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THE ROLE OF MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX IN FOREIGN POLICY
MAKING: THE UNITED STATES, SAUDI ARABIA, AND ARMS SALE

A Master's Thesis

by
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THE ROLE OF MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX IN
FOREIGN POLICY MAKING: THE UNITED STATES,
SAUDI ARABIA, AND ARMS SALE

BILKENT UNIVERSITY 2025

Department of
International Relations
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University
Ankara
May 2025

To the beloved 'Demir' family



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The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences
of
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

THE DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
İHSAN DOĞRAMACI BİLKENT UNIVERSITY
ANKARA

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By Zeynep Demir

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in International Relations.

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX IN FOREIGN POLICY MAKING: THE UNITED STATES, SAUDI ARABIA, AND ARMS SALE

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May 2025

This thesis examines the impact of defense industry lobbying on US foreign policy, focusing on arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Using the global arms transfer data, the research analyzes the role of major defense companies in the US in shaping policy outcomes. The study reviews the intersection of domestic politics, economic interest groups, and foreign policy, emphasizing how lobbying influences the decision-making process. Drawing on data from US Senate lobbying records and Congressional reports, the methodology combines qualitative and quantitative techniques, such as correlation analysis, to assess the relationship between lobbying expenditures and arms sales to Saudi Arabia between 2010 and 2024. As the choice of case, I focused on arms sales with Saudi Arabia during President Trump's first term, specifically the 2017 deal worth \$110 billion. The thesis explores the historical and political context of the US arms deals and defense industry in foreign policy making, then argues that lobbying by defense industries significantly contributes to

their actualization. Even though the qualitative findings support the statement, the correlation analysis brings an unexpected outcome. The amount of money spent on lobbying is insignificant in facilitating arms sales to Saudi Arabia, meaning that even if lobbying expenditures go down, sales can increase. However, the number of lobbyists hired and their relations with policymakers indicate a positive correlation with sales.

Key Words: foreign policy, defense industry, lobbying, United States, Saudi Arabia, arms deal

ÖZET

DIŞ POLİTİKA YAPIMINDA ASKERİ-ENDÜSTRİYEL KOMPLEKSİN ROLÜ: AMERİKA BİRLEŞİK DEVLETLERİ, SUUDİ ARABİSTAN VE SİLAH SATIŞI

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Tez Danışmanı: Prof. Dr. İbrahim Özgür Özdamar

Mayıs 2025

Bu tez, savunma sanayi lobiciliğinin ABD dış politikası üzerindeki etkisini, Suudi Arabistan'a yapılan silah satışlarına odaklanarak incelemektedir. Küresel silah transferi verilerini kullanarak, araştırma, ABD'deki büyük savunma şirketlerinin politika sonuçlarını şekillendirmedeki rolünü analiz etmektedir. Çalışma, iç siyaset, ekonomik çıkar grupları ve dış politikanın kesişimini gözden geçirerek lobiciliğin karar alma sürecini nasıl etkilediğini vurgulamaktadır. ABD Senatosu lobi kayıtlarından ve Kongre raporlarından elde edilen verilerden yararlanan metodoloji, korelasyon analizi gibi nicel tekniklerle nitel analizi birleştirerek 2010-2024 yılları arasında lobi harcamaları ile Suudi Arabistan'a yapılan silah satışları arasındaki ilişkiyi değerlendiriyor. Vaka seçimi olarak, Başkan Trump'ın ilk döneminde Suudi Arabistan ile yapılan silah satışlarına, özellikle de 2017 yılındaki 110 milyar dolar değerindeki anlaşmaya odaklandım. Tez, ABD silah anlaşmalarının ve dış politika

yapımında savunma sanayisinin tarihsel ve politik bağlamını arařtırmakta ve ardından savunma sanayileri tarafından yapılan lobicilięin bunların gerekleřmesine önemli ölçüde katkıda bulunduęunu savunmaktadır. Nitel bulgular argümanı desteklese de korelasyon analizi beklenmedik bir sonuç ortaya koymaktadır. Lobicilik için harcanan para miktarı, Suudi Arabistan'a silah satışını kolaylařtırmakta o kadar önemli deęildir, yani lobicilik harcamaları düşse bile satışlar artabilir. Ancak, işe alınan lobicilerin sayısı ve politika yapıcılarla kurdukları ilişkiler, satışlarla pozitif korelasyona işaret ediyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: dış politika, savunma sanayii, lobicilik, ABD, Suudi Arabistan, silah satışı

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to start by thanking my thesis supervisor, Prof. Dr. İbrahim Özgür Özdamar. Since beginning my Master's journey, he has always been invaluable and encouraging towards my work. In our first year, we took several classes to find our curiosity in the discipline, but I have always known that I wanted to learn more about foreign policy analysis. Thanks to his expertise, I was more inspired to learn about the discipline of International Relations. His intuitive feedback and endless encouragement were incredibly helpful in constructing my thesis and my academic satisfaction. I am especially grateful for his patience when I struggled to express my ideas, and for always challenging me to think critically and push the boundaries of my understanding.

I am also grateful to Prof. Dr. Ersel Aydınli. His class IR-5103, "American Politics and Foreign Policy," was my muse when I struggled to finalize a thesis topic. The final paper I wrote as a course assessment in his class was the foundation stone of this thesis. Without his advanced reading materials and the comfortable discussion environment he created for us to express ourselves freely, I may not have been able to develop a thesis topic. Thus, I sincerely appreciate his role in my Master's journey.

I would also like to thank Asst. Prof. Çağlayan Başer and Assoc. Prof. Nihat Ali Özcan for accepting to be my defense committee member. They gave me insightful and helpful feedback to improve my thesis.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my family. They have always been on my side for every decision I made. The way they support and inspire me throughout this challenging yet rewarding journey is indescribable. After I had completed my bachelor's degree in 2023, I was in a place where I was not sure what to do next with my career. I always knew I want to improve my education, but I was also in doubt. Thankfully, my family's encouragement led me to do a Master's degree, for which I am utterly thankful to them. This thesis would not have happened if it were not for them.

Lastly, I would like to thank Bilkent University. I feel incredibly fortunate to be able to complete both my Bachelor's and Master's degrees at this exceptional institution. Mainly, the Master's program compensated for the time I lost during the pandemic. My whole perspective on life has changed thanks to Bilkent. It has not only provided me with a high-quality education but also shaped I want my life to be future. The supportive academic environment, inspiring professors, and the friendships I have built here will always have a special place in my heart. I will always carry and cherish the lessons and memories from this campus.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) is a subfield within the discipline of International Relations (IR), distinguished by the unique nature of its composition. Scholars should not identify FPA as an isolated domain within the greater IR discipline, as it connects to multiple political and institutional dynamics. Instead, it comes to light from a deep web of interacting factors, such as individual or group actors, collective interests, states with cultural diversity, or the dynamics of domestic political systems. While states employ a mixture of strategies, ranging from diplomacy and economic instruments to international institutions and cultural exchange, to manage and preserve their relations with other states in pursuit of national interest, this thesis exclusively focuses on the role of domestic politics in influencing foreign policy choices.

My research question is: To what extent do the military-industrial complex (defense industry) lobbying efforts influence the United States (US) policy decision regarding the 2017 arms deal with Saudi Arabia? Any attempt to analyze every single

component of domestic politics—the executive, the legislature, bureaucratic politics, public opinion, and the domestic media to interest groups—would exceed the scope of the thesis. Therefore, the research question helped narrow the focus to one specific element: the influence of interest groups in making foreign policy. The American military-industrial complex, or defense industry, which I use interchangeably throughout the thesis, is the interest group I investigate at its core.

I employ a qualitative case study combined with correlation analysis for 2010 to 2024 to explore the relationship between the lobbying expenditures of the American military-industrial and arms sales to Saudi Arabia. The case study focuses on arms sales to Saudi Arabia during President Trump’s first term, particularly the 2017 deal worth \$110 million. The thesis analyzes the historical and political context of the US arms sales and the military-industrial complex in foreign policy making, then argues that lobbying by the military-industrial complex significantly contributes to the approval of arms sales.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the foreign policy literature in several ways. First, while there is ample work on interest group politics and foreign policy in the context of the US, fewer studies explicitly link quantitative lobbying data to specific foreign policy outcomes, such as arms sales. This thesis offers a more nuanced and data-centric examination of the defense industry’s influence on foreign arms sale approval by conducting a mixed-methods case study that combines qualitative historical context with empirical correlation analysis. The correlation analysis aims to show the relationship between the lobbying activities of the defense industry and the amount of arms exports made to Saudi Arabia from the US. Second, the study expands the

scope of existing literature on the military-industrial complex by grounding it in a contemporary and highly contested policy act, the arms deal. Even though the origin of the term military-industrial complex dates back to the 1961 farewell address of President Eisenhower, its footprint remains as vivid today as it was then, especially in a world increasingly marked by active and ongoing armed conflicts. Finally, this thesis emphasizes the significance of critically examining the domestic foundations of foreign policy making. This viewpoint enhances FPA and stimulates more in-depth contemplation of how a democratic nation functions in the face of concentrated corporate power as a domestic interest group.

In recent years, the world has witnessed numerous interstate armed conflicts defying the conventional wisdom of the scholarly community that the possibility of an actual hot war was far from reality after the Second World War. Following the end of the Cold War, the new world order dominated by the ideals of globalization, economic interdependence, and international organization oversight would have been expected to prevent any direct military confrontation between states. Nevertheless, recent occurrences—the war in Ukraine and Gaza, worsening tension around the South China Sea regarding Taiwan, and proxy wars of great powers in the Middle East—have revealed that the prospect of state-on-state feud is very much possible and still present today.

Several diverging opinions in the IR literature aimed to make sense of these developments. The unwarranted influence of the military and the defense industry—commonly referred to as the military-industrial complex—is one of the driving forces behind these unexpected developments in the current global order. This

expectation is precisely what led me to formulate my research question in the first place. The defense industries in powerful states play a critical role in fueling armed conflicts around the world and, more generally, in navigating the system of states. However, many did not initially anticipate the extent to which the military-industrial complex has infiltrated the policy-making processes of states, particularly the foreign policy decisions of the US (Cox, 1998). I find it especially important to focus on the US in my research question because of its singular position as the largest arms exporter in the world and a star player in shaping world affairs. In addition, the US offers a wealth of data for researchers, particularly within social science. Government institutions, independent watchdog organizations, and lobbying entities systematically collect, document, and publish extensive datasets and fact sheets related to the US policy-making process, lobbying activities, and interstate relations, making it an ideal case study for scholarly analysis.

The decision to concentrate on the lobbying efforts of the US military-industrial complex in influencing foreign policy, especially in the context of arms sales to Saudi Arabia, stems from a mounting scholarly and public concern regarding the impact of corporate or private economic interests on state policy-making. The arms deal is a strategic tool for exporting states, such as the US, to exert power and influence over importing states. By entailing dependency on defense technology, these arms deal often extends beyond pure economic leverage and transform into geopolitical leverage. On the other hand, transparency, democratic accountability, freedom, and liberty are strongly identified with the US. However, these principles are all at risk due to the uncontrolled influence of the defense industry. Thus, the real motivations behind international arms transfers are being seriously questioned as the

military-industrial complex's increasingly apparent influence on the US foreign policy decisions.

This topic is relevant to understanding how domestic pressures in the shape of an organized interest group result in global repercussions because arms sales to Saudi Arabia clearly impact international security. The weapons exported do more than ensure the national security of Saudi Arabia but also pave the way for the world's most severe humanitarian crises in Yemen. It is also well-timed, given the continuing discussions around US participation in the Middle East and its strategic and transactional partnership with Saudi Arabia. As the line between national security policy and corporate interest becomes increasingly blurred in the US, there is an urgent need to scrutinize the mechanisms through which these influences operate.

The rest of this study is organized as follows. In the next chapter, I present a detailed review of the scholarly work surrounding foreign policy analysis, focusing on the role of domestic politics as the first step. It examines the broader interplay between domestic political factors and foreign policy decisions. The review then narrows down one step: interest group politics and their role in foreign policy decisions, particularly economic and business groups, before focusing on the defense industry and the concept of the military-industrial complex. This structure helps situate the case study within a well-defined academic context. The following chapter explains how I reached the research question, the theoretical framework proving the mechanism and hypothesis, and the methodology to answer the central inquiry. It outlines the research's qualitative and quantitative components, the selection of sources, and the rationale for using a case study approach supplemented by

correlation analysis. It also discusses the time frame, selection of variables, and data reliability. The fourth chapter is where everything starts to make sense, and that is the data analysis. I divided it into two main sub-sections—qualitative and quantitative data—this chapter presents the empirical core of the thesis. The qualitative finding is also divided into five sub-sections by itself. These are the origin of the military-industrial complex in the US, the reason why arms deal is classified as a foreign policy tool, the interplay of the arms deals and the military-industrial complex, in other words, corporate interest in American foreign policy; the brief history of US-Saudi relations; and the defense lobbying in the US. On the other hand, the quantitative section presents a correlation analysis of lobbying expenditures and arms sales to Saudi Arabia over 15 years, offering data-driven insights into the relationship between these variables.,

Results suggest that the military-industrial complex in the US, as an interest group, is effective in influencing the country's foreign policy decisions regarding arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Even though the qualitative findings and the case study, the 2017 arms deal with Saudi Arabia, support the main argument of the thesis, the correlation analysis brings out an unexpected outcome. The amount of money spent on lobbying is insignificant in facilitating arms sales to Saudi Arabia, meaning that even if lobbying expenditures go down, sales can increase. However, the number of lobbyists hired indicates a positive correlation with the sales. Ultimately, my results partially prove the hypothesis. Defense lobbying does influence arms sales to Saudi Arabia, but not always through direct financial expenditure. Instead, the personal relationships lobbyists cultivated with policymakers exert the greatest influence.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout the literature on FPA, multiple layers of answers exist to make sense of how countries shape their foreign policy decisions. FPA is a complex product of interactions of different elements, ranging from individuals with other objectives, whether in group form or not, nations with diverse cultures, domestic politics, and much more. States decide on various strategies to regulate and sustain their relations with other countries through international organizations, diplomacy, economic means, security measures, and cultural exchange to safeguard the national interest. However, this thesis will exclusively explore how domestic politics plays a part in shaping foreign policy decisions. Domestic politics is comprehensive because it comprises many elements, from the President or Prime Minister, the legislature, bureaucratic politics, public opinion, and the domestic media to interest groups/lobbies. Since it will be unattainable to go over every single one of these elements due to limitations on time and space, this thesis will broadly conceptualize domestic politics and foreign policy.

This literature review has four sub-headings. First, I examine how domestic politics

interacts with foreign policy analysis. I narrow down the literature one step down and talk about the role of interest groups in domestic politics and how they influence foreign policy decisions through lobbying and various activities. Thirdly, I further analyze and investigate economic and business interest groups and their lobbying in foreign policy decisions. Finally, I will review how the military-industrial complex's (defense industry) lobbying shapes foreign policy decisions.

2.1 Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy Decision-Making

Hudson and Day (2020) have effectively summarized the discussion for us: “Foreign policy is the continuation of domestic politics by other means...” (p. 145). In other words, it is about investigating the political contestation in the larger society and how it eventually determines the nation's foreign policy. It would be hard to comprehend foreign policy without considering the domestic context (Kissinger, 1966; Putnam, 1988; Bueno de Mesquita, 2002; Goldgeier, 2010; Beasley et al., 2012; Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2012; Brule & Mintz, 2017; Da Conceição-Heldt & Mello, 2017; Hudson & Day, 2020). As Kissinger (1966) put forward, “the domestic structure is taken as given; foreign policy begins where domestic policy ends” (p. 503). There is a vivid link between domestic politics and international relations. It also pushes us to think beyond the traditional influence of domestic factors. Domestic factors play a significant role in shaping issues that are typically considered beyond the jurisdiction of domestic political debate (Da Conceição-Heldt & Mello, 2017).

