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Arming the new Sheriff in Town: Arms Transfers in the Wake of Leadership Turnover

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While a large existing body of work considers the international determinants and consequences of arms transfers, research on their domestic sources is rare. However, anecdotal evidence highlights their importance. This paper addresses this gap by linking arms transfers to research on the consequences of leadership turnover for interstate relations. It develops the expectation that leadership turnover in a recipient country should result in reduced arms orders from previous suppliers, given that new leaders should introduce uncertainty into diplomatic relations and tend to change their countries' foreign policy behavior. This should especially be the case when new leaders are affiliated with a different support coalition than their predecessors, and when political power is highly concentrated in the executive. These expectations are tested using global dyadic data on leadership turnover and arms orders. Surprisingly, across a range of operationalization and modeling strategies, there is no empirical support for the expectation that leadership turnover decreases arms orders filed with previous suppliers. This research raises important questions regarding the domestic sources of states' foreign policy behavior and politico-strategic role of arms supply relationships between states, especially highlighting important future directions for research on the consequences of leadership transitions.

Si bien existe un amplio conjunto de trabajos que analizan los determinantes y las consecuencias internacionales de las transferencias de armas, las investigaciones relativas a sus fuentes nacionales son escasas. Sin embargo, existe evidencia anecdótica que resalta su importancia. Este artículo aborda esta laguna a través de la relación entre las transferencias de armas y la investigación sobre las consecuencias que tiene los cambios de liderazgo sobre las relaciones interestatales. El artículo desarrolla la expectativa de que la rotación del liderazgo en un país receptor debería resultar en una reducción de los pedidos de armas a los proveedores anteriores, ya que los nuevos líderes introducen incertidumbres con respecto a las relaciones diplomáticas y tienden a cambiar el comportamiento en materia de política exterior de sus países. Esto debería ser particularmente cierto cuando los nuevos líderes están afiliados a una coalición de apoyo diferente a la de sus predecesores y cuando el poder político está altamente concentrado en el ejecutivo. Ponemos a prueba estas expectativas utilizando datos diádicos globales relativos a los cambios de liderazgo y a los pedidos de armas. Sorprendentemente, en una variedad de estrategias de operacionalización y modelización, no existe un respaldo empírico para la hipótesis de que los cambios de liderazgo

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reducen los pedidos de armas presentados a proveedores anteriores. Esta investigación plantea importantes cuestiones con respecto a las fuentes internas del comportamiento de la política exterior de los Estados y al papel político-estratégico de las relaciones de suministro de armas entre Estados, destacando especialmente importantes direcciones futuras para la investigación sobre las consecuencias de las transiciones del liderazgo.

Bien qu'un ensemble important de travaux s'intéresse aux déterminants et conséquences internationaux des transferts d'armes, la recherche sur leurs sources nationales est plus limitée. Néanmoins, des éléments probants non confirmés mettent en lumière leur importance. Cet article cherche à combler cette lacune en reliant les transferts d'armes à la recherche sur les conséquences d'un changement de dirigeant pour les relations interétatiques. Il développe l'hypothèse qu'un changement de dirigeant dans un pays receveur devrait se traduire par une réduction des commandes d'armes auprès des anciens fournisseurs, car un nouveau dirigeant devrait introduire une certaine part d'incertitude dans les relations diplomatiques et tendrait à modifier le comportement de son pays en politique étrangère. Cela devrait être d'autant plus vrai que le nouveau dirigeant est affilié à une coalition différente de celle de son prédécesseur et que le pouvoir politique est très concentré au niveau exécutif. L'on teste ces hypothèses à l'aide de données dyadiques mondiales sur le changement de dirigeants et les commandes d'armes. Chose étonnante, malgré l'éventail de stratégies de mise en œuvre et de modélisation, l'hypothèse selon laquelle un changement de dirigeant réduirait les commandes d'armes auprès des anciens fournisseurs ne se confirme pas sur le plan empirique. Ce travail de recherche soulève d'importantes questions quant aux sources nationales de comportements étatiques en politique étrangère et au rôle politico-stratégique des relations de fourniture d'armes entre les États, en mettant notamment en évidence d'importantes pistes de recherche sur les conséquences des transitions de dirigeants pour l'avenir.

Key words: leadership change; political leadership; arms transfers; foreign policy.

Palabras clave: cambio de liderazgo; liderazgo político; transferencias de armas; política exterior.

Mots clés: changement de dirigeant; direction politique; transferts d'armes; politique étrangère.

Introduction

In February 2021, Myanmar's armed forces removed the country's civilian government and instituted military rule. As a result of this the new government, led by general Min Aung Hlaing, faced internal pushback, which it has since then met with brutal repression, as well as increasing international isolation, with many governments speaking out against the Burmese irregular leadership change and ensuing violence (Human Rights Watch 2023). However, this international response is contrasted by recent evidence that while Myanmar's new military rulers have excised civilian rule and turned their guns against their own population, they have continued receiving the weapons for these repressive activities from abroad (United Nations 2023). This invites pessimism regarding the arms transfer policies of international suppliers, providing an example in line with the literature on arms transfers to human rights violators (see Erickson 2013a; Perkins and Neumayer 2010; Platte and Leuffen 2016; Johnson and Willardson 2018). But it also invites the

question whether the research showing domestic leadership changes, such as Myanmar's military coup as well as more peaceful leader transitions, to trigger a multitude of foreign policy and trade realignments (e.g., McGillivray and Smith 2004; Wolford 2007; Leeds and Mattes 2022) is applicable to arms transfer.

