

Dana P. Eyre and Mark C. Suchman. 1996. "Status, Norms, and the Proliferation of Conventional Weapons: An Institutional Theory Approach," p. 79-113; in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed. *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press).

Quick summary: *Both weapons proliferation and the broader process of the worldwide spread of professional, technically oriented military organizations are interpreted as social (and not merely functional or military) phenomena. The proliferation of conventional weapons is profoundly shaped by an essentially 'ritualistic' belief in militaries and modern weaponry as distinguishing emblems of the modern nation-state, as defined by world-level culture. Third World countries, therefore, will acquire symbolically significant but functionally unnecessary weapons (such as supersonic aircraft) in addition to useful yet less symbolic weapons (armored personal carriers?!?). Note: Their empirical tests are problematic and do not clearly support their central argument.*

What is the central puzzle?

Why do Third World countries possess or develop expensive "advanced" high-technology weapons that are of limited functional use instead of just useful and functional less advanced weapons?

What is the central answer(s)?

Weapons spread not because of a match between their technical capabilities and national security needs but because of the highly symbolic, normative nature of militaries and their weaponry. Weapons have proliferated because of the socially constructed meanings that have become associated with them. Highly technological militaries symbolize modernity, efficacy, and independence. Thus, the spread of weapons is a process driven and shaped by institutionalized normative structures linking militaries and their advanced weapons with sovereign status as a nation, with modernization, and with social legitimacy. The acquisition of modern weaponry, like the acquisition of a flag, is at least in part a product of world-level cultural definitions of the modern nation-state. A given weapons symbolic significance is dependent on the degree to which it is linked to cultural ideas and images of the nation-state; highly technological, visible, unique weapons are more effective at symbolizing independence than are mundane, unremarkable weapons.

What are the possible alternative explanations?

1. *'Superpower manipulation'* – The proliferation of conventional weaponry and, more broadly, the militarization of the world system is primarily the consequence of major power decisions and geopolitical concerns. Weapons proliferation is not driven by (local) national needs or internal politics but by the global strategies of the U.S. and the USSR.
2. *'National security'* – Weapons procurement is driven by security needs. Strategic, operational, and tactical analysis governs force structure and weapons procurement decisions. Decisions are made on the basis of rationally developed performance criteria and threat assessments, and nations are presumed to select a mix of weaponry that balances military benefits with purchase costs.
3. *'Factional interest'* – Factional or political theories view procurement as a reflection of competing internal interests.

Despite the conclusions offered by Eyre and Suchman, their empirics do not seem to support their central argument. International organization membership is significantly related not merely to those weapons that were seen as highly symbolically significant (supersonic aircraft) but also to weapons that were seen as of lesser symbolic significance (armored personnel carriers).