International relations are not distinct from domestic politics. Instead, self-interested leaders make foreign policy decisions influenced by political institutions, which consequently shape those choices and their impact on the international environment

(Bueno de Mesquita, 2002; Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2012). International relations is a platform where politicians seek to gain or risk losing domestic political advantage. With this perspective, ideas like national interest, grand strategy, and separating international politics from domestic concerns become problematic. Viewing international affairs as an integral, routine part of domestic politics fundamentally changes our understanding (Bueno de Mesquita, 2002). Domestic politics is all about the 'power struggle' between different actors playing on the domestic field. The actors vary from political parties, executives, and interest groups to public opinion (voters). Unfortunately, not every actor enjoys the same amount of power or influence over politics, restraining them from imposing their objectives on policymaking. The existence of institutions besides the administrative body creates checks and obstacles to the decision-making mechanism. The composition of powerful institutions with powerful interest groups can procure unintended results. The executive can navigate foreign policy matters without considering domestic politics by following its priorities. Therefore, powerful actors are vital and are there to intervene in the process (Hudson & Day, 2020).

Robert Putnam (1988) discussed the domestic politics-foreign policy duality called the 'two-level game' theory of Robert Putnam (1988). The theory is the touchstone in developing FPA in the IR discipline. It emphasizes diplomacy's complexity, where leaders negotiate policy options in two stages (abroad and at home). It refutes the idea that states are not unified entities and act independently; however, states' decision-making process goes back and forth between domestic and international linkages. The globalized system makes the two-level games more relevant. Globalization and the growing scrutiny of international organizations have

intensified the pressure on national government leaders from parliaments, courts, business and labor groups, public opinion, and NGOs to defend the compromises made during international negotiations, especially when such agreements fail to deliver clear benefits for their citizens (Da Conceição-Heldt & Mello, 2017). Thus, decision-making is not a one-dimensional process. Since internal and external variables influence leaders' goals and limitations, it is impossible to completely comprehend foreign policy actions without considering the domestic political climate (Bueno de Mesquita & Lalman, 2008).

The two-level approach recognizes the inevitability of domestic conflict about the “national interest” demands and that the central decision-making authorities must be aware that they must simultaneously arbitrate between domestic and international establishments (Putnam, 1988). Putnam (as cited in Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2012) put forward that making sense of international negotiations requires recognizing what negotiators can sell to their domestic constituents and their foreign counterparts. From this perspective, government leaders act as ‘chief negotiators’ in international negotiations on behalf of their public, but this ultimately requires domestic approval (Da Conceição-Heldt & Mello, 2017). Even though a negotiator has managed to win the approval of both their foreign equivalent and domestic audience, there may be situations where the negotiator can misrepresent either their audience's red line or their foreign counterparts’ red line.

Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman (2008) also mentioned a two-level decision framework in their book. However, their primary focus was on war and peace. Decision-makers must balance domestic political demands with international

constraints. Decisions with broad impacts, such as war and peace, nation-building, and foreign aid, are determined not only by external threats or opportunities but also by the existence of domestic support (Bueno de Mesquita & Lalman, 2008; Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2012).

Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman (2008) also introduced the ‘rational actor model’ into the literature in their book. Leaders are rational beings who aim to increase their chances of political survival (Bueno de Mesquita, 2010). It frequently entails making decisions about foreign policy that support political interests at home, even when such decisions might not be the best from a strictly global standpoint. Their rationality depends on how they interpret the domestic constraints and incentives, comprising domestic institutions, public opinion, and political opposition. For instance, leaders of democratic countries would suffer more if they initiated an unnecessary war, whereas authoritarian leaders enjoy more wiggle room.

Democracies, for instance, are argued to be more cautious in engaging in wars due to greater accountability to their citizens (Bueno de Mesquita & Lalman, 2008). Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman (2008) provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how internal and external dynamics jointly shape foreign policy decisions by integrating domestic political considerations with international imperatives. This natural fear of democratically elected leaders pushes them to negotiate out of conflicts unless the odds are decisively to their advantage (Bueno de Mesquita & Siverson, 1995; Fearon, 1994).

When domestic structures are relatively stable, leaders are less inclined to resort to bold foreign policies to foster internal unity. (Kissinger, 1966). According to

conventional wisdom, even though the public is not influential in the foreign policy process, the average citizen is inclined to know and care little about the country's foreign affairs. Nevertheless, the public opinion and foreign policy duo can be more complex than anticipated. State leaders are sensitive to the public's possible reactions. Public opinion mirrors "enduring core values or opinion moods" (Beasley et al., 2012, p. 14). These refer to beliefs the public holds and utilizes to judge foreign policy. On the other hand, Fearon (1998) argues that "what constitutes a "domestic-political" explanation of a state's foreign policy choices has not been clearly elaborated" (p. 291). A domestic-political explanation of foreign policy is defined in contrast to explanations considered non-domestic-political, which are referred to in the field as "systemic" or "structural" explanations (Fearon, 1998, p. 291). However, several ways exist to define a systemic theory, model, or argument in international relations.

Consequently, what qualifies as a domestic political theory can change depending on how we conceptualize systemic theories. Fearon (1998) distinguishes between two systemic arguments. The first argument implies that a systemic IR theory views states as unitary and goal-oriented actors who take notice of the potential actions of other states when they come up with a foreign policy. The second argument is similar to the first one except for adding conditions on which explanatory variables can function or how they function within a true systemic theory. These two systemic IR theory arguments translate into two corresponding ideas of what articulates a domestic-political explanation of foreign policy (Fearon, 1998; Alons, 2007). This domestic-political argument accounts for how domestic-political dynamics lead a state to adopt suboptimal or misguided foreign policies compared to a normative

standard.

A second explanation of domestic politics is more extensive. It encompasses not only arguments about how domestic politics yields bad foreign policies but also arguments where specific characteristics of states, besides power, play a role in making sense of their foreign policy choices or where domestic political interactions result in various foreign policy practices among states (Fearon, 1998; Beasley et al., 2012). As opposed to that standpoint, Ozkececi-Taner (2017) argues that a state's foreign policy is not only shaped by traditional means, such as systemic structural constraints or prospects based on power distribution and military capabilities. Since FPA discipline treats the state as a 'black box,' it can sometimes be challenging to find why different states take certain foreign policy actions at specific times. It is because states vary from each other because of their diverse unit-level characteristics. These can be political institutions, political regimes, public opinion, leadership, and so on (Ozkececi-Taner, 2017). The institutional constraints argument is one way to differentiate states. Democratic peace theory is the most infamous product of this argument. Democratic states share the same value system, restraining them from acting aggressively toward one another (Rosato, 2003).

Domestic factors such as the diversity of political systems, cultures, and leaders are essential for pushing states in different paths, though they are confronting the same external forces (Hermann, 1980; Bueno de Mesquita, 2002; Bueno de Mesquita & Lalman, 2008; Beasley et al., 2012; Hermann, 1994). Domestic-oriented theories claim that states sometimes make choices that do not necessarily serve their best interests internationally. It is what we call "deviations from rationality," the need for

leaders to balance domestic political goals with foreign policy interests or because of flaws in decision-making (Beasley et al., 2012, p.13). Those who attribute foreign policy to domestic factors pay attention to a wide range of voices and conflicts over foreign policy. The public, societal groups, government organizations, and leaders are some of the many voices at various levels of actors and institutions within nations.

Finally, to look at the domestic politics-foreign policy debate from the international relations theory perspective, recent developments in major IR theories of realism, liberalism, and constructivism have incorporated domestic politics into decision-making (Smith, 2001; Kaarbo, 2015). The liberal tradition within the IR is the most suitable place to study domestic political factors. Research on the ‘democratic peace theory’ restored the role of domestic politics in liberalism along with its institutions, public opinion, and cultural and normative values as predominant descriptions of peace (Kaarbo, 2015).

Consequently, domestic politics and foreign policy are in a symbiotic relationship where neither can survive without the other. It complicates the scholarly work on foreign policy because there will never be one reason to explain why a state decides on ‘this’ foreign policy action. To understand a foreign policy decision, scholars must peel all the layers until they reach the core of the decision. These layers are every single component of domestic political factors.

2.2 Domestic Interest Groups and Foreign Policy Decision-Making

Until now, I have covered the fundamental premises of the relationship between

domestic politics and foreign policy in the literature. This section will be devoted to the 'domestic interest group' and its impact on foreign policymaking. First, I start with what a domestic interest group is. Defining the interest group under a single conceptualization would be very challenging. An interest group can be a lobby, a pressure group, an NGO, or a business corporation. An interest group is a collection of people who, without a desire to run for office, organize to influence the decisions the incumbent political party makes in line with their preference (Eising & Lehringer, 2016). Robert H. Salisbury (as cited in Dietrich, 1999) defines an interest group as "an organized association which engages in activity relative to government decisions...Interest groups, therefore, would include citizens' groups organized around a particular issue such as human rights, as well as professional lobbies, businesses, and public interest law firms" (p. 280). Most importantly, "interest groups represent their constituents before government" (Berry, 1978, p. 379).

Domestic politics matters for foreign policy, and interest groups matter in decision-making (Milbrath, 1967; Uslander, 1995; Alons, 2007; Dür & Bievre, 2007; Iverson, 2007). Uslander (1995) claims that the number and forcefulness of interest groups in foreign policy have risen dramatically as the line between 'foreign' and 'domestic' policy has blurred. By nature, and definition, interest groups desire to influence government policies. Interest groups can act as intermediaries between the concerned citizens and the government. They can be designated groups to speak on their behalf. They exert influence through lobbying, providing expert knowledge, and mobilizing public opinion (Uslander, 1995). They also leverage their access to decision-makers to sway decisions. The growing number of groups engaged in lobbying increased the importance of understanding the impact of interest groups on the policymaking

process. It carries prominent normative implications since world governments and international organizations strive to boost political participation by forming societal groups (Dür, 2008). Their issue of focus can stretch beyond “business, labor, ethnic, human rights, environmental, and other organizations” (Dietrich, 1999, p. 280).

Interest groups’ success in influencing foreign policy decisions is based on several indicators. The group must advocate for policies aligning with the state’s strategic interests. The ethnic identity interest groups must mainly be assimilated into society while maintaining enough connection to their heritage to inspire political activism on related foreign policy issues. An interest group can be influential if it aligns its vision of desirable policy with the prevailing public attitudes and gains access to key policymaking centers. Success is more likely if the group modifies its perception of current needs with the dominant attitudes of influential segments of the public and has access to major governmental decision-making hubs (Gable, 1958). The policies they have promoted should secure the backing of the broader audience (Dür & Bievr, 2007). The group must possess loyal members to exert political influence, supported by resources. Lastly, the groups’ objectives must be seen as pursuing a legitimate interest (Iverson, 2007). Interest groups’ effectiveness depends on how strongly they can access government officials, usually through organizing private meetings and public forums (Dietrich, 1999).

Thanks to their involvement with policymaking, they carry three responsibilities. First, they played a role in shaping the terms of the debate. Second, depending on the country's political context, they can support Congress or Parliament in policy oversight by monitoring developments and providing testimony during hearings.

Lastly, interest groups serve a broader function as providers of information and policy analysis (Dietrich, 1999). Dür and Bievr (2007) have gathered some factors affecting the influence of interest groups, such as institutions, traits of interest groups, and issue-specific factors. First, the interaction of governmental interest groups is critical because the same institution can either invest in or deprive them of their interests. Second, the characteristics of the interest group are said to be vital. This can be compared to the number of resources at their disposal. Lastly, their success in influence also depends on the type of issue the group deals with. It is advised that they should engage more with their strong suit and leave room for the rest (Dür & Bievr, 2007).

As I highlighted in the previous section many times, policy preference is a product of political and societal actors. While the executive and legislature are members of political actors, interest groups are part of societal actors. Each of these entities is considered a unitary and rational entity. Interest groups operated as a cohesive unit, representing the preferences of their median members (Milner, 1997). Furthermore, their fixed purpose is to maximize their constituencies' benefit as rational actors, which can be many things. Regarding foreign policymaking, interest groups either favor or oppose policies that enhance their benefit (Eising & Lehringer, 2016). Undeniably, the elected political leader has the last word on policy decisions, but it does not make special interest groups irrelevant. On the contrary, those interest groups can provide significant support by contributing resources such as funding, votes, campaign organizations, media coverage, and many more (Milner, 1997). All of these have the power to alter the course of the election result.

Leaders desperately need interest groups' support and, in turn, must advocate for policies that benefit these groups while avoiding those that harm them. Interest groups serve as a key venue for citizens to reflect their opinions to decision-makers. Their involvement in decision-making can enhance the process by promoting policies that align with public preferences and opposing those serving the interests of the governing elite. However, intense pressure from interest groups can also hinder policymakers from implementing the most efficient policies, as these often impose costs on specific population segments (Dür & Bievre, 2007).

McLean and Whang (2014) have offered a different angle on the relationship between interest groups and foreign policy. Their perspective viewed economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool designed to hurt the targeted country in order to acquire concessions. They also agreed with the existing scholarly consensus that interest groups are important domestic actors influencing government policies, including coercive measures. They argued that special interest groups that gain from the relationship with the sanction-target country are linked to a decreased possibility of using sanctions that would impose high costs on local interest groups, even though public opinion pressures enhance the likelihood of sanctions. (McLean and Whang, 2014). The sanction sender countries must take into account domestic constituencies. When confronted with opposition from interest groups, policymakers in the sender country are inclined to choose measures that appeal to the concerns of interest groups by diminishing the impact on economic relations with the target country. However, it is important to specify that the author's study implied that policymakers in sender countries, which are democratic, form sanction policies to satisfy both political and economic constituencies, such as interest groups.

Alons (2007) argues that domestic and international constraints determine a state's foreign policy decisions. He wanted to show in his work under what circumstances states are willing to prioritize domestic or international incentives. He used 'internal polarity' and 'external polarity' terms. Internal polarity refers to the extent of power concentration within the government relative to society. On the other hand, external polarity pertains to the level of power centralization in the international system. Different combinations of these two measurable variables are detrimental to influencing the design of foreign policy decisions. He argued, "When internal polarity is low and external polarity is high, domestic considerations will be decisive...when internal polarity is high and external polarity is low, international considerations will be decisive" (Alons, 2007, p. 211). The level of influence and success of the domestic interest groups depends on the low internal polarity because the government would have no choice but to give precedence to the domestic constituency and their preferences.

The two principal emphases dominating our comprehension of interest groups and foreign policy subjects are ethnic interest groups and US foreign policy (Milbrath, 1967; Haney & Vanderbush, 1999; Jacobs & Page, 2005; Foyle & Belle, 2010). Thinking of interest groups and foreign policy concepts without considering the United States would be unreasonable. In any case, the US is the pioneer country in harboring interest groups. Their success is undeniable because they know how to reach the policymaking hub. Many scholarly works focus on who makes foreign policy in the US, and fortunately, multiple actors are involved, one of which is the interest group. Even though this thesis will not cover ethnic interest groups exclusively, I nevertheless thought that understanding the way ethnic groups function

as strong influencers in the foreign policy arena will provide us with valuable insight regarding the broader concept of domestic interest groups.

Among every other type of interest group, ethnic interest groups are by far the most influential over foreign policy (Uslander, 1995). There are two reasons why ethnic lobbies are so noticeable in the broader literature on interest groups and foreign policy. First, ethnic lobbies have diffused in the United States' news media and political discussion. Secondly, these have successfully shaped foreign policy (Foyle & Belle, 2010). The success of ethnic interest groups has nothing to do with facing different obstacles. On the contrary, Rubenzer's (2008) findings indicate that the challenges ethnic minority interest groups face in achieving success are comparable to those of interest groups of all other kinds. To wield influence, ethnic identity interest groups must organize properly and mobilize their member accordingly. It would not be feasible to separate interest groups, especially ethnic ones, from the US foreign policy.