In this regard, a closer look at recent arms transfers to Myanmar proves instructive. As highlighted by the United Nations' Special Rapporteur's report, the five countries responsible for weapons transfers to Myanmar have been Russia, China, Singapore as well as, to a smaller extent, India and Thailand (United Nations 2023). These countries also show up in the Major Conventional Weapons trade register provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI 2023), both for the period before and after the coup. However, this trade register reveals that in the 5 years before the coup, 2016–2020, Myanmar also ordered and received weapons from several other countries, including Israel, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Vietnam, which neither SIPRI nor the UN Special Rapporteur have since reported as providing weapons to the Military junta. While not all of Myanmar's weapons suppliers stopped providing arms in the wake of the coup, this shows that numerous suppliers did, and thus begs the question whether, and under which conditions, leadership turnovers are connected to shifts in the provision of armaments more generally?

Building on the existing body of work studying the effects of leadership changes on foreign policy outcomes, I tackle this question by studying how leader changes in a country affect previous suppliers' transfers of weapons to it. In doing so, I focus on Major Conventional Weapons *orders* because arms *deliveries* right after a leader change may simply reflect the fulfillment of pre-transition orders and because existing datasets report very high fulfillment rates for orders (see SIPRI 2023). Mirroring the Myanmar example above, I propose that leadership changes reduce existing suppliers' propensity to file weapon orders. This expectation is based on two connected mechanisms. First, such transitions induce uncertainty into how other states view the country under new leadership, thus making arms suppliers less certain what recipients would do with weapons and hence less willing to supply them. And second, given this uncertainty, existing suppliers should try to gauge new leaders' foreign policy intentions by studying observable signals of them, but doing so should only make them less willing to provide arms as leadership transitions have been broadly linked with observable foreign policy shifts, such as alliance exits and changing voting patterns at the UN (see e.g., Leeds and Mattes 2022). However, it is important to note that not all leader transitions are created equal. On one hand, transitions that also entail a change in ruling or support coalition will have more pronounced effects than those within a constant coalition (Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll 2015; Leeds and Mattes 2022). And on the other hand, transitions in political systems where power is heavily concentrated on the leader will result in stronger foreign policy shifts than where the leader's actions are checked by other institutions (see Bobick and Smith 2013; McGillivray and Smith 2004; Quiroz Flores 2012; Smith 2016).

Empirically, I thus use a dataset covering leader transitions and arms orders in the period 1950–2022 to test the expectation that leadership turnover reduces existing suppliers' propensity to supply weapons. In doing so, I distinguish between all leadership changes and those that also entail a shift in ruling coalition, and investigate how this dynamic plays out in two types of political systems that exhibit increasing levels of power concentration on the leader, (1) autocracies and (2) highly personalized autocracies. Contrary to expectations, I find no consistent evidence that leadership transitions, in either the form of leader or ruling coalition turnovers, affect arms transfers in the hypothesized manner. This null finding holds for the whole sample, as well as for autocracies and highly personalized autocracies more specifically.

These results indicate that, in contrast to other foreign policy and security outcomes, international arms transfers are unaffected by leadership transitions. This paper thus, first, contributes to the body of research on the outcomes of leadership changes by identifying arms transfers as an initially puzzling foreign policy outcome, which does not conform to the expectations and results generated by this literature. And second, the paper also discusses potential reasons for the documented null effects, focusing here on the strategic role of arms transfers as tools of exporter influence, thereby also emphasizing the strategic agency other states have in reacting to domestic leadership changes.

Leadership Changes and Arms Transfers

The literature on both the drivers and consequences of arms transfers has experienced substantial growth in the last few years. Beginning with the latter, existing work considers how arms imports affect outcomes such as international rivalry and conflict (Beardsley et al. 2020; Kinsella 1994, 1998; Krause 2004), civil war onset, intensity, and duration (e.g., Craft and Smaldone 2002; Fritz et al. 2022; Magesan and Swee 2018; Mehltretter 2022; Mehrl and Thurner 2020; Moore 2012; Pamp et al. 2018, 2025), and human rights violations (Blanton 1999; Sullivan, Blanken, and Rice 2020; Sullivan 2023). This body of work highlights that weapons transfers can have several, often politically important outcomes, underlining the importance of better understanding their drivers.

As compared to other trade, arms transfers stand out due to being highly politicized while still maintaining an economic component (Levine, Sen, and Smith 1994). This particularly affects how arms deals are made, as while weapons are technically sold by companies, sales processes are strongly regulated by exporter governments, who have to grant export licenses, but regularly are also needed to financially support exports via offsets, barter agreements, or loans (Smith 2009). Importantly, arms transfers can be studied in terms of the actual delivery of weapons, arms orders, and the negotiations before an order is even filed. Most existing literature on the causes and consequences of arms transfers, surveyed above and below, investigates their deliveries, though these may occur over several years given the complexity of the involved weapons systems and thus result from events or agreements that had happened a few years before[1]. In contrast, arms orders reflect the moment when all parties to the sale (at a minimum: importer, exporter government, and defense company) agree that weapons systems should be transferred, a contract is signed, and preparations for the actual deliveries begin. Orders accordingly indicate the point in time when domestic and international observers should begin reacting to a weapons transfer (Alley 2024), and signal that, in principle, both sender and recipient state are happy with it to go ahead[2]. Of course, given the timescales of deliveries, these deals can then still be the subject of further negotiation, reflecting alterations in recipient needs as well as political shifts, potentially resulting in changed costs, different unit number, and even longer delivery periods (Smith 2009).

Much work on the drivers of arms transfers comes from a political economy perspective and thus considers gravity model of trade-style factors such as wealth, military spending, population, and distance (Akerman and Seim 2014; Comola 2012; Martínez-Zarzoso and Johannsen 2019), while also including variables capturing military alliances between senders and receivers or their political difference

[1] Smith (2009 p.123) gives the example of a 1995 order of Chinook helicopters by the UK; eight of these had to be adapted for special forces use, resulting in a 2001 delivery. Inferential studies of arms transfer deliveries accordingly have to grapple with how much explanatory variables should be lagged to capture extended delivery dynamics.

