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The Political Psychology of Embargoes: An Example from the Eritrean-Ethiopian War

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Abstract. This article describes psychological inferences embraced by supporters and opponents of embargoes as tools to prevent, end, or moderate political violence between nation-states.

One common response to end or moderate the ongoing war between Eritrea and Ethiopia--or to prevent a future conflict after the current one has died down--is to advocate a weapons embargo. Without weapons (so the thinking often goes) combatants cannot fight--or if they do, the fight will be much less lethal. Moreover, it is posited that there will be savings from not buying weapons that can then be expended on the health, education, and social welfare of people. But there can be a dark underside to instituting a weapons embargo.

Instituting an embargo will not be a fool-proof or air-tight endeavor. Some weapons will get through, although there may be fewer of them. In the context of supply and demand, supply will decrease and demand will increase. The price of weapons will surely increase. The total amount of currency or other entity of value expended for weapons may even approach or increase the amount expended before the embargo--even for fewer weapons, although the number of weapons may still increase depending on the buyer's hard currency reserves or reserves of some other entity of value. As the unit price of weapons increase, there will be a greater motivation for embargo busters to further bust the embargo and for embargo supporters to become embargo busters. Likewise, the buyer may seek weapons from representatives of nation-states that have agendas even more insidious to world peace and prosperity than the original sellers. These latter nation-states may be even more motivated and adept at keeping the war going for their own economic, military, political, and socio-cultural benefits. Moreover, as the unit price increases, even more of a nation-state's assets may be withdrawn from health, education, and social welfare.

There are three other phenomena that may occur reactive to a weapons embargo. The buyer may also become a developer of a domestic weapons industry that may skew the ratio of military to nonmilitary expenditures even further than before the embargo. (And this "in-house" capability may decrease the threshold for engaging in other military adventures as well as becoming a buster of weapons embargoes against other nation-states). Also, the higher prices for weapons precipitated by the embargo may, in turn, precipitate a weapons price downturn as more embargo busters get into the act--especially in conjunction with the development of a domestic weapons industry. Finally, the embargo initiators and other nation-states who refuse to become embargo-busters may garner the opprobrium of the buyer that may be translated into noxious consequences for initiators and refusers sometime in the future.

The moral of the story is that the consequences of weapons embargoes may be more complex than assumed by a global citizen desiring the waxing of peace and the waning of war. The research opportunity for political psychologists is to differentiate the consequences of a weapons embargo for specific political conflicts, political actors, and historical eras. (See Barkley, D. (May 23, 2000). U.N. embargo's costs. *The New York Times*, p. A30; Becker, L. J., & Seligman, C. (1981). Welcome to the energy crisis. *Journal of Social Issues*, 37, 1-7; Locurto, C. M., Tierney, J., & Fitzgerald, S. (1981). Omission training and positive conditioned suppression in the rat. *Animal Learning and Behavior*, 9, 261-268;

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