Furthermore, a significant portion of the existing literature revolves around the US. Since the end of the Cold War, the scholarly community has increasingly focused on the role of interest groups in foreign and security policy. The post-Cold War era was when security threats were less urgent, which paved the way for Congress to be more active, and the dividing line between 'foreign' policy and 'domestic' politics has become vague. Many have highlighted the growing activism, though not very influential in the beginning, of ethnic interest groups in US foreign policy. One of those interest groups was ethnic interest groups (Cuban, Israeli, Armenian). Ethnic interest groups often seek to build "symbiotic relationships" with the American

government (Haney & Vanderbush, 1999, p. 357). Additionally, the influence is not a unilateral process. On the contrary, ethnic interest groups may actively seek to engage with the government while the government desperately needs their support (Haney & Vanderbush, 1999).

In the end, even though the measurement process of the influence is relatively challenging in interest group studies compared to other domestic political actors, the existing literature is sufficient to grasp the essential premises and the logic behind their work. It is time to narrow the literature further and get involved with the economic/business interest groups in foreign policy.

2.3 Economic Interest Groups and Foreign Policy Decision-Making

The impact of economic/business interest groups on foreign policy is not as rich in literature as its impact on public policy or domestic politics. Therefore, this particular subsection will be relatively narrow compared to others. Nevertheless, the economic or business interest groups and foreign policy topics mostly revolve around the US in the literature. Thus, this section does refer to the US as illustrative of the existing literature.

For the past four decades, the pressure on governments to align foreign policy with business groups' interests has skyrocketed due to the emergence of an open world economy characterized by rapid capital movement and increased inevitable involvement in international economic warfare (Jacobs & Page, 2005). Business interest groups influence specific foreign policy issues, linking economic policies to the interests of powerful domestic economic groups. At the same time, Trubowitz (as

cited in Jacobs & Page, 2005) attributes various foreign policies to uneven economic growth and regional struggles for economic advantage. Grossman and Helpman (1995) introduced business/economic interest groups to analyze states' international trade relations. Their model consisted of campaign funding by business lobbies that incite policy preferences in decision-makers. They connected industry lobbying and campaign contributions to international trade policies, particularly imposing higher tariffs for politically organized industries.

The state and the business interest groups are responsible for translating common interests into joint action (Atli, 2011). The traditional view hinted that those groups convey information and voice opinions to influence the decision-making process, but their responsibilities have been broadened. They assume roles: gathering information and presenting it to the decision-makers, representing the opinion of the greater business community, and collaborating with public servants and political bodies. Economic interest groups are no different from the remaining (McLean & Whang, 2014). They also possess the financial means to support political campaigns and lobby the incumbent political party to enact their preferred policies. The receiver politician's funding by the group can be either cut off or shrunk. Therefore, decision-makers should remain responsive to the interest groups' agenda (Grossman & Helpman, 1995; Jacobs & Page, 2005; Atli, 2011; McLean & Whang, 2014).

A significant part of American history was especially crawling, with commercial interests playing a significant role in foreign policy and vice versa. The United States, as the trailblazer of the open world economy, is again the starring character of this literature. American foreign policy has been obsessed with open markets for

local businesses (Garten, 1997). As influencers of foreign policy in the US, the organized interest groups of businesses and the economy play a significant role in policy shaping. The survey study by Jacobs and Page (2005) shows us that American foreign policy, especially the issues of economy, military, and diplomacy, has been heavily controlled and consistently shaped by “internationally oriented business leaders” (Jacobs & Page, 2005, p. 107). Business corporations have strategic resources for pressuring decision-makers. What they meant by these resources is the ultimate power to shake the national economy and, second, their ability to urge the public to punish the government through media manipulation and advertising wrongful portrayal of the administration in office.

Garten (1997) interprets the expansion of American businesses abroad as a cornerstone of the nation's frontier spirit and one step closer to fulfilling its destiny. Historical records even prove some cases where individual corporations control and implement foreign policy. One such instance was to protect the interest of "United Fruits" against the Latin American market (Garten, 1997, p. 68). The corporate influence was facilitated by prominent segments of society, where corporate executives, attorneys, and investment bankers, with unusual frequency, switched positions between top government spots and the private sector. The Constitution also gave Congress control over trade policy, opening up a wide range of continuous commercial lobbying opportunities (Garten, 1997).

Another argument for the economic and business interest group's influence on foreign policy is the 'corporate foreign policy.' Corporate foreign policy is “the relationship between a business and a national government. Specifically concerning

the former's response to the latter's policies towards another national government or international organization. Its objective is to influence the national foreign policy of one government towards another” (Parella, 2023, p. 1996).

Even though there is less scholarly work, economic/business interest groups can direct a state's foreign policy. How they achieve influence is not very different from other interest groups. With the expansion of an open economy, corporate interest groups' pressure on national governments heightened to implement their policy preferences.

2.4 Military-Industrial Complex and Foreign Policy Decision-Making

To understand the military-industrial-complex-influenced-foreign-policy of a nation, we should first untangle the term piece by piece. Shortly, the military-industrial complex approach considers the military as an interest group. Where there is an interest group, conflict of interest is inevitable between the military's desire to expand national security and the interest of the group itself and its individual members. On the other hand, the 'industrial' side represents the state economy, which is comprised of scientists, engineers, research and development, and many more (Gibbs, 2019). The presence of a military-industrial complex in a country is an invitation to "a bureaucratic pressure for conflict and even war" (Gibbs, 2019, p. 46). This is the contemporary political conceptualization of the term.

Now, I offer the conceptualization used during the periods between the Second World War and the end of the Cold War. The simplest way to define it is “a convergence of state and industrial forces collaborating to shape US national security

policy to privilege the forces' respective special interests over the national interest and national security" (Roland, 2021, p. 2). However, the term was first coined by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his 1961 farewell address at the end of his second term, who warned about this horrible scenario where a powerful, permanent military-industrial complex could manipulate American politics to the detriment of the country's interest if not be careful:

"The conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience... We must guard against the military-industrial complex's acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes." –President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1961)¹

The term military-industrial complex has high conceptual similarity with C. Wright Mills' "The Power Elite, " which he wrote in 1956, which I think is important to highlight. Mills (1956) put forward that different groups in society use various forms of power in a competitive environment regulated by the government. According to Mills, the primary power centers (political, economic, and military) consist of elites from the same social background who move back and forth between these spheres. These elites are familiar with each other in both professional and social environments, leading them to collaborate in their shared interests rather than resource competition. The state is a body that coordinates the interests of these elites. The state and the economy are becoming increasingly interdependent, while the military is the most significant state involvement (Mills, 1956). Business elites benefit from having large, dependable customers, while military elites receive almost

¹ President Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Eisenhower's 'Military-Industrial Complex' Speech Origins and Significance," January 17, 1961, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gg-jvHynP9Y>.

unlimited resources to achieve their objectives, enjoying broad political support (Smith, 2015). In other words, there is this unbreakable transactional relationship between two spheres.

In the context of war funding, the military industry and the state are fueling each other. With the increase in popularity of the military-industrial complex, there has been a dramatic change in policy trends, where it goes in the direction of "the unprecedented levels of peacetime defense spending and an increasing militarization of foreign policy" (Brunton, 1988, p. 599). The military-industrial complex contributes to a militaristic attitude to foreign policy. It is about building up the national security defense system and indirectly encouraging the outbreak of warfare in other countries. Even though congressional deference to the president is expected during wartime, the extent of peacetime deference on national security issues is historically uncommon. This has enabled the executive to pursue aggressive foreign policy agendas that have ended up with prolonged wars (Thorpe, 2014). In addition, Brunton (1988) proposed a different explanation for the military-industrial complex approach. He located it as a system of institutions. These institutions comprise peacetime military procurement by private contractors, the revolving door, preparedness ethos, defense interest groups, and the state's support of strategic industries (Brunton, 1988).

This American commitment to create a permanent war economy is the most inclusive expression of the notion that a military-industrial complex was primarily responsible for all of its Third World interventions (Ledbetter, 2011). Defense and security industries have become integral parts of the American economy, poised to control

Congress and the administration through their corporate interests (Dunlap, 2011; Dunne & Sköns, 2014). The military-industrial complex strongly influences American administrators regardless of who the president is. Numerous analysts have argued that to sustain high military spending, America's political and military elite have exaggerated or even counterfeited threats to national security. One shocking incident was Dick Cheney, who served as Vice President between the years 2001 and 2009. Even before the war, speculations were wandering around the public and inside the media that there was a connection between a military infrastructure company called Halliburton and Vice President Dick Cheney (Ledbetter, 2011). Even mainstream news outlets were financially supported by the arms manufacturing corporations to depict the environment in intervention-needed countries (the Third World) to make the war necessary (Gibbs, 2019; Ledbetter, 2011).

The coalitions of interests within the government and industry may result in decisions that prioritize the interests of coalition members over the country's national security concerns. These coalitions might involve individuals from the armed services, civilian defense bureaucracy, legislature, arms manufacturers, and employees (Dunne & Sköns, 2014). The first symptom of the military-industrial complex's influence over the foreign policy process is the government's decision to increase the defense budget or military spending. Since the term military-industrial complex was first coined by an American President (Dwight D. Eisenhower), almost all scholarly works have focused on the United States. Cox (1998) noted that "...high rates of military spending is an economic and institutional expression of the interests of the ruling elite within the United States" (p. 192). It was a hot topic when American business associations were worried about emerging threats to their foreign

investment opportunities in underdeveloped countries, mainly in the Middle East and Central America.

At the same time, business groups that were reliant on high levels of military spending actively lobbied for extensive growth in the military budget (Cox, 1998). What some have referred to as the "right turn" in US foreign policy is, in reality, the outcome of a multifaceted interplay among political institutions, prominent political figures, and corporate elites within the state's highest decision-making bodies. This order has always cultivated the legitimized explosion of military spending in the US.

Gibbs (2019) argues that the military and its private sector contractor associations act as a political lobby that often induces international tension and, in some instances, full-blown war. He also contends that, as opposed to the realist perspective, the interests of the military-industrial complex play a significant role in policy design.

The complex influence of 'low politics' in defense procurement and 'high politics' matters, such as the initiation and execution of military action (Gibbs, 2019).

Furthermore, the military-industrial complex enthusiasts have this extreme interpretation of the US foreign policy that wars, especially third-party interventions in Third World countries, serve to safeguard and expand US investments. The US' third-party interventions in countries like Honduras, Iraq, and Afghanistan were the victims of the military-industrial complex (Bray, 2020).

The military-industrial complex approach to foreign policy is very far from the realist approach of Hans Morgenthau. In contrast to realism, the military-industrial complex approach defends the presence of a more significant military as an

independent feature that significantly influences decision-making processes, including leading the country into warfare. The hands made the US foreign policy an instrument of the military-industrial complex, in which they attempted to export their goods and services abroad under the guise of pursuing a global neoliberal agenda (Bray, 2020).

In the US, defense corporations and military service providers have directed the legislation to be aligned with their interests. The transactional relationship between the government and the army corporations has been boosted as the neoliberal world order is settled. This dynamic paved the way for defense lobbying at the top governmental positions to procure favorable policies. Large defense corporations were eager to create partnerships with the Pentagon. Together, they built a permanent, giant sector in the American economy devoted to producing lethal weapons systems, in which the money of the American taxpayers was allocated to preferred contractors without much space for competition. By concentrating profits in private hands and shifting risks onto American society, the military-industrial complex permitted defense companies with unwarranted influence over the US foreign policy (Bernstein & Wilson, 2011).

Even though the initial literature on the military-industrial complex and foreign policy goes back to the post-Second World War era, the concept is still relevant to contemporary world politics. Global arms transfers, third-party interventions, defense contractor lobbying, and corporate interests are the unwanted products of the 21st-century military-industrial complex. By disclosing the lobbying with a legal framework, the US government makes it as democratic as possible. One of the

cornerstones of a functioning democracy is the principle of transparency. Therefore, by making lobbying records publicly available to every single citizen of the US, the government ensures transparency. Anyone can look up the expenditures made by the lobbying firms, which bills they lobby for, and whose election campaign they contribute to. In the United States, lobbying is a legitimate and accepted right, much like the right to vote. Thus, this formulation of lobbying can override criticisms, saying it is an obstacle to democracy or a restriction to people's power of expression by its status as a legally disclosed and institutionally accepted practice in the country.



CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I revisit the broader inquiry of the thesis and restate the research question. The theory section elaborates on the mechanism behind the research question, which guided me in formulating the hypothesis. Subsequently, I outline the types of data I analyze to test the hypothesis. Finally, I conclude the chapter by stating the justification of the methodology and explaining the reason for utilizing qualitative and quantitative data analysis.

3.1 Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis

The research question of my thesis is: To what extent do the military-industrial complex (defense industry) lobbying efforts influence the United States' policy decision regarding the 2017 arms deal with Saudi Arabia? Even though the theoretical mechanism seems like it is about lobbying, it is actually 'the interest group theory of foreign policy,' a crucial framework that provides a comprehensive understanding of the broader picture we should look at. Lobbying is just one way of influencing government policy outcomes, and interest groups have resorted to it as a

technique. As I have highlighted in the literature review, foreign policy-making is not one-sided; on the contrary, it is the outcome of the merge of domestic and international conditions a country experience simultaneously. Interest groups are one of the players in domestic politics.

Military-industrial complex or the American defense industry, which I will use interchangeably throughout the thesis, is one form of an interest group because they have, as Eising and Lehringer (2016) highlighted, organized to influence the decisions the government makes in line with its desired preferences. In other words, they put their constituents' needs before the government's preferences (Berry, 1978). An interest group is an actor in domestic politics, but this should not imply that its influence is solely restricted to the domestic affairs of a country. Instead, they are fundamental in shaping foreign policy outcomes as well. Let us briefly remember how interest groups influence foreign policy. Interest groups can spend reasonable amounts on lobbying, contribute to public campaigns to make public opinion closer to their point of view, or form elite networks of top-tier positions to impact foreign policy decision-making processes that reinforce their benefit. Sometimes, a member of an interest group can even be a former government employee. We often witness this in the defense industry's history, known as the 'revolving door' activity. For instance, in 2021, the Pentagon witnessed 36 employees leave to join private defense or defense-adjacent corporations. In the same year, the firms to which these 36 people fled were rewarded \$89.3 billion in contract obligations from the Pentagon (Summers, 2022).

As for the foreign policy decision the military-industrial complex has aimed to

influence, I decided to focus on the arms sales the US has done with Saudi Arabia. The interest group activities (lobbying) coincide mainly with the United States in foreign policy literature. The country has successfully legitimized this lobbying process in the state system, where it has documented every spending, every organization has ever made under the 'Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995.' Even though the origin of the term military-industrial complex dates back to 1961, when President Eisenhower first coined it during his farewell address to the American public at the end of his second term, it is still very much alive and relevant to contemporary American foreign policy. The reason why the military-industrial complex is so powerful in American political life is that there is this commitment, fueled both by the administration and the industry itself, to create a permanent war economy. The desire for a military-based economy has paved the way for the military-industrial complex to permeate every layer of governance; it forced every incumbent political party to wage numerous wars and organize military interventions, although some of them were regarded as unnecessary and baseless (Ledbetter, 2011).

As President Eisenhower put it, the US was compelled to build a permanent armed industry to prevail in the Second World War. Despite the absence of a full-blown war environment threatening every single nation in the world at the moment, the military-industrial complex not only persisted, but also grew in influence, challenging the decision-making process of the US (Roland, 2021). The coalitions formed between the government and the defense industry may lead to decisions that favor the interests of the coalition members rather than the nation's security concerns. These alliances may include individuals from the military service, civilian

defense agencies, legislative bodies, arms manufacturers, and their workforce (Dunne & Sköns, 2014).