[2] Negotiations up until this point are complicated, can involve many parties across, for instance, different departments of state or defense companies, and may feature demonstrations, competitions, but also bribes (Smith 2009). For work describing these processes, see Barlas and Güvenç (2002) or Ferreira and Liebenberg (2004).

in terms of regime type. From a similar perspective, other work looks at price effects (Goodhart and Xenias 2012; Smith and Tasiran 2005, 2010) and considers the effects of arms embargoes (Baronchelli, Caruso, and Ricciuti 2022; Bove and Böhmelt 2021; Erickson 2013b). Alley (2024) studies the role of political business cycles in US arms export orders. And recently, several studies have begun to investigate network effects within the arms trade (e.g., Kinne 2016; Mehrl, Seussler, and Thurner 2024; Pamp et al. 2021; Thurner et al. 2019). There is thus a large and growing literature on when states trade weapons. But notably, most of these studies exhibit little linkage to the wider International Relations literature, and thus neither benefit from nor substantively contribute to the theories and arguments developed there. Some recent exceptions to this include work on the effects of international hierarchy and status (Johnson and Shreve 2024; Vucetic and Tago 2015), Willardson and Johnson (2022), who try to derive testable hypotheses from the three big International Relations paradigms, as well as research studying the effects of bi- and trilateral rivalry relations on the arms trade (Mehrl, Seussler, and Thurner 2025). But taken together, much existing work on the drivers of arms transfers largely focuses on economic trade models as well as network theories, while making little use of existing IR approaches. And even where such approaches are used, the focus clearly remains on country-level attributes such as regime type, material capabilities, or rivalry (see Mehrl, Seussler, and Thurner 2025; Willardson and Johnson 2022)[3].

In doing so, the arms trade literature appears detached from work in International relations that emphasizes the role of political *leaders*, that is, the individuals responsible for ultimately leading their country to war, into an alliance or, here, investing financial and political resources into acquiring weapons. This is puzzling as this field of research has grown substantially for, at least, the past 20 years and highlights the role of leader *transitions* for a variety of outcomes closely connected to arms transfers[4]. Most importantly, leadership changes have been shown to be associated with foreign policy shifts (see Leeds and Mattes 2022; Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll 2015; Smith 2016), implying that new leaders exit existing commitments and enter new ones. Accordingly, existing work shows that leadership transitions result in an increased risk of states engaging in international conflict, as new leaders are incentivized to build a reputation for resolve while their opponents are pushed to probe this resolve by escalating (Wolford 2007; Wu, Licht, and Wolford 2021; Wu and Wolford 2018; Licht and Allen 2018), or in trade disputes (Bobick and Smith 2013)[5]. But, it also links these transitions to an increased probability of terminating ongoing wars and trade disputes (Bobick and Smith 2013; Quiroz Flores 2012; Ryckman and Braithwaite 2020), exiting alliances and other international treaty commitments (Böhmelt 2019; Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel 2009; Leeds and Mattes 2022; Pilster, Böhmelt, and Tago 2015), and changing trade partners (Leeds and Mattes 2022; McGillivray and Smith 2004). Importantly, these results are particularly strong for leadership transitions associated with a change in support coalition and countries, where this coalition is small, that is, non-democracies (Bobick and Smith 2013; Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel 2009; Leeds and Mattes 2022; Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll 2015; McGillivray and Smith 2004; Quiroz Flores 2012; Smith 2016).

Building on these insights, I argue that a leadership transition in a recipient country decreases the probability of arms orders from existing supplier countries, especially when that transition also changes the ruling coalition and when that coalition is small. This, I argue, is the case due to two reasons, which I develop in more detail below. First, as highlighted by research on crisis escalation in the wake of leadership changes, other countries now face increased uncertainty over the resolve and,

[3]An exception to this is the literature investigating whether arms exporters care about recipients' human rights record (e.g., Erickson 2013a; Johnson and Willardson 2018; Perkins and Neumayer 2010).

[4]For recent introductions to this large literature, see Saunders (2022) and Carter (2024).

[5]The literature on leader experience offers similar predictions, though based on principal agent (Saunders 2017) and prospect theory (Carlson and Dacey 2023).

more generally, preferences of the new political leadership. For arms suppliers, this should translate to reduced certainty over what the recipient may intend to do once armed and hence a reduced willingness to provide arms. And second, given this uncertainty, arms suppliers will look to better understand new leaders' intentions by studying observable signals of these, that is, new leaders' wider foreign policy conduct. But as leadership transitions are linked to a wide array of behavioral changes in states' foreign policy, these observable signals should reduce other states' uncertainty only in the sense that they would become increasingly convinced not to send arms.

As the literature on leader turnover and war shows, new leaders introduce uncertainty into bargaining processes: they have their own levels of resolve and of importance that they attribute to a certain issue, which likely differ from other individuals—such as their predecessor in office—and are private information. Importantly, new leaders also have clear incentives to overstate these factors as they seek to build a reputation and maximize bargaining outcomes. In crisis bargaining, opponents are in turn incentivized to test new leaders on their stated resolve in order to reveal information about it, thus pushing both sides toward conflict (Wolford 2007; Wu and Wolford 2018). However, opponents are unlikely to be the only audience to new leaders' statements of resolve and intentions as their existing partners will also be listening. For this audience, it is important to understand how the leadership turnover affects their position and whether they can still rely on sharing common foreign policy interests with their erstwhile partner. Along these lines, formal work on the arms trade highlights that arms suppliers consider potential security repercussions when deciding whether to provide weapons to another country but also describes "sales to an ally" as a "straightforward" case where "transferring arms will increase [. . .] the suppliers security" (Levine, Sen, and Smith 1994, 5). In other words, suppliers need not fear negative externalities from selling weapons to allies, given that they have the same interests. But what if the ally's interests change and are not the same anymore? Then, arming that ally clearly becomes less beneficial as the provided weapons are, at a minimum, used to pursue goals outside of the supplier's interest and, at a maximum, may even be turned against the supplier. For arms suppliers, partner countries having new leaders with unknown resolve and preferences thus induces uncertainty whether they are still safe destinations for arms supplies, especially as the security issues they previously worked on together will likely be closely connected to those the new leader is seeking to demonstrate resolve on. This increased uncertainty reduces the security, and thus overall payoff, suppliers can expect from providing weapons to a recipient with a new leader, making it less attractive for them to continue supplying arms.

