This disjointed approach makes it much harder for Europe to present a coherent united foreign policy and effectively pursue its interests.

A dispute between EU member-states about whether to sell weapons to Saudi Arabia is the most recent example of the failings of the Union's arms export regime. Germany suspended arms exports to the Kingdom last year after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, drawing criticism from France and Britain. As a result, the EU was unable to reach a consensus on how to respond to Saudi Arabia's violations of international law at home and in Yemen. That followed similar disagreements about whether to impose sanctions including an arms embargo on Venezuela in 2017, and whether to supply arms to rebel groups in Syria in 2013.

These cases underline the need for a genuinely co-ordinated EU arms export policy based on three pillars: improved controls to keep weapons and 'dual-use' goods that can be used for civilian or military purposes out of the hands of those who might use them to violate international law or create instability; targeted exports to allies that need European support to address shared security challenges; and a shared export policy that helps European defence firms to work together to improve the EU's own capabilities.

A common and enforceable EU arms export regime, including a sanctions mechanism and supervisory arms control body, should be the ultimate goal, but is unlikely, as it would require treaty change and there is currently no appetite among member-states to give up sovereignty over arms exports. For now, EU countries should attempt to reach a shared view on the security context of arms exports, improve reporting by member-states, tighten end-use controls and reach inter-governmental export agreements.

"The EU wants to become a credible defence actor, but arms export policy is the elephant in the room. The EU's high-profile initiatives to fill its defence capability gaps will fall flat without first coming to an understanding about arms exports, and Europeans are far from reaching an agreement," said Sophia Besch, co-author of the new CER analysis.

"Too often, arms export decisions are driven by politics and the allure of large arms contracts, rather than by the EU's own laws and guidelines. This weakens the Union's foreign policy and undermines its credibility as a principled power," said Beth Oppenheim, co-author of the new CER analysis.

Note for editors: For further information on the report and to request an interview with Sophia Besch or Beth Oppenheim, please contact Nick Winning in the CER press office on pressoffice@cer.eu or + 44 (0) 20 7233 1199.

The Centre for European Reform is a think-tank devoted to making the EU work better and strengthening its role in the world. The CER is pro-European but not uncritical. Follow us on twitter [@CER_EU](#) and the authors on [@SophiaBesch](#) [@BethOppenheim](#)