The war-making or the Third World military interventions are not the only means of livelihood for the military-industrial complex; the global arms deal is the other. The US has been the biggest exporter of weaponry in the world since 1950 (Sheline, 2025). This makes the country the invisible hand behind many armed conflicts. Even though the US did not directly interfere in the conflict process, its arms sales did. For instance, according to the fact sheet published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in March 2024, the share of global arms exports occupied by the United States between the years 2019 and 2023 was 42%, which was 17% greater than it was in the years 2014 and 2018. Moreover, the biggest recipient of those arms was Saudi Arabia between the same years (SIPRI, 2024). This statistic is very significant to understanding the relationship between an exporter (the United States) and an importer (Saudi Arabia) of arms in American politics and, ultimately, the role played by the military-industrial complex in those sales.

The US has arms trade relationships with countries that are riddled with deadly conflicts and those with tremendous human rights violations, often without considering the final destination of the recipient or the intended use after delivery. Furthermore, there are multiple instances where American soldiers were forced to fight against groups equipped with American-manufactured weaponry (Thrall & Dorminey, 2018). It is quite an unexpected fact for such a country that has always been the champion of democratic values, civil or political liberties, and human rights. Despite being very resourceful in terms of oil, Saudi Arabia is a country that is against everything the US has valued in theory. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia is still

the largest arms importer from the US. Even though there are several instances where Congress attempted to block the sale of air-to-air missiles to Saudi Arabia, it is known to be used to fuel the War in Yemen even further (Abramson, 2022). This is striking because how it is possible to override such a strong institution like the US Congress. This is where the 'interest group' theory entered into the discussion. A robust domestic interest group shapes foreign policy to serve its interests.

It is a transactional relationship between two very different states due to a strong interest group (military-industrial complex) facilitating arms sales. The role of the military-industrial complex is vital in the realization of those sales, and it happens because of the intense lobbying efforts the complex has put in. The American lobby literature mainly revolves around ethnic interest groups, such as Israelis or Armenians. However, lobbying by business corporations is also common. After all, the military-industrial complex, or the defense industry, is a part of such an interest group, and their lobbying spending is well-documented. Even though there is an abundance of studies analyzing the US-Saudi Arabia relationship, arms deals, and the military-industrial complex separately, their combination has not been considered much lately. Therefore, I wanted to make a contribution to the literature by combining these three and hypothesizing the argument like this:

Hypothesis: The more the military-industrial complex (defense industry) spends on lobbying activities in the US, the more likely the government will approve arms sales to Saudi Arabia in 2017.

This thesis aims to support the hypothesis that the lobbying expenditure by the American military-industrial complex and the arms sale agreements to Saudi Arabia. This hypothesis will test a particular inquiry, but the bigger picture of this research will attempt to determine the extent to which economic interests

and corporate influence shape US foreign policy. If a strong correlation is found, it would mean that military-industrial complex lobbying efforts play a significant role in securing arms sales to Saudi Arabia, potentially putting corporate profits over broader strategic or ethical considerations. By providing empirical evidence on the relationship between corporate interest and foreign policy-making, this analysis improves our knowledge of how political and financial incentives affect decisions about arms sales.

3.2 Methodology and Empirical Data

According to the hypothesis, my independent variable is lobbying activity, and my dependent variable is the US arms sale to Saudi Arabia. In order to empirically test the hypothesis, I will consult both qualitative and quantitative data collection from various sources. This subsection will talk about where and what kind of data I will extract and explain the application of the choice of method to run these data in detail.

My research topic is an instance of a case study. According to Hancke's (2009) description of a case study, it is "the study of a single instance of a decision, policy, institution, event, process, etc.—the study of a single case, in short—in which the case is differentiated from other cases by having a single value (high or low, absent or present, say) in terms of either the outcome that you are interested in or of the explanation that you are exploring" (p. 62). This single case of instance or event is significant for us, as researchers, because it "sheds light on a broader theory or argument as a result of how it is connected to that theory or argument" (Hancke, 2009, p. 63). The case can take various forms:

person, country, region, company, policy, etc. Most importantly, it should be confined in time and space, have applicability to the broader world, and have a clear connection between the case and the explored theoretical framework (Hancke, 2009).

Before analyzing the numerical representation of the relationship between the military-industrial complex lobbying and arms sale to Saudi Arabia, I first need to show the necessity of preparing a qualitative data collection. The quantitative representation is an effective way for making policy analysis but not sufficient to explain whether there is an actual relationship between the dependent and independent variables. Therefore, initially, I have to demonstrate the relationship with qualitative data. I start by collecting data primarily on the origin of the military-industrial complex in the US; the reason why arms deal is classified as a foreign policy tool; the interplay of the arms deals and military-industrial complex, in other words, corporate interest, in American foreign policy; the brief history of US-Saudi relations; and the defense lobbying in the US.

My primary sources for the origin of the military-industrial complex are the archival research on government and military records, review of scholarly articles and books, and analysis of presidential and congressional speeches. I obtain them from the National Archives and Records Administration, Congressional Research Service, and related scholarly journal websites, such as Oxford Research Encyclopedias, ScienceDirect, or JSTOR. Scholarly articles and books are fundamental to the arms deal, which is classified as a foreign policy act. However, think tank reports and newspaper articles such as Foreign

Affairs, American Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute, and Congressional Research Service are great support. This data will also comprise the role of arms sales in the US foreign policy because the identification of arms sales as a foreign policy tool was first mentioned in the US context in the literature. This thesis examines a particular inquiry about the United States and Saudi Arabia. Thus, I should provide the reader with a glimpse into the relationship between the two countries, mentioning the evolution of how Saudi Arabia became the biggest recipient of American weaponry. The primary sources are the bilateral relations fact sheets published by the US Department of State, the US Embassy, and the Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I look to the secondary resources of scholarly articles and books as well. Reports also show the relationship timeline prepared by institutions like the Wilson Center or the Brookings Institution.

In my final step for the qualitative empirics, I investigate defense lobbying in the United States. Since lobbying is the most common practice the interest groups have resorted to, data are abundant. The primary resource for obtaining lobbying data comes from the United States Senate Lobby Disclosure, which offers annual lobbying spending in sector-by-sector and company-by-company. In addition, there is a US-based NGO called Open Secret tracking every lobbying spending made since 1998, offering a graphic representation of these spendings, revolving door activity, and the bills that have been lobbied one by one.

For the second part of my analysis, I pick one arms deal between the US and Saudi Arabia, the infamous \$110 billion worth arms deal signed in 2017. I will

investigate the underlying mechanism of how the defense lobbying achieves the actualization of this largest-ever arms deal in US history. I chose this specific case because it first created a sensation among the US policy circles and the international media when it was first revealed to the public. The volume and the content of the deal are unprecedented. Furthermore, President Trump, known for his proximity to the military-industrial complex, has always advocated for these arms deals more than any other US president because he believes that they can further enhance the country's economic prosperity and national security, even before he took office.

For the final part of my empirical analysis, I will be collecting quantitative data aiming to test the hypothesis with regards to whether there is a positive correlation between the American military-industrial complex's lobbying spending and the value of arms sales made to Saudi Arabia by the American defense industry between years 2010 and 2024. With the data I collect, I will run a simple two-variable correlation analysis, which is one of the simplest techniques in quantitative studies to investigate the association between independent and dependent variables. Additionally, to support the case study, I make a separate correlation analysis exclusively focusing on the defense lobbying and arms sale to Saudi Arabia happened during President Trump's first term (2017-2020).

First, I delimit myself to a timeframe, focusing on the years between 2010 and 2024, because data are abundant between those years. Furthermore, 2010 and 2024 are politically and historically significant because the former is the pre-

Syrian Civil War environment period when the arms sales were expected to peak. The data of the arms sale contracts on the government website only goes back to 2010, and this is the time of the Ukraine and Gaza wars, when the arms sales were expected to be at their lowest.

For my independent variable (the lobbying activities of the American military-industrial complex), I retrieved my data from a primary source of the United States Senate Lobby Disclosure, which offers annual lobbying spending in every sector and even in companies belonging to that sector. In addition, a US-based NGO called OpenSecrets and a website called LobbyView track every lobbying spending made since 1998, offering a graphic representation of this spending, revolving door activity, and the lobbied bills. As for my dependent variable (arms sale to Saudi Arabia), there are various websites that I utilize: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency, and the Center for International Policy. They all offer primary arms sales documents monthly and annually by country. Moreover, the Center for International Policy categorizes arms sales into two categories: foreign military sales (between the US government and a foreign government) and direct commercial sales (Between a US manufacturer and a foreign buyer). For each year between 2010 and 2024, I plan to run a correlation between the monthly value of the sum of every arms export made to Saudi Arabia in US dollars and the lobbying spending made by the defense sector (military-industrial complex) in the US. I do the exact same thing once again for the arms sales to Saudi Arabia during Trump era (2017-2020).

CHAPTER 4

EMPIRICAL DATA ANALYSIS

The previous section discussed the theoretical framework with the main hypothesis, and the choice of methodology. Since the broader topic of this thesis is the impact of corporate interest of military-industrial complex on a foreign policy decision, in this section, I touch upon this inquiry through the application of both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

4.1 Qualitative Findings

4.1.1 Origins of the Military-Industrial Complex in the US

In straightforward terms, the military-industrial complex is the relationship between private defense contractors and government officials, sustained through funding and support of military operations and arms sales worldwide. Since 1960, there has always been an upward trend in defense expenditures, except for a few minor

setbacks between 2011 and 2015 (World Bank Open Data, n.d.). According to the US Department of Defense's "Fiscal Year 2024 Defense Budget" document, the defense expenditures mounted to \$824.3 billion, an increase of \$26.8 billion compared to fiscal year 2023. President Eisenhower's very-much-necessary warning seems as apt today as it was 64 years ago.

The revolving door is a widespread and severe phenomenon, emphasizing the influence of the military-industrial complex in American politics. It briefly is the movement of federal public employees between government positions and employment in private businesses or lobbying industry and vice versa (Blanes i Vidal et al., 2012). Most importantly, it enables them to smoothly infiltrate the foreign policy-making process as they have experience as government officials. They know how to navigate the process. The US military-industrial complex relies heavily on the revolving door, concerning high-profile army officers, private defense contractors, and politicians. They switch sectors because of privilege, power, access, and money. After retirement, top-ranking generals and admirals find themselves in new occupations, mainly as lobbyists, defense executives, defense firm board members, consultants, or financiers. For instance, in 2021, the Pentagon witnessed 36 employees leave to join private defense or defense-adjacent corporations. In the same year, the firms to which these 36 people fled were rewarded \$89.3 billion in contract obligations from the Pentagon (Summers, 2022).

It creates the impression in people's minds, and in some circumstances, the reality, that the exchange of occupation causes a conflict of interest in forming the defense policy and in the settlement of the size and context of the Pentagon budget. The

interference of generals and admirals in the defense industry is one part of the revolving door problem, in which top-tier Pentagon and military personnel abandon their current occupation and join defense contractors. These people utilize their network with former colleagues to advocate for the interests of their corporate employers and clients. Their impact on budgetary and policy matters can tip the scales in favor of a "more militarized foreign policy" (Hartung & Fisher, 2023, p. 4).

The military-industrial complex is not solely accountable to influence defense policies, but also the mass media. The powerful corporations own mass media outlets aiming to sculpt the public perception by regulating the flow of information. Kellner (2004) highlights that the media have been manipulated in favor of "arms of conservative and corporate interests" as a result of concentrated ownership (p. 31). We witness the same thing with the military-industrial complex in the US, where critical domestic and foreign policy matters, such as waging war, are discussed only among a small circle of people occupying at least one of these power centers. Since the Spanish-American War of 1898, which signaled the emergence of the US as the new imperial conqueror and rival on the global stage, the media have played a detrimental role in securing public support for war (Kumar, 2006). The military-industrial complex has been influential in the media since the Cold War. In this situation, many mainstream news outlets were financially supported by the arms manufacturing corporations to depict the devastating environment in a country planned to be invaded, to make the war necessary (Ledbetter, 2011).

As I discussed above, this American commitment was to create a permanent war economy. Thus, scholars mostly linked the reason for going to war to the influence

created by the military-industrial complex on the government. The 2003 Iraq War was the most explicit example among many for this obsession, which makes the public and scholars question whether the war was necessary. There is this belief that the US military-industrial complex was primarily liable for the 2003 Iraq War, indeed (Ledbetter, 2011). To fund the military economy, the US administrators were forced to wage numerous wars and organize military interventions, even though some of them were regarded as highly unnecessary and baseless. Besides, the military-industrial complex is not only accountable for the wars waged by the hands of the US, but also the US arms sales to countries already engaged in armed conflict. This practice not only encourages but also exacerbates ongoing wars. As the world-leading exporter, the US recorded a 29% increase in overseas arms sales in Fiscal Year 2024, reaching \$318.7 billion due to Ukraine-related demand (Stone, 2025). The US defense industry and economy are so entangled that their combination has transformed into an uncontrollable power that no one can tame. This is what President Eisenhower warned the American people about. The military-industrial complex can overshadow the notion of liberty and take over the country.

The Second World War changed the outlook of relationships between industry, the military, and universities, with state-funded R&D enabling significant advancements in arms technology. With the war's end, the defense industry spent millions of dollars on lobbying to preserve the persistence of military spending; thereby, the Cold War climate justified a permanent war economy. These developments were reinforced with revolving door activities. For instance, in 1961, Robert McNamara abandoned his presidency of the Ford Motor Company to become the Secretary of Defense to transport modern corporate practices into the conduct of military affairs. The

military-industrial complex gained its popularity for the first time thanks to the Cold War era, when the world atmosphere was crawling with the everlasting third-party interventions in the underdeveloped regions waged by the great powers for the sake of national security instead of a hot war between the US and the Soviet Union. It was the most convenient time for the military-industrial complex to consolidate its influence in US politics because military interventions and weaponry procurement peaked. However, what if this creation has done the opposite, spreading conflict and insecurities worldwide.

The US was the pioneer intruder at that time. It is quite plausible that the military-industrial complex initially was about anything related to wars the US initiated, but its dominion has evolved. It managed to infiltrate every layer of the foreign policy-making process, which I will detail in the following subsections. Since the end of the Second World War, the US has organized military operations annually in different regions. Interventions in Guatemala, Lebanon, Laos, Congo, and many more were all executed because of the push of the military-industrial complex in the country.

Former Republican congressman from Texas, Ron Paul, expressed the severity of the situation: “We spend more on defense than the rest of the world combined, and far more than we spent during the Cold War. In many cases, these expenditures foment resentment that does not make us safer but makes us a target. We referee and arm conflicts worldwide, and have troops in some 140 countries with over 700 military bases” (Paul, 2010, para. 6).

When the Cold War ended with American victory, many political leaders promoted the concept of a “peace dividend,” suggesting that capital previously allocated for

defense campaign against the Soviet Union could be redirected to other uses, such as the healthcare system, education, or infrastructure (Ledbetter, 2011, p. 192). During the 1992 presidential campaign, candidates from both parties proposed a reduction in future military spending by \$200 billion to \$66 billion over five years (Risen, 1992). While some cutting did happen in the 1990s when adjusted for inflation, these were reversed during the George W. Bush administration for his 'Global War on Terror' campaign and the Iraq War extraction. This occurs despite the absence of a comparable adversary, as the United States spends more on its military than all other countries combined.

On the other hand, the military-industrial complex has also provided thousands of employment opportunities around the country. Not only were males employed, but also their spouses joined the workforce. This also served the purpose of the big defense corporations. The defense industry has become one of the most significant sectors of the American economy. Private contractors are fighting for government tenders, creating competition. The weapons manufacturers are outside contractors who provide services to the military (catering, laundry, and accommodation). This hampered the separation of business from the military (Jarecki, 2005). However, the concern over the military-industrial complex's influence is not limited to war-making. Defense and security industries, the backbone of the US manufacturing sector, are situated to control Congress for the sake of corporate interest (Pfaff, 2010).