But faced with this kind of uncertainty, existing suppliers are also likely to consider whatever empirical record the new leader has in terms of demonstrating their foreign policy intentions and compliance with existing commitments. We know from existing research that suppliers are more likely to arm another country if they share a defense alliance or are similar in terms of voting at the United Nations (see e.g Martínez-Zarzoso and Johannsen 2019). And in line with liberal peace arguments, there is also evidence that they are more likely to trade weapons when they generally trade more (Willardson and Johnson 2022). But new leaders appear prone to tear up existing alliance commitments (Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel 2009; Pilster, Böhmelt, and Tago 2015), shift how their countries vote on UN resolutions (Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll 2015; Smith 2016), and change who they trade with (Leeds and Mattes 2022; McGillivray and Smith 2004). As such, arms suppliers are likely to experience partner countries with new leaders moving away from them in terms of these known and easy to observe indicators of shared preferences. And even where this has not yet occurred, there appears to be clear reason for suppliers to expect foreign policy shifts by their erstwhile partner, thus adding an expectation of preference dissimilarity to their uncertainty over the partner's intentions.

Given this uncertainty over the new leader's intentions and potential for increased foreign policy dissimilarity on part of the supplier, I expect that a leadership transition in a recipient country decreases the probability of arms orders from existing supplier countries. Note here that, in theory, a leadership change could in fact also produce a new leader that is more aligned with a supplier's foreign policy goals, thus actually increasing their payoff from supplying weapons to the new leader's country. However, there are two reasons to believe that such a leader change would not actually have a positive effect on arms orders. First, as I am studying only pre-existing supplier–recipient relationships, the recipient's previous leader must already have been sufficiently aligned with supplier's foreign policy outlook to warrant the provision of weapons. So, even if a new leader is even more aligned, both the old and new leaders' interests will generally have been very close to that of the supplier, warranting little change in terms of arms supplies. And second, even if a new leader, upon coming into office, swears continued or even increased adherence to their predecessor's foreign policy, neither their enemies nor allies can be certain regarding their resolve to act accordingly when push comes to shove—for their predecessor, this had been know from prior observable action and interactions, whereas for the new leader, it remains private information and hence introduces uncertainty (Wolford 2007). As such, there is reason to believe that even if a new leader is equally or even more aligned with their arms suppliers' foreign policy goals than their predecessor, arms orders from previous suppliers will not increase in the wake of a transition but, due to uncertainty regarding their resolve, actually decrease.

Nonetheless, this scenario also emphasizes that not all leadership transitions are created equal. Accordingly, I especially expect that a leadership transition in a recipient country decreases the probability of arms orders from existing supplier countries when two conditions hold. The first is that the new leader is backed by a different support coalition than their predecessor. This stems from the fact that such leaders, as compared to "political heirs," are more likely to substantially differ from their predecessors, thus introducing uncertainty regarding their intentions and resolve toward existing policy issues and increasing the chance that they indeed hold different preferences (see Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel 2009; Leeds and Mattes 2022; Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll 2015). And second, recipient leader changes are more likely to affect arms transfers if they occur in a country, where the ruling coalition is small and the leader's ability to act on their individual intentions and resolve is unchecked by other institutions. While political leaders matter, not all can simply translate their personal whims into policy because they have to contend with the influence of other, formal or non-formal institutions that check their ability to do so. Accordingly, much research finds that leader changes in autocracies prove more influential than those in democratic countries, where policy decisions may have to be coordinated with the responsible ministers, voted on by one or even two parliamentary chambers, and signed off on by a head of state (Bobick and Smith 2013; McGillivray and Smith 2004; Quiroz Flores 2012; Smith 2016). But adding to this, research on autocracies also shows that even autocratic leaders may face substantial hurdles in their personal execution of power, as they may be checked and controlled by, for instance, party organs such as a politburo or by fellow military leaders within a junta (see Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014, 2018). This highlights the specific role of power concentration within the country, and thus that especially highly personalized autocracies should experience foreign policy shifts, as well as their repercussions in terms of arms transfers, after their leader changes.

Taken together, I thus expect that leadership transitions in a country should result in reduced arms transfers from countries it has previously received weapons from. In addition, I expect that this relationship should hold in particular when leadership transitions affect not only an individual leader, but their entire support

coalition, as well as when they occur in autocratic countries and, especially, highly personalized autocracies.

Research Design

In line with existing research on the effects of leadership transitions, I focus on a country's arms trade relations with previous suppliers of weapons as it should be particularly these states that would have to re-assess their relationship with the country under new leadership (McGillivray and Smith 2004). As an added benefit, this also ensures that the models do not include thousands of irrelevant dyads, where the potential sender is a country that has never exported any arms. Given this focus on an arms recipient's interaction with specific sender countries, I employ the directed sender–receiver dyad-year as unit of observation. In the main models, I take previous suppliers to be those that have sent weapons to the recipient during the prior 5-year window, and hence include only those directed dyads as observations in the sample within which at least one arms order has occurred during years $t-6$ to $t-2$. Below and in the Supplementary Materials, I also present results of models which use both shorter 3-year and longer 10-year time frames, and, more importantly, focus not on all previous suppliers but instead only top suppliers. Specifically, the models focusing on top suppliers include only dyads involving potential senders that, in the prior 5-year window, ranked, respectively, in the top three and at the very top among suppliers to the recipient in question. This is done as the expectations developed above may hold particularly for top suppliers.