For a long time, a tiny and distinct group of defense corporations has enjoyed the most significant share of the Pentagon arms contracts, mainly Lockheed Martin,

RTX Corporations (formerly Raytheon Technologies), Northrop Grumman, General Dynamics, and Boeing (see Figure 1). They consistently mass-produced the same planes, ships, and missiles for the government while securing huge profits for their owners. “Lockheed Martin is the prime contractor for the Air Force’s top-priority F-35 stealth fighter (a plane that has often proved distinctly disappointing in operation); Northrop Grumman is building the B-21 stealth bomber; Boeing produces the F-15EX combat jet; and General Dynamics makes the Navy’s Los Angeles-class attack submarines” (Klare, 2025, para. 5). However, according to the article published on The Nation, the mushrooming of new companies, many originating in Silicon Valley instead of Capital Beltway or embracing its disruptive ethos, is now challenging the older giants for access to highly-profitable Pentagon contracts.

Rank ^a		Company ^b	Country ^c	Arms revenues (\$ m.)	
2023	2022			2023	2022 ^d
1	1	Lockheed Martin Corp.	United States	\$60,810	\$61,820
2	2	RTX	United States	\$40,660	\$41,190
3	3	Northrop Grumman Corp.	United States	\$35,570	\$33,620
4	4	Boeing	United States	\$31,100	\$30,500
5	5	General Dynamics Corp.	United States	\$30,200	\$29,270
6	6	BAE Systems	United Kingdom	\$29,810	\$29,150
7	9	Rostec ^{e f}	Russia	\$21,730	\$14,550
8	8	AVIC	China	\$20,850	\$19,750
9	7	NORINCO	China	\$20,560	\$21,130
10	10	CETC ^e	China	\$16,050	\$14,260

Figure 1: Top arms-producing and military services companies in the world (SIPRI)

The industry's greatest strength is the extensive body of superficially independent research that roots interventionist foreign policies and relaxed arms export regulations (Marshall, 2020). Experts in foreign policy and military policy, as well as

the think tanks they hire, make up a vast network intricately linked to the global military-industrial complex, thereby influencing US foreign policy. War-profiting companies are think tanks' biggest donors that support aggressive US foreign policy. More than half of the most-cited US think tanks are funded by defense contractors: General Electric sponsors eleven of them, Boeing and Lockheed Martin six each, and Northrop Grumman and Raytheon are financing three (Carp, 2013).

The military-industrial complex has been shifting towards the control of “big tech companies, venture capital, and private equity firms” (Gonzalez, 2024, p. 1). A new version of the US military-industrial complex is being born. Anduril and General Atomics are the first two renowned companies of the new military-industrial complex. Due to global developments happening in the last two years, the Pentagon has intensified its interest in Silicon Valley technologies, particularly the deployment of drones and AI-powered weaponry systems in war zones, such as Ukraine and Gaza, and concerns over a likely AI arms race with China. In addition to that, the threat of Russian cyberwarfare and disinformation efforts has pushed the Department of Defense to invest in superior digital technologies (Gonzalez, 2024). This has managed to steal the spotlight from the conventional arms producers.

To conclude this subsection, I can say that Eisenhower’s 1961 version of the military-industrial complex has evolved far beyond its original scope, embedding itself within the American political, economic, and social life. What started as a response to the necessities of the Second World War has now grown into a self-sustaining force that prolongs high military spending, exerts lobbying influence, and even shapes public opinion through the media. Even though there is a discussion in

the academic circles that the defense spending cycle and international intervention will slow down, with AI, cyberwarfare, and autonomous weapons at the forefront, war and militarization still remain the primary US strategy due to the unshakeable bond between the defense industry and policymakers, with the help of the revolving door phenomenon..

4.1.2 The Interplay of Arms Deal and Military-Industrial Complex in the US Foreign Policy

In this subsection, I want to show what arms deals play in American foreign policy and how the corporate interest (military-industrial complex) facilitated those deals in the background. Nevertheless, I want first to show the evolution of the US arms sale policy over the decades because arms sales have been one of a state's most widely used tools in achieving broader foreign policy objectives. Then, I will associate it with the military-industrial complex at the end.

Arms deals are a potent tool in foreign policy decisions. First of all, selling weapons to a country that is politically and ideologically aligned with the provider can further increase the security and defense of the supplier country. Second, the procurement of military equipment often comes with an attachment. It requires maintenance and operational support from the supplier, compelling the buyer to uphold positive relations or risk losing essential services of the weaponry system. Finally, large-scale arms deals can create significant financial debt for the buyer, granting the seller to leverage this dependence to advance its foreign policy objectives, a strategy often referred to as 'debt-trap diplomacy,' meaning that a country "deliberately seeks to entrap countries in a web of debt to secure some kind of strategic advantage or an

asset of some kind" (Brautigam, 2020, p. 2). Additionally, the power imbalance between seller and buyer enables the supplier to dictate overwhelmingly favorable terms, mainly when the recipient urgently needs military support.

The most significant return of an arms deal is the leverage it brings out over other countries' delicate foreign policy decisions. The most pressing instances of this statement from the literature always come from the US as the starting figure, because the US holds its position as the biggest exporter of arms in the world. For instance, in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the arms deal has been leveraged to make challenging political and territorial decisions more acceptable. The late US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger supported utilizing arms transfers as a foreign policy tool. He promised their ally Israel a vast amount of new weaponry systems, including the first-ever sale of the F-15 export, in return for its leaders' endorsement of the 1975 Sinai disengagement agreement. Similarly, the Carter administration's 1978 decision to sell F-5E fighters to Egypt was primarily driven by the need to cheer up Anwar Sadat and prevent him from deserting peace negotiations. Likewise, the large-scale arms supply to Iran and Saudi Arabia was based on the assumption that strengthening their militaries would reduce the likelihood of the Shah or King Khalid backing an OPEC oil embargo to cut off supply.

Four historical junctures define the evolution of the US arms deal policy. The first juncture was the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War. Even though the US had already mingled with the global arms transfer after the First World War, large-scale arms sales did not come until the end of the Second World War. The Cold War competition unintentionally forced the US to invest in the R&D

of new weaponry systems to compete with the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the US relied on arms sales to defend Western European allies, its grand American agenda of containing the Soviet Union, and its efforts to spread communism (Stohl & Grillot, 2017). The second juncture in US arms deal policy was the ratification of the Arms Export Control Act in 1976 and the founding of the modern arms deal process. It prevented American presidents from ordering arms sales without the notification of Congress (Stohl & Grillot, 2017). Before any legislative regulation or limitation, President Richard Nixon made use of these arms sales very effectively to employ force and wield influence without actually sacrificing American troops as a response to communist ideology. The fear generated from the uncontrolled export of American weaponry pushed the state to pass the AECA and a risk assessment procedure for potential sales.

Another historical juncture has shown itself with the end of the Cold War. During that time, the US sold arms to a small circle of states, mainly the allies and ideologically aligned nations (Thrall & Dorminey, 2018). With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the rival nations desperately needed to modify their Soviet-era arms systems with American ones. Ultimately, the client profile of the US expanded, and the company started to export arms to third-world countries. The most recent juncture in US arms sale policy was the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Both President Bush and Obama experienced a unique surge in arms exports as a countermovement to the attacks, bestowing foreign countries with unmatched access to American weaponry. As expected, the risk assessment procedure went to waste due to the urgency of the counterterrorism actions. The post-9/11 environment created a worldwide panic that would allow countries that had been previously prevented from purchasing American

arms systems due to flawed human rights records or their involvement in conflicts to be given the green light to be on the client list of the American arms systems, as long as they would help combat terrorism (Sullivan et al., 2011). Iraq and Afghanistan were at the top of this client list. Both administrations have increased their sales, which continued to rise after President Trump took office in 2016.

Major arms sale cases, such as President Trump's record-high agreement with Saudi Arabia in 2017 worth \$110 billion or the decision to sell arms to Ukraine, facilitated brief periods of suspicion among political circles. However, there is no noteworthy moment in US political history where any administration has doubted and interrogated the rationale behind exporting weaponry, whether to an ally or non-ally. Congress, which enjoys the power to revoke any arms deal, has not blocked a single sale since the Arms Export Control Act of 1976 entered into force (Thrall & Dorminey, 2018).

People in favor of arms deals find common ground in three ways. First, supporters of arms sales advocate the idea that arms exports strengthen American security by improving the military capabilities of allied nations, empowering them to contain and deter their enemies, and fostering peace in critical regions where the US needs to safeguard its interests, like the Middle East and Southeast Asia. They also argue that the arms deal is not only an essential aspect of the decision-making process in the country but also an instrument to exert influence over the recipient nations' behaviors and foreign policy dispositions. Supporters defend the arms deal because they think it boosts the US economy through a defense industrial base and comes with fiscal benefits, such as reducing unit costs for the Pentagon, or the contracts received from

foreign countries provide tens of thousands of job opportunities to nearly every state on the continent. These are the perks the arms deal advocates put forward.

Nevertheless, they are exclusive to the US context. No other country can benefit from such a sale other than the US because the US is the pioneer of the defense industry worldwide, and most states, regardless of whether they are allies or not, supply their defense necessities from the US. This eventually gave the country tremendous power, which was not only a material power but also a psychological supremacy over other countries. Therefore, the arms deal will always be an artillery that the US harbors in critical situations, whether it can backfire.

The sale of US-made weaponry and other defense-related equipment to partner nations has been a key portion of US national security since the Lend-Lease programs before the country entered the Second World War (Arabia et al., 2023).

Historically, American Presidents have been inclined to use arms and defense-related sales to further achieve extensive foreign policy ambitions. This routine ranges from supplying arms to strategically significant countries during the Cold War to strengthening global counterterrorism capabilities in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. According to the Arms Export Control Act of 1976, "It is the sense of Congress that all such sales be approved only when they are consistent with the foreign policy of the United States" (Arabia et al., 2023, p. 4). Six US Presidents have issued a Conventional Arms Transfer (CAT) Policy, which gives the executive branch a framework for evaluating potential arms deal proposals (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2019). It first started with President Jimmy Carter in 1977, and the most recent CAT program was implemented by President Joe Biden in

February 2023, named the National Security Memorandum (NSM)-18 (The White House, 2023).

The Biden Administration claims that the NSM-18 embodies the government's foreign policy ambitions of advancing human rights, reviving alliances, bolstering and promoting the US defense industrial base, and guiding the world with diplomacy in order to prevail in a time-complicated strategic rivalry. The policy instructs the executive to handle possible arms transfer on an individual basis while considering particular factors, such as how convenient the arms transfer is for the US foreign policy traditions. The US government must comply with the Arms Export Control Act clause, which dictates the mandatory risk assessment of potential arms sales to forestall any unwanted outcomes (U.S. Congress, 1976). However, it does not mean that institutions like the Pentagon and Department of State take it seriously.

Historically, the findings show that the US has made arms deals with any country willing to buy them, meaning the risk assessment is disregarded (Thrall & Dorminey, 2018). In 2024 solely, the total amount of Foreign Military Sales, including all defense articles, services, and security cooperation activities, was \$117.9 billion (U.S. Department of State, 2025).

The arms deal directs states' foreign policy through some mechanisms despite their many uses, and the US is the pioneer in utilizing them. The first entails using arms sales to ensure the supplier and recipient's security and stability. It helps allies win wars or deter enemies, advance regional and local stability, or support friendly governments against insurgencies and other internal challenges by redistributing power and capabilities between the recipient and its neighbors. The second mechanism is generating influence and leverage over other countries' actions by

selling weapons. This resonates a great deal of power from the US perspective.

The United States may set the terms under which it will consent to sell specific weapons, as it produces the world's most sophisticated and desirable weaponry. As Shapiro (2012) stated, when a country purchases a US defense system, it does not stay solely as a regular purchase of arms from a supplier to boost security. However, it comes with an attachment, an unescapable strategic relationship with the US. This interaction encourages bilateral relations and recipient nations to sustain good ties with the US. So far, we have a great deal of understanding of the function of arms deals in US foreign policy mechanisms. Now, it is time to link arms deal policy to the military-industrial complex, in other words, the corporate interest of the defense industry in US foreign policy.

The conventional wisdom defends the idea that the US foreign policy is determined by the administration in power and Congress. However, whenever the government deals with a foreign policy issue, such as defense spending or defense policy, the iron triangle framework shines out. It is about the collaboration of defense contractors, military officers, and policy-makers to perpetuate a policy outcome benefitting the military-industrial complex, rather than the general public (Adams, 1981). Thus, the military-industrial complex would become the first to decide on their behalf (Caldicott, 2002). Since the Second World War, the properties of US foreign policy-making have reinforced the influence of the military-industrial complex by unifying authority for foreign policy decisions within the executive branch and constructing a compound arrangement of bureaucracies relying on the existence of an external enemy to justify their activities (Cox, 2023).

The governments have always justified the strong presence of the military-industrial complex in the policy process by identifying a security threat to the US national interest. The military-industrial complex is the one that establishes, shapes, and redefines the meaning of 'national interest' to maximize revenues and protect access to resources. However, they are not the only corporate interest group in the US political process that wants to influence the policy course. Indeed, they have to compete with another group of sectors with personal interests to have a say in the definition of national interest (Cox, 2014). Furthermore, defense manufacturers making up the military-industrial complex with corporate interest must sustain good relationships with central US foreign policy bureaucracies, such as the Department of Defense, which is, in the end, the one deciding the urgency of the threat to the nation and the Congress who is the one finalizing the budget approval.

The ongoing commitments to the military-industrial complex are driven by policy arguments that connect arms deals to the US benefits. It is the formation behind the promotion of arms deals as a foreign policy instrument in the US. The complex's livelihood only comes from the sales of the defense systems they manufacture, so it is plausible that they push so hard for a foreign policy decision revolving around an arms deal. In other words, the military-industrial complex is responsible for militarizing the US foreign policy. Sherry (1995) defines militarization as the mechanism in which national security and war turned into overwhelming concerns and gave rise to the metaphors, models, and memories that influence many facets of national life. Militarization of foreign policy means that the country's international relations are increasingly regulated through military approaches and defense

mechanisms at the expense of diplomatic and non-military tactics. The profits generated by the military-industrial complex do not just go into the hands of executives or stockholders; they are used to intensify the militarization of US foreign policy. This conceptualization embodies the growing influence of military institutions and perceptions in shaping foreign policy choices.

4.1.3 Lobbying and Defense Industry in the US

The lobbying activities in the US are regulated under the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995, which says that the lobbying takes place between the government representative and a client (U.S. House of Representatives, 1995). According to the Act, the client is “any person or entity that employs or retains another person for financial or other compensation to conduct lobbying activities on behalf of that person or entity” (U.S. House of Representatives, 1995, n.d.). In this case, the client is the military-industrial complex, or more commonly, the defense industry. This Act ensures that the general public is aware of the efforts the lobbyist have put to influence the decision-making process of the government. Additionally, this Act mandates that all lobbying companies must submit annual activity report to the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives, including the names of the lobbyists and the amount spent on lobbying (U.S. House of Representatives, 1995).

There are two conflicting opinions with respect to the role of lobbying in political systems. One side believes that lobbying contributes to the checks and balances of the government. It contributes not to the conventional way of the separation of powers but rather to a framework where domestic interest groups, civil society, and

the general public influence the decision-making process. In other words, lobbying allows non-governmental entities to have a voice over governmental issues (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998). It makes is vital component of the democratic participation. On the other hand, some criticizes the lobbying activity due to ethical loop wholes and granting too much power over the political influence, thus undermining the democracy in the country (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998). Lobbying has also become a contentious subject in US politics, since big industries, who the public already find them wielding unnecessarily too much power, often lobby for their own benefit, disregarding the greater public's interest.

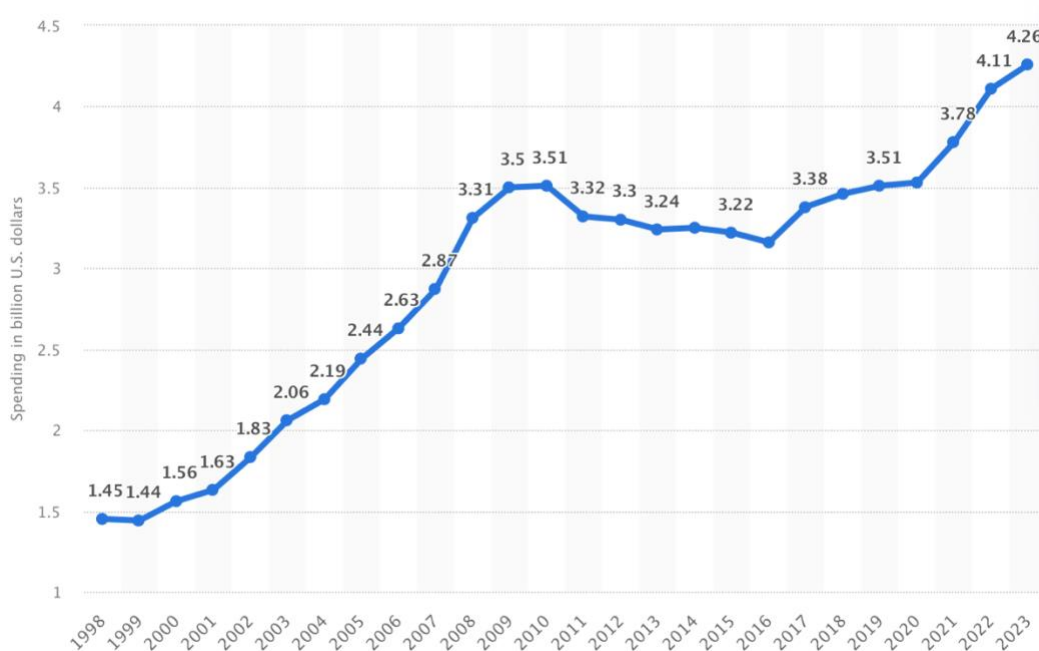


Figure 2: US total lobbying spending, 1998-2023 (Statista)

Each year, lobbyists in the US spend billions of dollars to influence policymakers and shape policy decisions. At the same time, the majority is known to be lobbying for the interest of huge, controversial industries, such as gun rights, fossil fuel companies, abortion policies, and healthcare access, while the rest advocate for the

promotion of human rights. Lobbying in the US has been an industry that has generated an average of \$3.3 billion every year since 2008 (see Figure 2). The country is harboring an average of 13,000 registered lobbyists, outnumbering the Congress members by a ratio of 20 to 1 (see Figure 3) (Statista, 2025).

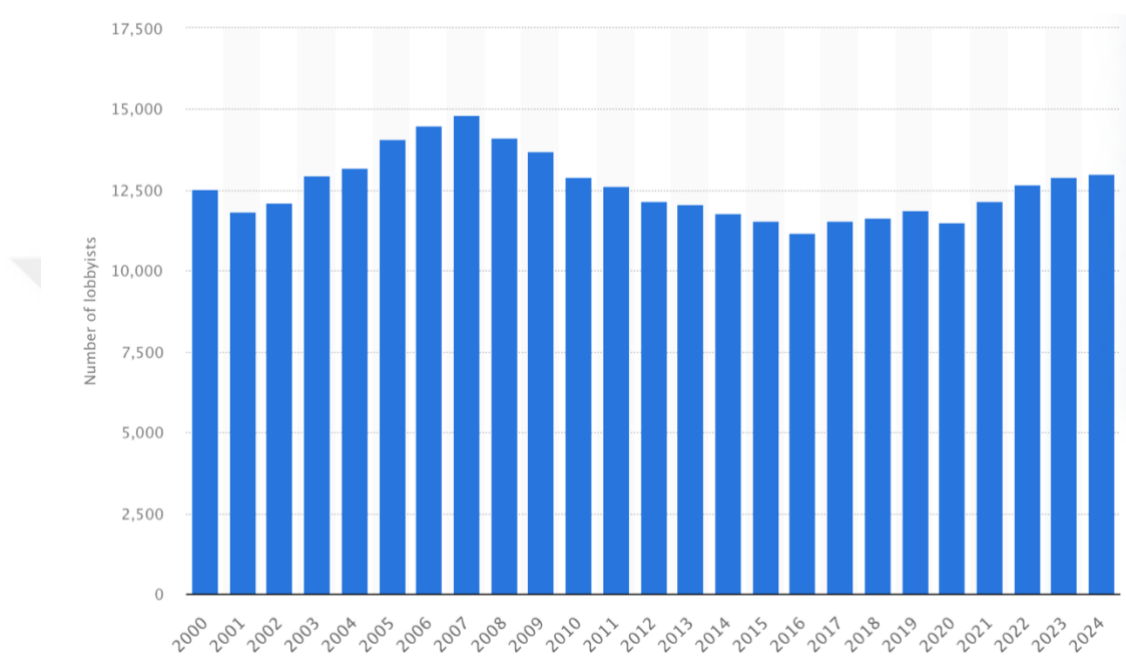


Figure 3: US total number of lobbyists, 2000-2024 (Statista)

The lobbying can occur in various degrees, from local government to presidential elections. Business groups are the top spenders on lobbying, allocating \$3.7 billion solely in 2024, whereas \$200 million was spent by ideological groups (see Figure 4). The National Association of Realtors and the US Chamber of Commerce were among the highest spenders on lobbying, allocating over \$53 million in 2024 (Statista, 2025). As part of a business group, the defense industry, allocated \$150 million in 2024 (see Figure 5). One of the most straightforward tactics used by the defense sector is making financial contributions to members of Congress. In particular, lawmakers on the House and Senate Armed Services Committees are their

key targets to lobby. They are critical players because they are responsible for drafting the National Defense Authorization Act, which determines the budget allocated to forces and procurement put forward by the Department of Defense. Political Action Committees (PACs) are another way of raising and spending money to influence elections in support of or opposition to candidates.

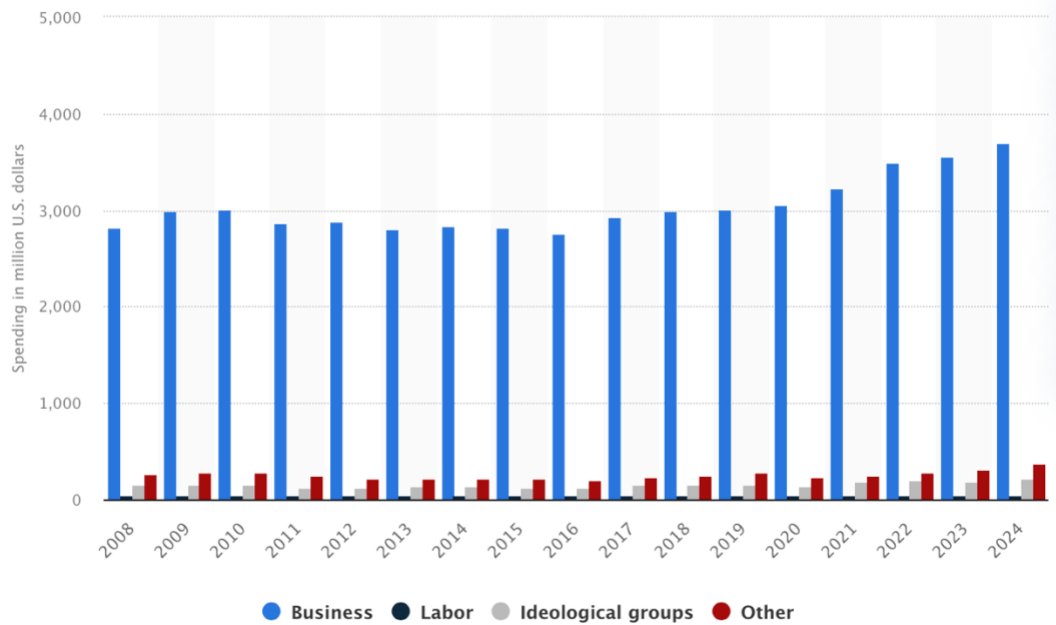


Figure 4: US Business, labor, ideological lobbying spending, 2008-2024 (Statista)

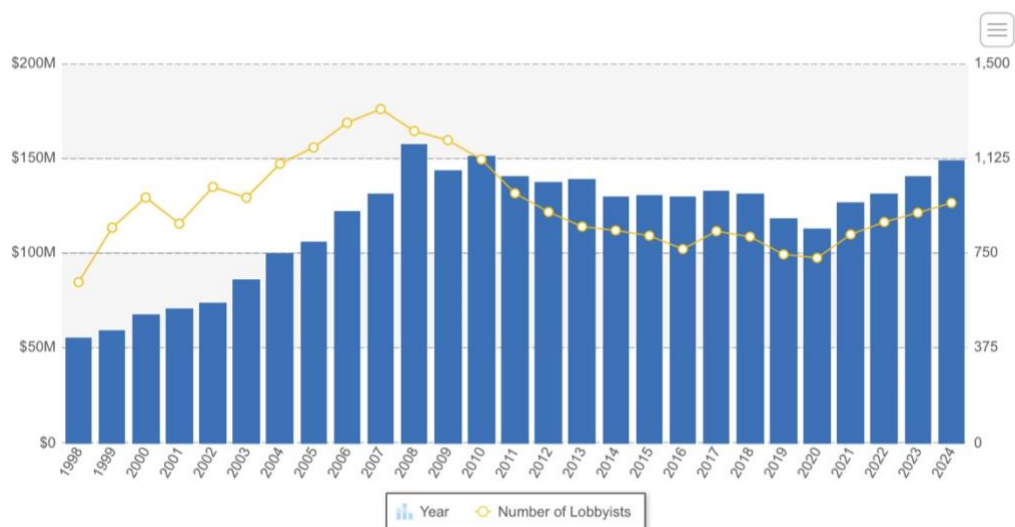


Figure 5: Annual Lobbying on Defense (Open Secret)

Most PACs are affiliated with businesses, labor unions, or specific ideological groups (Open Secrets, n.d.). For example, for the 2022 election cycle, the defense sector donated \$3.4 million to the 59 House Armed Services Committee lawmakers and \$4.7 million to the Senate Armed Services Committee. These financial contributions are expected to bear some favorable arms contracts for the industry. Almost \$2.6 million came from PACs and \$806,000 from individuals related to defense companies (Giorno, 2022).

The revolving door is the second most used tactic by the industry to lobby the government. According to the Government Accountability Office' report of 2021, between years 2017 and 2019, more than 1700 high-ranking government and military officials from the Department of Defense joined at least one of the top defense companies, averaging more than 300 per year (see Figure 6) (Government Accountability Office, 2021). In 2022, a minimum of 672 individuals who once held positions in government, the military, or Congress became lobbyists, executives, or board members for the 20 leading defense contractors. According to 2023 data, out of 708 lobbyists representing defense contractors, at least 516 had altered professions through the revolving door (Giorno, 2023).

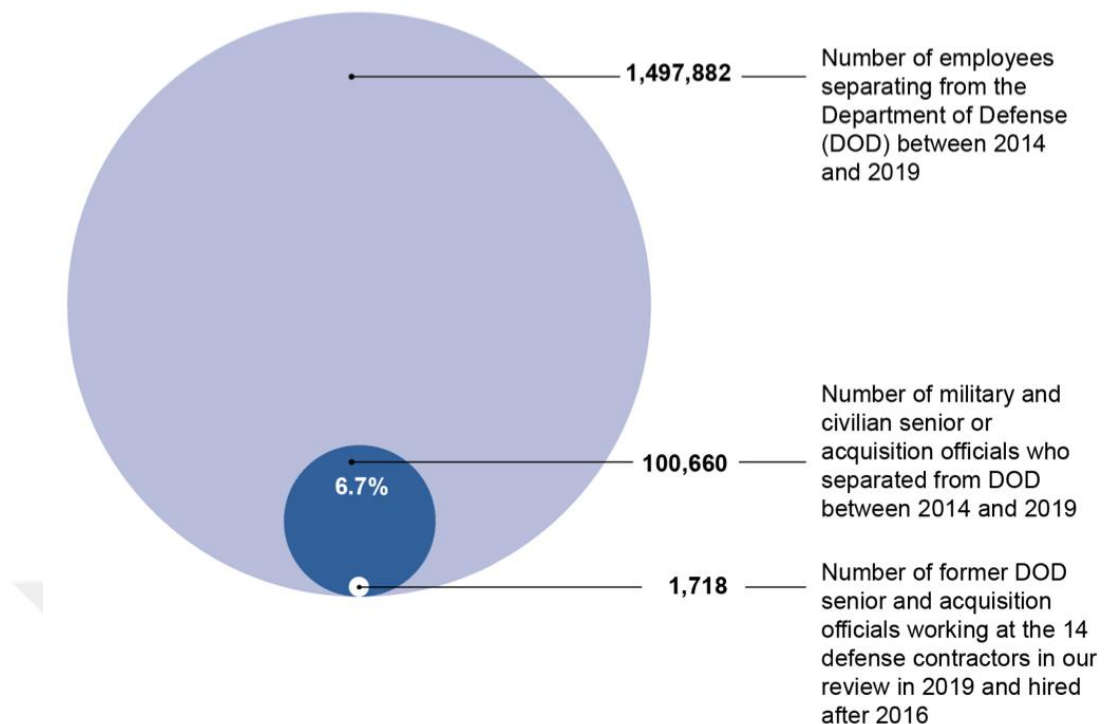


Figure 6: Number of DOD Employees Separating from the Department between 2014 and 2019 and Employed in 2019 at Defense Contractors (Government Accountability Office)

Supporters of the revolving door phenomenon defend that former military officers bring valuable expertise to the defense industry, enhancing its performance and ensuring the development of systems suited to defense needs. However, according to the report prepared by Senator Elizabeth Warren’s office, more than 90 percent of high-ranking government employees who go and work for defense corporations have become lobbyists (U.S. Senate, 2023). Their job description does not include how to conduct a state-funded projects properly, but promoting projects that would only suitable for the financial performance of their employers. In recent years, the coverage of the revolving door has expanded. Normally, retired officers used to only join the boards of the defense firms or work as lobbyists, but now it has evolved. Some has founded their own consulting companies, hired as advisors to defense startups, or work in businesses financing defense companies (Hartung & Fisher,

2023).

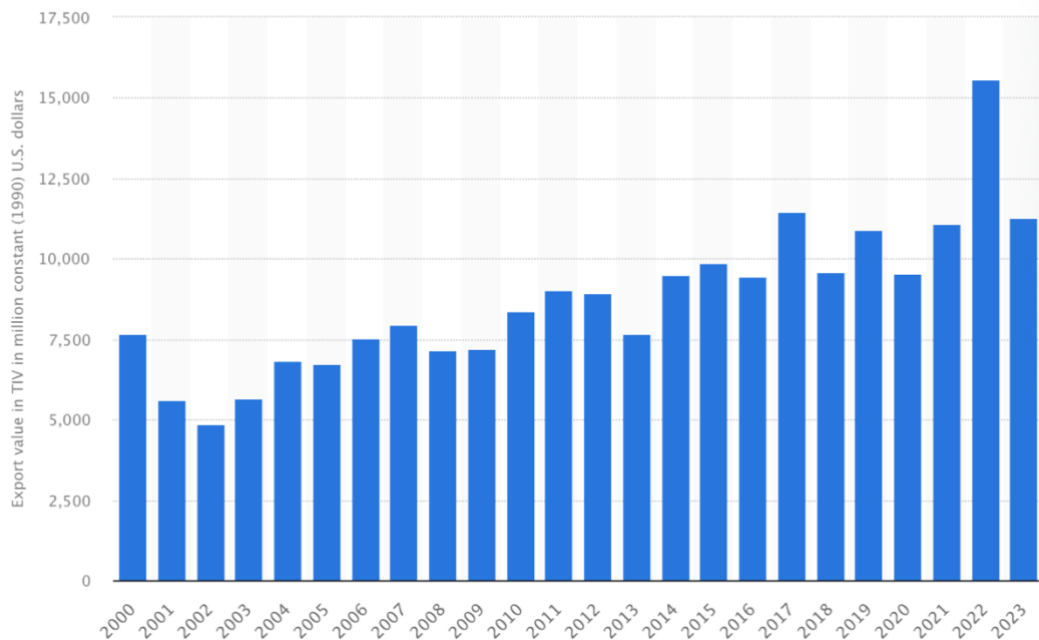


Figure 7: US arms exports from 2000 to 2023 (Statista)

The defense industry's lobbying apparatus has earned a reputation for successfully securing the benefits of the largest spending sector of the US government to acquire billions of dollars' worth of arms and any other defense article, such as maintenance, operation, training and consulting staff that they procure for themselves, their clients and beneficiaries. Thanks to the success of defense lobbying, defense companies can enjoy further expansion of investment by the Pentagon, which engages with capital markets through its Office of Strategic Capital. This initiative offers private sector partners loan guarantees and investment support, directly channeling funding to the military-industrial complex (Whitson, 2023).