The dependent variable is dichotomous, taking the value 1 if at least one arms order was filed in a given sender–recipient dyad-year. Data on the incidence of arms orders comes from SIPRI (2023). Mirroring the majority of literature on the arms trade, this paper thus focuses on transfers of major conventional weapons. To clarify the unit of observation, different samples, and dependent variable, we can again look at Myanmar as an example. In 2022, Myanmar could, in theory, have received weapons from more than 180 source countries, each of these would then form one observation, with a potential source country, e.g., Honduras, as sender, Myanmar as the recipient, and 2022 as the year. However, this analysis focuses on those countries that had already sent weapons to Myanmar before, that is, its previous suppliers. In fact, Myanmar had received weapons from only 11 out of the potential 188 countries during the period 2016–2020, meaning that for 2022, eleven observations with Myanmar as potential recipient would be included in the main models. The dependent variable would then capture whether Myanmar ordered weapons from the respective supplier, for instance, for the dyad China–Myanmar-2022, whether weapons were ordered from China in 2022. In the analyses focusing on only top suppliers, these eleven observations involving Myanmar as a recipient in 2022 would then be further whittled down, so that, respectively, only three—China, Russia, and India as top three suppliers to Myanmar during 2016–2020–and one, the China–Myanmar-2022 dyad, would enter the estimation sample.

I employ two different measures to capture the core independent variable, leader turnover, both of which are dummies and sourced from the CHISOLS data (Mattes, Leeds, and Matsumura 2016). The first measures all types of leader turnover, taking the value 1 for years where a potential recipient-country's leader changed. The second measure, in contrast, is more narrow and captures only those leader changes that also entailed a shift in the leader's support or ruling coalition. More specifically, this variable only considers such leadership changes as support coalition changes where, in democracies, the successor is from a different political party than the predecessor and, in autocracies, when a transition occurs from one ruling clique or regime to another, thus excluding, for instance, leader changes within the same military junta or royal family (see Mattes, Leeds, and Matsumura 2016, 261–62). Such

support coalition changes make up roughly 50 percent of all leadership changes, both in the full CHISOLS data and the estimation dataset.

Both the dependent and independent variable are thus dichotomous. This results in the model of interest ultimately becoming a comparison of means test and allows me to ignore concerns regarding its functional form[6]. Accordingly, I employ linear regression models, which have the added benefits of working well with fixed effects and being computationally lightweight. All models include the cubic polynomials of time since the last arms order within a directed dyad to account for temporal dependence (Carter and Signorino 2010), and I cluster standard errors on the dyad to account for the non-independence of observations within it[7].

The main models include both directed dyad- and year-fixed effects, thus accounting for factors which remain constant within a dyad (including well known gravity model of trade factors, such as distance and common language) as well as global shocks to the arms trade, such as the end of the Cold War. In addition, I include a set of control variables to account for confounders, which credibly affect both the probability of leader change and countries' propensity to trade weapons. For instance, existing research highlights that arms transfers are affected by both sender and receiver regime type, wealth, military spending, and involvement in armed conflict (Martínez-Zarzoso and Johannsen 2019; Mehrl, Seussler, and Thurner 2025; Thurner et al. 2019), while leader and regime change, for instance via coup d'etats, are equally affected (Arbatli and Arbatli 2016; Bell 2016; Croco 2011; Leon 2014; Londregan and Poole 1990). In line with gravity approaches to trade, I control for sender and recipient population size. And because especially in democracies with term limits, leader change is strongly affected by how long a given leader has already been in office, I also control for the importer country's time since the last leader turnover. Finally, I include indicators of the sender and recipient's difference in regime type, as well as whether they share a defense alliance, to capture to what extent they will have similar underlying interests. The full set of control variables, their operationalizations, and sources are presented in Table 1.

While this discussion is sufficient for the models testing the direct effect proposed by hypothesis 1, this is not the case for the interaction effect posited by hypothesis 2. To test this hypothesis, I interact the measure of leadership turnover with one of two measures of a recipient country having a small ruling coalition and a lack of checks and balances on a new leader. The first, more general of these measures is a dichotomous indicator of whether the recipient country is an autocracy, mirroring the logic that autocrats have smaller support coalitions than democratically elected leaders and are less constrained by the rule of law or powerful other governing bodies, e.g., a parliament. But secondly, I also take into account that leaders' individual power and control over their countries' politics varies significantly across autocracies, and thus use a dichotomous indicator of whether a country is a highly *personalized* autocracy. Both of these variables are constructed from Geddes, Wright, and Frantz' (2014, 2018) data on autocracies. I do not directly use their latent personalization measure, but instead code a personalization dummy from it, as I would otherwise have to exclude all non-autocracies. The dummy takes the value one if a country–year is an autocracy and in the top quartile of the latent personalization measure. The interaction models are specified in the same manner as the models testing a direct effect, the only exception being that they exclude the originally included control for importer regime type.

To summarize and clarify the temporal order of included variables, I estimate the following full models:

[6]See, for instance, Mehrl and Dworschak (2022).

[7]The Supplementary Materials include models employing standard errors, which are robust specifically to dyadic clustering and thus account for overlapping members across multiple dyads (Aronow, Samii, and Assenova 2015).

Table 1. Control variables.

Variable	Measure	Operationalization notes	Source
Regime type	V-Dem electoral integrity index	Included for sender and receiver	Coppedge et al. (2023)
Wealth	Latent GDP estimate	Included for sender and receiver; Log-transformed	Fariss et al. (2022)
Population	Latent population estimate	Included for sender and receiver; Log-transformed	Fariss et al. (2022)
Military spending	Latent military spending estimate	Included for sender and receiver; Log-transformed	Barnum et al. (2025)
Armed conflict	UCDP ongoing armed conflict dummy; ongoing MID dummy	Included for sender and receiver	Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg (2023), Gibler, Miller, and Little (2016)
Leader time	Years since last leader change	Constructed from CHISOLS data	Mattes, Leeds, and Matsumura (2016)
Regime type difference	Difference in V-Dem electoral integrity index	Absolute value	Coppedge et al. (2023)
Defense alliance	ATOP defense alliance dummy	/	Leeds et al. (2002)