In addition, the government's military aid program drastically increased due to wars

in Ukraine and Gaza. This increase represents a direct transfer of capital from the US government budget to the US defense industry to manufacture and supply arms to the needy country. Another primary source of revenue for the defense industry is foreign military sales, reaching more than \$100 billion in 2024 (U.S. Department of State, 2025). However, they have to consult on extensive lobbying efforts since this type of sales requires the approval of Congress.

Defense industry's influence has long depended on an arrangement of direct lobbying of Congress, campaign contributions, and employment in industry for former government and military personnel, constructing a complex array crawling with conflicts of interest. For civilian officials, they are the backbone of lobbying for their defense corporations. Meanwhile, for retired military officers, the way they lobby the government is less direct. They often secure positions within the industry as a consultant, drastically embedded within the politics of the Pentagon, thanks to their former occupation. They participate in the negotiation and implementation processes of arms procurement contracts, this time working alongside defense corporations.

The defense Industry's means of livelihood depends on the amount of arms sales, and it cannot sell weapons without war or conflict (see Figure 7). I am not saying the defense industry directly lobbies for war, but they lobby to the last point for the increased US military spending for national security. In 2022, the National Defense Industrial Association, a prominent lobbying organization for defense companies, warned the government officials not passing a bill on defense spending "risks signaling a lack of seriousness and competence to counter Russian aggression in the

Ukraine and Chinese actions in East Asia and the South China Sea” (Evers-Hillstrom & Mitchell, 2022, para. 20).

4.1.4 Key features of the US-Saudi Arabia relationship

In this part, I discuss the brief history of the US-Saudi Arabia relationship. After officially recognizing Saudi Arabia in 1931, the US established full diplomatic ties with the Kingdom in 1940, marked by the exchange of credentials and the diplomatic appointment of the first US ambassador. The long-lived bilateral relationship between the Kingdom and the US is rooted in several factors. Saudi Arabia’s strategic location at the heart of the Persian Gulf gives it a sphere of influence over critical maritime oil shipping routes. Next, Saudi Arabia enjoys regional leadership in the Middle East. Most importantly, the Kingdom owns the world’s second largest oil reserves ensuring its role in the global energy market. The bilateral relationship has stayed intact regardless of various challenges. Both nations share a common interest in maintaining the Gulf region’s stability, security, and prosperity while consulting each other on regional and global problems.

In recent years, their common distress over Sunni Islamist extremism and Iran’s offensive policies has brought them closer through strategic cooperation (Blanchard, 2023). Even though political turmoil and conflict across the Middle East area put some degree of strain on their ties, Saudi Arabia still has a special place in US politics because it is a powerful ally sharing an identical perspective for the region as the US, mainly about the security and counterterrorism initiatives as well as military, diplomatic, and financial cooperation. To protect the national security interests of both countries, Saudi personnel collaborate closely with American military and law

enforcement agencies. With tens of thousands of Saudi students attending American universities and institutions and countless educational and cultural exchange visits annually, the United States and Saudi Arabia also share strong cultural and educational relations.

Saudi Arabia and the US have a long history of security cooperation. Their relationship is unique because Saudi Arabia is the biggest customer of the US's foreign military sales (FMS), with over \$100 billion currently active FMS cases. In addition, despite the countless unrests in the region, the US administration has always regarded Saudi Arabia as an indispensable ally. Amid regional conflicts, for instance, the Obama administration labeled the Saudi government a significant regional ally. US arms sales and other security cooperation initiatives have persisted under congressional supervision despite some congressional resistance. It is again the Obama Administration trying to convince Congress to sell fighter aircraft, helicopters, naval ships, missile defense systems, and any other defense articles to Saudi Arabia.

		Share of global arms exports (%)		Per cent change from 2015–19 to 2020–24 ^a	Main recipients and their share of exporter's total exports (%), 2020–24					
Rank	Exporter	2020–24	2015–19	2020–24 ^a	1st		2nd		3rd	
1	United States	43	35	21	Saudi Arabia	12	Ukraine	9.3	Japan	8.8
2	France	9.6	8.6	11	India	28	Qatar	9.7	Greece	8.3
3	Russia	7.8	21	–64	India	38	China	17	Kazakhstan	11
4	China	5.9	6.2	–5.4	Pakistan	63	Serbia	6.8	Thailand	4.6
5	Germany	5.6	5.7	–2.6	Ukraine	19	Egypt	19	Israel	11
6	Italy	4.8	2.0	138	Qatar	28	Egypt	18	Kuwait	18
7	United Kingdom	3.6	3.6	–1.4	Qatar	28	USA	16	Ukraine	10
8	Israel	3.1	3.2	–2.0	India	34	USA	13	Philippines	8.1
9	Spain	3.0	2.3	29	Saudi Arabia	24	Australia	18	Türkiye	13
10	South Korea	2.2	2.1	4.9	Poland	46	Philippines	14	India	7.0

Figure 8: Top 10 exporters of major arms and their main recipients, 2015–2024 (SIPRI)

Their strong bilateral relationship made massive arms sales agreements possible. The US' biggest arms importer is Saudi Arabia (1st), then Ukraine (2nd) and Japan (3rd) follow (see Figure 8). For instance, between 2009 and 2015, the US signed arms deal with the Kingdom worth more than \$58 billion (Blanchard, 2023). The relationship got stronger after 2015 when the US declared its support for Saudi Arabia in the Yemen war. They even trained the Saudi military while providing them with American-manufactured armament, logistical backing, and intelligence in favor of their presence in Yemen. Some members of Congress have voiced their suspicion over Saudi Arabia's hands-on US arms, questioned the sincerity of the Kingdom's intentions with the counter-extremism efforts, and the overall extent to which the Saudi leadership's alignment with the US political priorities. Nonetheless, the joint focus on counterterrorism has strengthened the security cooperation between the two nations, and they have kept working closely to drain the existence of the Islamic State within Saudi borders and abroad.

With the Biden Administration, the security cooperation talks with Saudi Arabia have become a trend. They have emphasized that normalizing the dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Israel is the key to US national security. The Kingdom's initiative of exploring new partners, mainly China and Russia, has alarmed the Biden Administration, saying they must maintain their position as Saudi Arabia's principal security partner. Saudi Arabia has been negotiating formal security guarantees from the US in exchange for normalized dialogue with Israel, as well as leaning towards limiting cooperation with US strategic rivals. However, for decades, the Kingdom has taken a firm stand when it comes to possible normalization with Israel, attaching its position to the enhancement of Palestinian interests and the establishment of a

sovereign Palestinian state (Blanchard, 2024).

With the eruption of the Israel-Hamas conflict in October 2023, Saudi Arabia announced in February 2024 that “there will be no diplomatic relations with Israel unless an independent Palestinian state is recognized on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, and that the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip stops and all Israeli occupation forces withdraw from the Gaza Strip” (Blanchard, 2024, p. 2). The future of the bilateral relationship remains ambiguous, but the recent reelection of Donald Trump as the US President might reverse this ambiguity. Saudi Arabia openly encourages reinforcing the existing diplomatic ties with the US. King Salman even released a congratulatory statement mentioning “the excellence of this historic close relation between the two friendly countries and peoples”. He underlined the joint commitment to “strengthen and develop them in all fields” (Al-Mustafa, 2025, para. 1).

Saudi Arabia is determined to foster constructive relations with the Trump Administration and, at the same time, preserve its strategic independence. The Kingdom will seek this partnership without jeopardizing its essential requirements for normalized dialogue with Israel, its connections with significant powers such as China and Russia, or its political-economic agenda (Al-Mustafa, 2025). Ultimately, the collaboration between the US and Saudi Arabia might be the reset button everyone expects for the Middle East. The majority of the Arab nations will follow suit if Saudi Arabia normalizes relations with Israel. Saudi Arabia is in a strong position to maintain its leadership role in the evolving Arab world. Now is the time for the US and the Kingdom to collaborate to make a permanent geopolitical

breakthrough.

4.2 Case Study: The 2017 US-Saudi Arms Deal

This section illustrates the mechanism behind the military-industrial complex lobbying activities influencing the facilitation of arms deal, using the 2017 US-Saudi Arabia arms deal worth \$110 billion as a case study.

In May 2017, President Donald Trump started his official overseas visits, and his first destination was the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where he met with King Salman. President Trump's visit highlighted the US's strong commitment to supporting the Kingdom's security, stability, and economic prosperity. They expect to strengthen their bilateral ties in the future. The most notable result of the meeting was the signing of an arms deal worth almost \$110 billion, which made it the largest arms deal ever signed in US history (The White House, 2017). Presented as a historical moment in US-Saudi relations, the deal was a foreign policy instrument to maintain regional security, suppress Iranian animosity, create employment opportunities for American citizens, and, most importantly, "a significant expansion of the security relationship between two countries" through defense exports (David, 2017, para. 2).

According to the Presidential Executive Order released by the White House, President Trump determined that "a healthy manufacturing and defense industrial base and resilient supply chains are essential to the economic strength and national security of the United States" (Trump, 2017, p. 1). Trump also said the country can fast-respond to emergencies and national defense matters thanks to its high-capacity

manufacturing sector, defense industrial base, and supply chain. Nevertheless, with the loss of 60,000 national factories and companies with 5 million manufacturing employees since 2000, the country's capacity to meet defense needs is in danger (Trump, 2017). Therefore, Trump's presidency emphasized foreign military sales, which would eventually contribute to the resurgence of the defense industrial base—a significant pillar of the country's economic prosperity and national security.

As I highlighted in the previous sections, arms deals can be controversial when there are concerns regarding the prospective use of the weapons once the recipient country acquires them. Even though the economic and strategic gains from the arms sales to Saudi Arabia are undeniably fruitful, these sales still stir up controversy among government officials. Despite concerns from political circles, the Senate was unsuccessful in blocking the Trump administration's 2017 arms sales to Saudi Arabia. For instance, a Democratic Senator from New York, Chuck Schumer expressed his opposition to the \$110 billion U.S.-Saudi arms deal, saying "the human rights and humanitarian concerns have been well documented and are important: of equal concern to me is that the Saudi government continues to aid and abet terrorism via its relationship with Wahhabism and the funding of schools that spread extremist propaganda throughout the world" (Herb, 2017, para. 4). Nevertheless, the bipartisan resolution to prevent President Trump from signing the deal did not pass. The final vote was 53 to 47, a narrow victory (Vavra, 2017). Policy-makers feared that the potential use of these weapons would further exacerbate the war in Yemen, where the civilian casualties have already been mounting, and worried about ongoing human rights violations (Auble, 2021).

In addition to the failure of the Senate's blockade, the economic and political networks Saudi Arabia cultivated with the major American defense firms played a significant role in paving the way for this arms deal. Thus, the US's five biggest defense companies—Lockheed Martin, RTX Corporations (formerly Raytheon), General Dynamics, Northrop Grumman, and Boeing—provided 90 percent of the promised sales to Saudi Arabia (Auble, 2021). This big five contractors' team of lobbyists put much effort into Capitol Hill, scheduling meetings with critical figures in the congressional committees, and meticulously picked the relevant bills concerning arms deal and defense policies to lobby on behalf of the defense companies to secure the arms deal in 2017.

On the other hand, especially in the context of the 2017 US-Saudi arms deal, some of the lobbyists hired by the defense companies in the US are simultaneously working as registered foreign agents on behalf of the Saudi government. In other words, while these lobbyists safeguard the interests of the American defense industry (who benefit from arms exports), they also represent the Saudi government in Washington according to the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) (Dennett, 2017). This creates a conflict of interest and demonstrates how powerful the lobbying mechanism is in promoting arms sales in the US. For example, Squire Patton Boggs, a well-established K Street player, provided lobbying services to the Saudi government in 2017, the same year they signed the US's \$110 billion arms deal (Auble, 2021). This model of lobbying is dangerous because it allows lobbying firms to please multiple clients simultaneously, creating a conflict of interest. It eventually increases the chance that defense firms' lobbying will succeed. Defense contractors rewarded by the Department of Defense for the 2017 arms deal share the same lobbying firm with

the Saudi government to facilitate the agreement (Hashem & Allen, 2019).

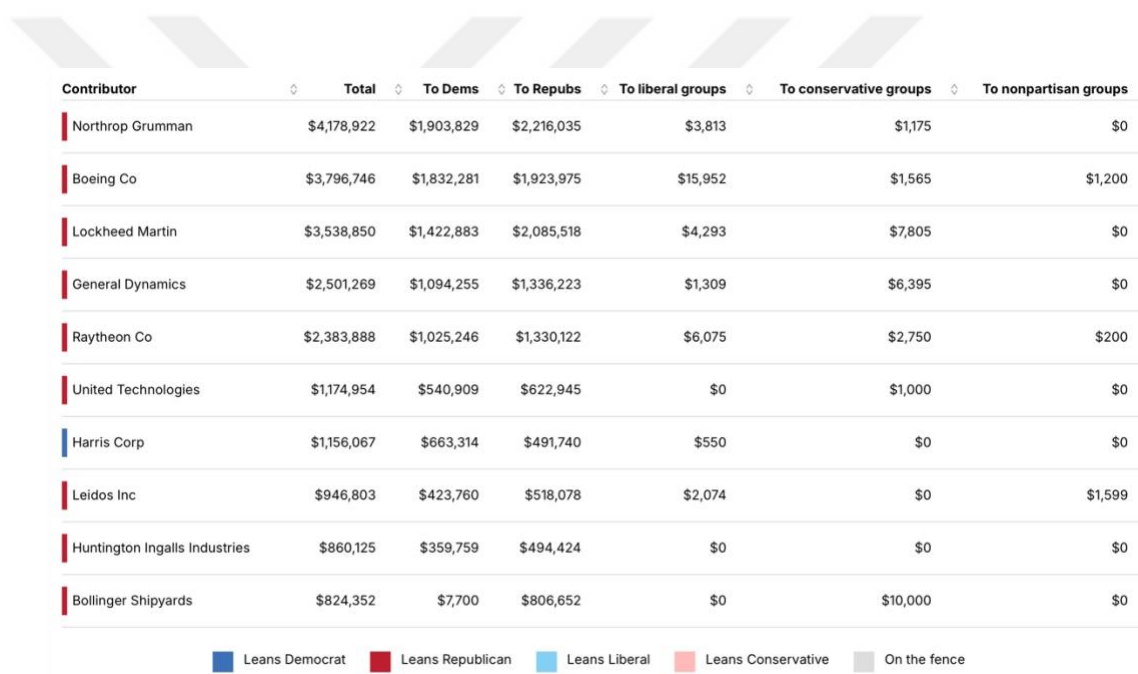
Akin Gump, McKeon Group, and American Defense International were among the lobbying firms specializing in defense policies, assisting the defense industry in influencing the decision-making process prior to the finalization of the 2017 deal (NGO Report, 2023). American Defense International's lobbying activities were closely aligned with the interests of the defense industry, lobbying against congressional resolutions concerning the war in Yemen, thereby advocating the 2017 deal with Saudi Arabia. The firm advocated for corporate interests despite civilian casualties and uninhabitable living conditions (Hashem & Allen, 2019).