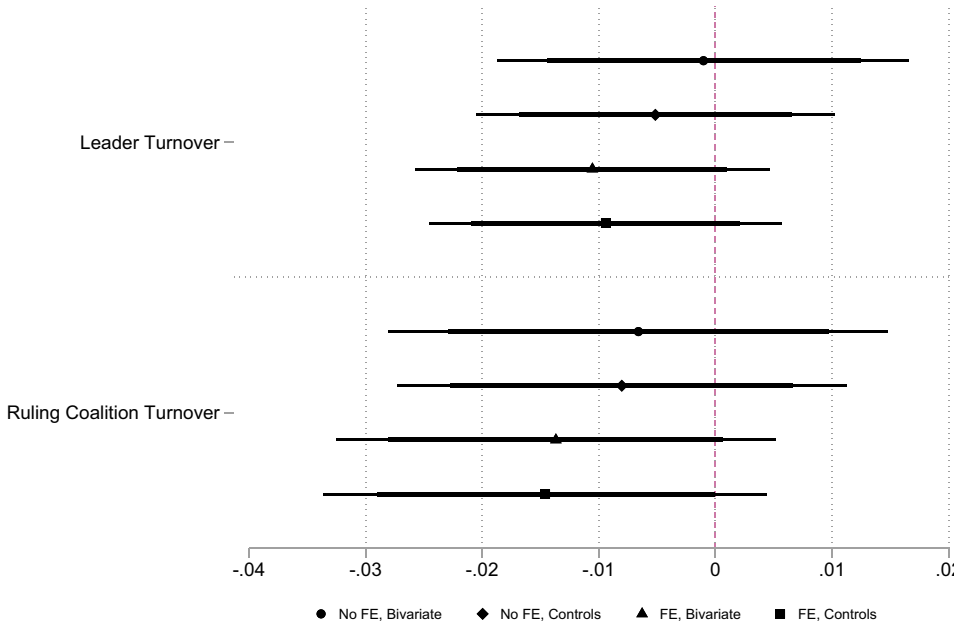

Figure 1. Leadership turnover and arms orders. Change in order probability associated with a leadership turnover. Whiskers indicate 95 percent (thick lines) and 99 percent—confidence intervals (thin lines).

1) $Arms\ order_{i,j,t} = \beta_1 Leadership\ Turnover_{i,t-1} + \alpha_{i,j} + \gamma_t + \boldsymbol{X} + \varepsilon_{i,j,t}$, where $\boldsymbol{X}$ is the following vector of control variables: $Regime\ Type_{i,t-2} + Regime\ Type_{j,t-2} + Wealth_{i,t-1} + Wealth_{j,t-1} + Population_{i,t-1} + Population_{j,t-1} + Leader\ Time_{i,t-2} + Military\ Spending_{i,t-1} + Military\ Spending_{j,t-1} + Ongoing\ MID_{i,t-1} + Ongoing\ MID_{j,\ t-1} + Ongoing\ Armed\ Conflict_{i,t-1} + Ongoing\ Armed\ Conflict_{j,\ t-1} + Defence\ Alliance_{i,j,t-1} + Political\ Distance_{i,j,t-2}$.
2) $Arms\ order_{i,j,t} = \beta_1 Leadership\ Turnover_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 Moderator_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 Leadership\ Turnover_{i,t-1} * Moderator_{i,t-1} + \alpha_{i,j} + \gamma_t + \boldsymbol{X} + \varepsilon_{i,j,t}$, where $\boldsymbol{X}$ is the same as before except for removing $Regime\ Type_{i,t-2}$.

All independent variables are lagged by 1 year in order to ensure temporal order with regards to the dependent variable, while regime type controls are lagged a further year to avoid their values being a direct result of contemporaneous leadership turnover.

Results

The results of eight models testing the first expectation are presented in figure 1[8]. These models use the two different measures of leadership change, capturing, on one hand, any leader turnover and, on the other, support coalition shifts, and move from a bivariate specification, to including control variables, then directed dyad- and year-fixed effects, and finally the full models including controls as well as fixed effects.

The results presented in figure 1 indicate very little support for the idea that leadership turnover decreases major conventional weapons orders. Leader turnover is not found to have a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable in any

[8]Complete regression tables can be found in the appendix.

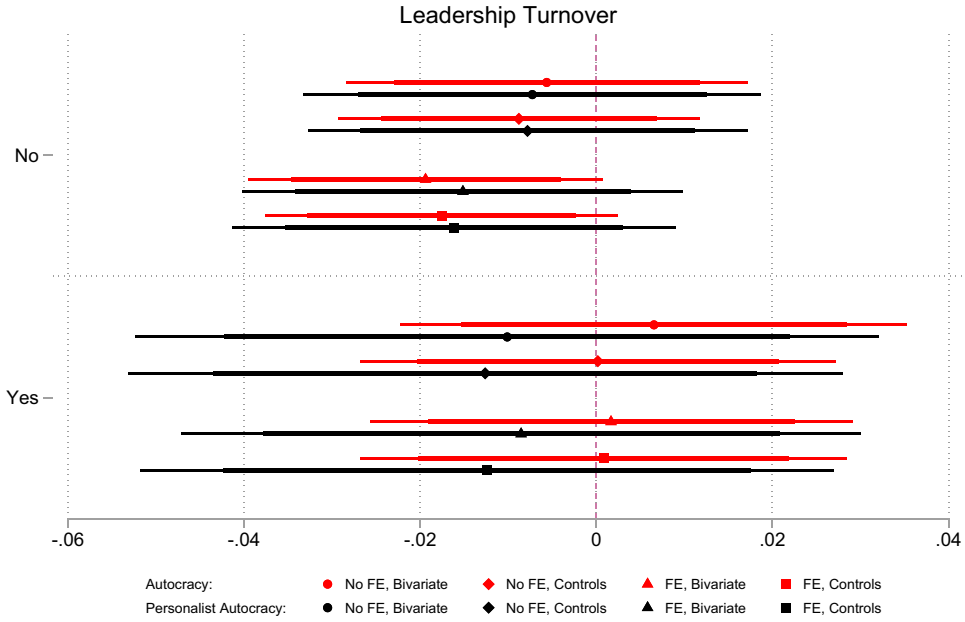

Figure 2. Leadership turnover and arms orders—interactions. Change in order probability associated with a leadership turnover. Whiskers indicate 95 percent (thick lines) and 99 percent—confidence intervals (thin lines).

of the four relevant models, while the effect of ruling coalition turnover just so is statistically significant at the 95 percent-level in the fully specified model. However, this effect seems to depend on the inclusion of both controls and fixed effects and, as it reduces the probability of arms orders by just 1.5 percent, can be deemed substantively negligible[9].

These results are not noticeably different in figures 2 and 3, which present the results of a total of sixteen models interacting the indicators of leader and ruling coalition turnover, respectively, with the two different measures of support coalition size and executive constraints. Across all sixteen models, the effect of leader turnover is substantively small. And while four effect estimates can barely be statistically distinguished from zero at the 95 percent-level, they are those for leader turnover *in non-autocracies* (if fixed effects are included) and for coalition turnover *in non-autocracies and non-personalist countries* (if both fixed effects and the controls are included). As such, there is little evidence that either leadership or support coalition turnover generally decreases the probability of arms transfers and equally little support for the idea that these changes have such an effect specifically in systems with smaller ruling coalitions.

Taken together, these results suggest that, contrary to expectations, leadership turnover does not reduce countries' weapons orders from existing suppliers. What is more, leadership changes do not even have this effect when the entire ruling coalition changes or when either of these changes occur in systems where power is heavily concentrated on the coalition or leader that is being replaced.

[9]Whether the effect is negligible can be assessed by comparing the coefficient estimate and its more extreme confidence interval to the standard deviation in the dependent variable for un-treated units, i.e., those countries without a ruling coalition change. Following Rainey (2014), the effect would be substantively negligible if both coefficient estimate and confidence interval are below 10 percent the size of the standard deviation. Here, they are 3.4 percent and 6.2 percent its size, respectively.

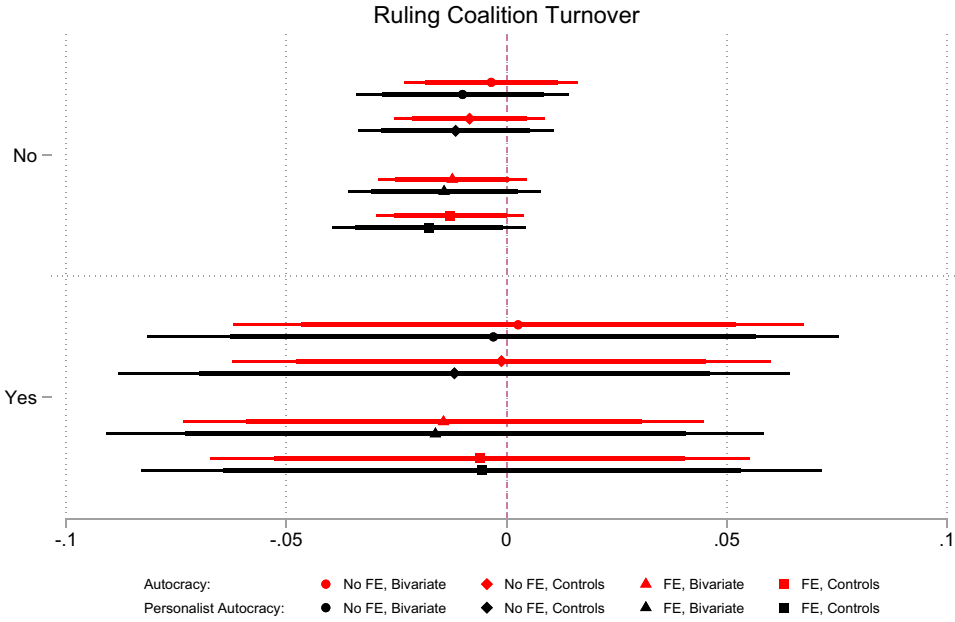

Figure 3. Ruling coalition turnover and arms orders—interactions. Change in order probability associated with a leadership turnover. Whiskers indicate 95 percent (thick lines) and 99 percent—confidence intervals (thin lines).

Finally, figure 4 replicates the models underlying figures 1–3, while further limiting the estimation sample to include only dyads involving top suppliers. Top suppliers, as compared to minor ones, which may have previously sold some weapons to a given recipient but not at large scale, may have larger political stakes in the relationship with the recipient, and thus be more affected by the recipient's foreign policy shifts following leadership turnover. If it is only these top suppliers who are affected by foreign policy shifts, the inclusion of minor suppliers in the analysis may mask potential effects of leadership changes on arms transfers. Figure 4 thus replicates previous models while focusing on top suppliers. In the left column, the estimation sample includes dyad-years involving a recipient's top three suppliers, that is, the three countries the recipient ordered weapons most from in the preceding 5-year window. And in the right column, only dyad-years between the recipient and the country with the most prior weapons orders, that is, the top supplier, are included. However, the results in figure 4 do not substantively differ from those presented in figures 1–3, indicating that the reported null effect also holds for top suppliers.

In the Supplementary materials, I further investigate whether these results depend on which countries are considered to be existing suppliers and account for dyadic clustering between observations (Aronow, Samii, and Assenova 2015). The substantive results do not change, further supporting the finding that leadership changes do not affect arms transfers from existing suppliers.

Conclusion

This research investigates how leadership changes in a recipient country affect its ability to file arms orders from existing suppliers. While a large International Relations literature on the foreign policy consequences of such changes suggests that these orders would be reduced, empirical results using a dataset of leadership changes and arms orders covering almost the entire post-World War II period

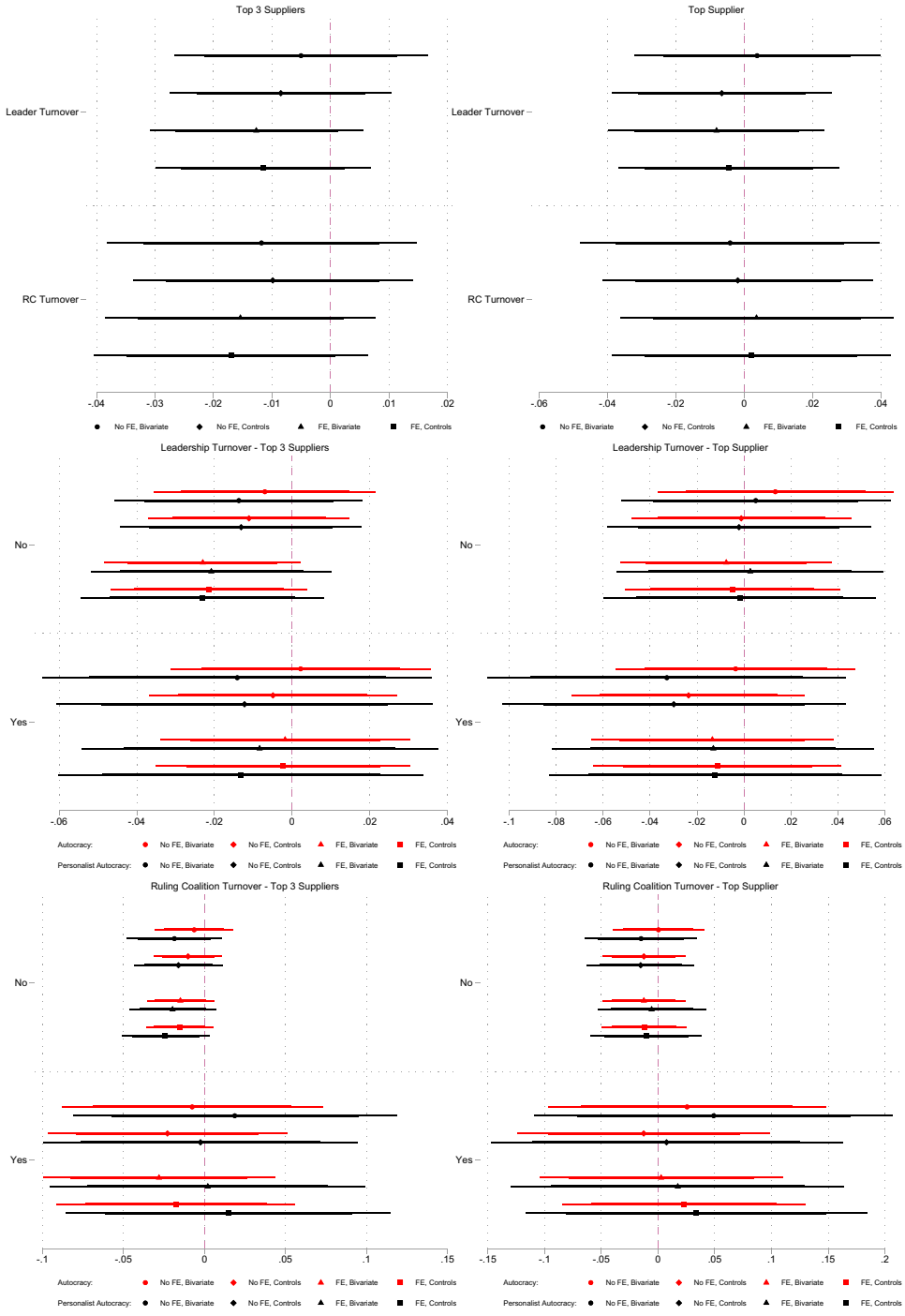

Figure 4. Leadership turnover and arms orders from top suppliers. Change in order probability associated with a leadership turnover. Whiskers indicate 95 percent (thick lines) and 99 percent—confidence intervals (thin lines).

provide no evidence for this expectation. Instead, neither leader changes nor shifts affecting a leader's entire support coalition reduce arms orders from existing suppliers. And in contrast to studies emphasizing the importance of such power transfers particularly in non-democratic systems with highly concentrated power, neither type of leadership change is found to affect arms orders by autocracies or personalized autocracies.

This raises the question, why do existing suppliers not re-evaluate and stop arms deals with recipient countries that have just undergone a leadership transition, given the implications such transitions seem to have for foreign policy orientation and behavior? While it is impossible to fully answer this question here, one clear possibility is connected to the political sway arms transfers afford to suppliers (Beardsley et al. 2020; Krause 1991; Mehrl, Seussler, and Thurner 2024). Instead of terminating arms deals because of recipients' changing foreign policies, suppliers may continue to supply weapons precisely in order to work against such changes. In other words, instead of giving up on the political relationship that arms transfers have allowed them to establish with the recipient, suppliers may seek to maintain and transfer this relationship from the old leadership to the new one via their continued supply of weapons, thus (re-)building the influence arms transfers offer them over the recipient state. Anecdotally, this explanation seems to fit China's consistent supply of weapons to Myanmar both before and after the military coup. But more systemically, this explanation clearly requires testing—future work may thus want to investigate to what extent states' foreign policy shifts in the wake of leadership changes are conditioned by those states remaining dependent on previous arms suppliers, but also within other forms of dependence-creating international hierarchy (see Lake 2009).

While the null findings presented here are thus initially puzzling in light of research on leadership transitions, they also point to new avenues in this body of work and highlight that more attention may need to be paid to other states' efforts to minimize the foreign policy consequences of such domestic shifts in political power.

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Supplementary Materials

Supplementary material is available at *Foreign Policy Analysis* online.

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