Furthermore, Buck McKeon, founder of the McKeon lobbying group, perfectly illustrates the revolving door phenomenon in Washington. He shifted his profession from Congressman of the Republican Party between 1991 and 2014 to chairman and CEO at McKeon Group. When he served in Congress, he received many campaign incentives from Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman, totaling \$192,900 and \$190,200, respectively. In exchange, he prioritized their agenda inside Congress, especially during his appointment as the chairman of the Armed Services Committee (Hashem & Allen, 2019). His firm was among those advocating arms sales to Saudi Arabia in 2017 on their behalf. He received \$190,000 from Lockheed Martin and \$110,000 from Northrop Grumman for his lobbying efforts within Congress in 2017 alone (Hashem & Allen, 2019). The same lobbying firms also represented Boeing, General Dynamics, and RTX Corporations, the largest arms manufacturers in the US and the world, that benefited the most from the deal (Auble, 2021).

Saudi Arabia's war campaign in Yemen was closely intertwined with the 2017 US-Saudi arms deal. This is because the agreement not only fortified the security alliance between the US and Saudi Arabia but also intensified concerns over the humanitarian crisis that the use of American weaponry further exacerbates. In March 2015, Saudi-led coalition forces initiated a military campaign against the Iran-supported Houthi rebels, aiming to restore the legitimate rule of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi (Sharp, 2021). As the primary weaponry supplier to Saudi Arabia, the US government received backlash for the role it played in the conflict. The 2017 agreement encompassed a variety of defense equipment, such as missile defense systems, tanks, combat naval ships, radar devices, and cybersecurity systems to be used in the war (Mehta, 2017). The international media knew that Saudi Arabia would use those American-manufactured military equipment to support its war campaign in Yemen (Hartung, 2020).

The international backlash over the US's role as weapons supplier to Saudi forces in the Yemen War was a legitimate reason for the US Senate to take action to suspend the signing of the deal in 2017. However, the military-industrial complex's lobbying efforts prevailed, and the Senate's blockade attempts became unsuccessful. In 2017 alone, the defense industry allocated \$132,825,961 to lobbying, alongside hiring 836 lobbyists, of whom 648 were revolvers (Open Secrets, n.d.). Revolvers, also known as revolving door lobbyists, have a special role in the industry, compared to regular lobbyists, as they were former government employees, such as members of Congress or army officers. One contributing factor was the campaign contributions from defense companies. During the election cycle of 2017–2018, members of the Senate from the Republican Party received the highest amount of campaign contributions,

and their biggest benefactors were again top arms-producing companies, which, at the same time, enjoyed the most significant share of production percentage in the 2017 arms deal (see Figure 10). The defense industry is very meticulous when it comes to political influence. They can control the outcome of an arm sale decision within the Senate. The American military-industrial complex is a potent interest group, “using its formidable financial and political clout, the industry has grown expert in slanting U.S. policy decisions for its financial gain—often to the detriment of human rights and global security” (Washburn, 1997, p. 38).



Contributor	Total	To Dems	To Repubs	To liberal groups	To conservative groups	To nonpartisan groups
Northrop Grumman	\$4,178,922	\$1,903,829	\$2,216,035	\$3,813	\$1,175	\$0
Boeing Co	\$3,796,746	\$1,832,281	\$1,923,975	\$15,952	\$1,565	\$1,200
Lockheed Martin	\$3,538,850	\$1,422,883	\$2,085,518	\$4,293	\$7,805	\$0
General Dynamics	\$2,501,269	\$1,094,255	\$1,336,223	\$1,309	\$6,395	\$0
Raytheon Co	\$2,383,888	\$1,025,246	\$1,330,122	\$6,075	\$2,750	\$200
United Technologies	\$1,174,954	\$540,909	\$622,945	\$0	\$1,000	\$0
Harris Corp	\$1,156,067	\$663,314	\$491,740	\$550	\$0	\$0
Leidos Inc	\$946,803	\$423,760	\$518,078	\$2,074	\$0	\$1,599
Huntington Ingalls Industries	\$860,125	\$359,759	\$494,424	\$0	\$0	\$0
Bollinger Shipyards	\$824,352	\$7,700	\$806,652	\$0	\$10,000	\$0

■ Leans Democrat
 ■ Leans Republican
 ■ Leans Liberal
 ■ Leans Conservative
 ■ On the fence

Figure 9: Top campaign contributors from defense sector, 2017-2018 election cycle (Open Secrets)

According to a report published by the policy journal “Just Security,” detected that, prior the signing ceremony of the deal, “on average, senators voting against the arms sale received \$21,484 per year in campaign contributions from the defense industry compared to senators voting in favor of the deal who received \$33,716 per year”

(Goodman, 2017, para. 6). In other terms, senators in favor of signing the arms deal received contributions from the military-industrial complex %57 more than those who opposed it. Senators, who received financial backing from the defense industry, also said that if they denied the sale agreement, the Saudis would procure the weapons from another country (Goodman, 2017). The money senators receive seems minuscule at first sight. Still, it is essential to remember that campaign contribution is a recurring process, and lobbyists must maintain connections with them during each election cycle. In the long run, those financial contributions accumulate and guarantee a long-lasting relationship between the policy-makers and the lobbyists.

The US did not want to jeopardize its relationship with Saudi Arabia, so any action against the deal was unacceptable. At the same time, the defense industry did not want to lose its number one client, therefore their lobbying effort has to be durable. In March 2017, two months before President Trump visited Saudi Arabia to sign the deal with King Salman, former ambassador Gerald Feierstein, current Director of the Center for Gulf Affairs at the Middle East Institute, highlighted in an interview that pointing accusations of war crimes towards Saudi-led coalition forces, along with threatening to halt arms export to Saudi Arabia have the potential to damage the long-lasting bilateral ties between the US and Saudi Arabia (Feierstein, 2017). He also pointed out that restricting the supply of weapons would be counter-productive because Saudi forces' access to precise weaponry could impede their ability to improve target accuracy and minimize collateral damage in the war zone (Feierstein, 2017).

To conclude, the 2017 US-Saudi Arabia arms deal illustrates how the American

military-industrial complex utilizes lobbying techniques to shape the US foreign policy to align with corporate interests, despite constant criticism from the international arena and several attempts at political blockade. Defense industry, especially the big five—Lockheed Martin, RTX Corporations, Boeing, General Dynamics, and Northrop Grumman—has well-preserved connections within the Capitol Hill. They managed to strengthen these connections with the assistance of campaign contributions, revolving door phenomenon, and powerful lobbying firms, thereby create a sphere of influence over decision process of \$110 billion arms deal in 2017. Even though some groups within the Senate tried to halt the signing of this deal by pointing out that Saudi-led coalition forces would transfer the acquired weaponry to the war in Yemen, which eventually worsened the humanitarian crisis, the defense lobby's efforts prevailed. The industry justified the 2017 arms deal as it would create new employment opportunities in the country. President Trump prioritized this more than anything when he first visited Saudi Arabia. With the support of the military-industrial complex lobby, Trump signed the deal, which would reinforce, in his opinion, the US's economic prosperity and national security.

4.3 Quantitative Findings

The lobbying is a huge part of interest group politics which is a useful way to influence the decision-making process because it creates an invisible bridge between the administration in power and the interest group's desires through financial means. The lobbying is a very common phenomenon especially in American politics where the state binds everything about lobbying with a law to make it as legitimate as possible. Therefore, there is abundance of data regarding the lobbying activities the

groups engage in the US. The military-industrial complex is among the interest groups in the US resorting lobbying activities quite often to sell arms.

For this section, I present my quantitative findings in an effort to test the hypothesis. My findings are the results of the correlation analysis I run through Excel. When social scientists talk about only two variables, they generally mean the ‘correlation’ between them, represented by the symbol r , which measures the linear relationship between them. The correlation coefficient is “the measure to quantify such degree of relationship of the variables” (Senthilnathan, 2019, p.2). There can be positive, negative, or even zero correlation depending on the movement of the variables towards each other (Franklin, 2009). R , correlation coefficient, ranges from -1 to +1.

Due to limitations of time and space, I picked top five defense companies as representatives of the military-industrial complex in the US, which are Lockheed Martin, RTX (formerly Raytheon), Northrop Grumman, Boeing, and General Dynamics. In fact, they are the world’s top 5 biggest arms exporting firms (SIPRI, 2024). At the same time, they are the top 5 spenders on defense lobbying in the US (Open Secrets, n.d.). I run three separate correlation analyses. My dependent variable is the contract earnings from Saudi Arabia’s arms sales for these five firms for given years. In contrast, my independent variables are the lobbying expenditure, the number of lobbyists hired, and the number of lobbyists hired by these firms. I get the data for contract earnings from the US government’s website, the Department of Defense, where they store major arms sale archives for each month of the year. All data for lobbying expenditures, lobbyists, and revolvers are from a US-based NGO

called Open Secret.

In the first part of my analysis, I run correlations between each company's lobbying expenditures and their annual Foreign Military Sales (FMS) contract earnings in dollar basis from arms sales to Saudi Arabia for every year between 2010 and 2024. Based on my first correlation analysis, two of five companies, Lockheed Martin and Boeing, positively correlate with the amount of money they earned and the total amount of lobbying expenditure they made. The correlation coefficient for Lockheed Martin is 0,034 which makes it a weak positive correlation, whereas for Boeing, it is 0,317 making it a moderate positive correlation. These results tell that as these two defense companies' lobbying expenditures rises, so do the contract earning each year. This positive correlation likely reflects the companies' attempts to shape government decisions and policies in ways that benefit its interests. The rest of three companies, RTX, Northrop Grumman and General Dynamics, have all negative correlation between each company's lobbying expenditures and their annual contract earnings, -0,077, -0,022 and -0,168, respectively. These correlation results show that the expenditure on lobbying does not affect the contract earnings. Also, while lobbying spending goes down, contract earnings rise. This may be the case because these three firms receive an explicit guarantee from the government that they will receive contracts regardless of how small the lobbying expenditures they make.

Defense Company	Lobbying Expenditure/Contract Earning	Number of Lobbyist/Contract Earning	Number of Revolvers/Contract Earning
Lockheed Martin	0,034	0,483	0,366
RTX (Raytheon)	-0,077	0,444	0,085
Northrop Grumman	-0,022	0,312	0,302
Boeing	0,317	0,513	0,408
General Dynamics	-0,168	0,049	0,099
Trump Era 2017-2020	0,660	0,664	0,608

Table 1: Correlation Results

For the second part of my analysis, I run correlations between the number of lobbyists the defense companies hired and their annual Foreign Military Sales (FMS) contract earnings in dollar basis from arms sales to Saudi Arabia for every year between 2010 and 2024. As opposed to first correlation analysis, the coefficient values assigned to all defense companies is indicating a positive correlation. Boeing has the strongest positive correlation with 0,513 coefficient value. Between 2010 and 2024, Boeing steadily increased the number of lobbyists they hire each year.

Lockheed Martin and RTX indicates very close positive correlation coefficients, 0,483 and 0,444, respectively. Then comes Northrop Grumman with 0,312, and General Dynamic with 0,049. Even though the level of significance is various among these five defense companies, they all show a positive correlation between the two variables, the number of lobbyists and number of contracts they have been awarded.

This suggests that, in the context of US arms sales to Saudi Arabia, the personal connections and relationships cultivated by lobbyists with key policy-makers may have had a more significant impact than financial expenditures alone. Even though

lobbying is mostly about finance, the findings demonstrate that the influence derived from one-to-one interactions between parties can be more decisive in some cases. The amount of money spent on lobbying activity ensure visibility, but the personal relations between a lobbyist and a critical policy-maker secure trust, which ultimately leads to desired outcomes by the lobbying party, defense industry in this case.

The third correlation analysis aims to show the relationship between the number of revolvers the defense companies hired, defined as individuals shifting from government positions to lobbying roles, and their annual Foreign Military Sales (FMS) contract earnings on a dollar basis from arms sales to Saudi Arabia for every year between 2010 and 2024. Similar to the second correlation analysis, the coefficient results for all five defense companies reveal a positive correlation. Boeing, again, has the strongest positive correlation with a 0,408-coefficient value. Between 2010 and 2024, Boeing steadily increased the number of revolvers it worked with as it received significant contract earnings from the government. On the other hand, Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman demonstrate very close positive correlation coefficient results, 0,366 and 0,302, respectively, making them a moderate positive correlation. General Dynamics and RTX follow them with 0,099 and 0,085, which are the instances of weak positive correlation. Even though the significance level varies among these five defense companies, they all show a positive correlation between the two variables, the number of revolvers and the amount of contract earnings they have been awarded.

The third correlation proves that, in the context of US arms sales to Saudi Arabia, the

number of revolvers, former government employees transitioning into lobbyists, has a critical role in influencing the arms sale decisions to a foreign country. Revolvers bring valuable expertise to defense corporations since many are former military officers. They have well-established networks with key decision-makers involved in arms deals. While most people associate lobbying exclusively with financial influence, the results show that insider connections cultivated by revolvers with key decision-makers can be more influential than lobbying expenditure in shaping policy outcomes in some cases.

In addition to the five defense companies, I conducted a separate correlation analysis for arms sales to Saudi Arabia during President Trump's first term to support the case study (2017-2020). For this purpose, I aggregated the data for each independent variable annually from 2017 to 2020. For example, in 2017, the total contract earnings awarded to defense companies were more than \$17 billion and 5 defense firms were contracted by the Department of Defense, while the total number of lobbyists and revolvers they hired in total were 201 and 159, respectively. I did this summation for years 2018, 2019, and 2020. The results demonstrate that all three of the independent variables—lobbying expenditure (0,660), number of lobbyists (0,664), and number of revolvers (0,608)—have strong positive relationships with the contract amount of the arms deal signed with Saudi Arabia during the Trump era.

During the same era, the world witnessed another major arms sale to Saudi Arabia, valued at \$8.1 billion in May 2019. This deal was unique because the Trump administration pushed it through without congressional approval. The Saudi-led coalition's inhumane war campaign in Yemen and the US' implicit involvement into

the war through supplying weaponry sparked criticism over the sale from both Democratic and Republican lawmakers. In June, the Senate voted to halt the sale, with 246-180 votes; however, President Trump overrode their authority (Robiou, 2019). Raytheon was one of the primary contractors of the sale, and the company's spokesperson, Mike Doble, indicated that their arms sale ensures with the US's foreign policy and national security priorities (Rubiou, 2019).

First, lobbying expenditure reflects the strength of the financial side of lobbying. Higher spending on policymakers' campaigns means a more durable influence on the decision-making process. Then, a number of lobbyists pave the way for personal contact with key members of the Congress, the Senate, the Pentagon, or the Department of Defense. Finally, a number of revolvers is critical because these individuals possess strategic knowledge regarding defense policies and existing connections at the state level. The significance of these variables is especially stronger during Trump's first term, in arms deals.

In the end, the influence of the military-industrial complex in facilitating arms deals in the US is undeniable. The American defense industry consults various lobbying techniques so as to align its corporate interests with the policy priorities of the US government. Even though the correlation analysis reveals mixed results, the case study of the 2017 US and Saudi Arabia arms deal and the qualitative findings support the hypothesis. The financial expenditure made by the defense companies is not as effective as the personal networks the lobbyists and revolvers cultivate when it comes to influencing policy outcomes. These person-to-person communications grew through years of working as a government official. They later transitioned into

a lobbyist role, easing the process of influence between key decision makers and the defense industry regarding arms sales. As seen in the case study, despite various attempts by the Senate to prevent the signing of the \$110 billion arms deal due to its prospective use by the Saudi-led coalition forces in the Yemen war, the intense lobbying efforts by defense contractors reversed the situation in their favor.



CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have investigated the influence of the American military-industrial complex—particularly through its lobbying activities—on the foreign policy decisions of the United States, with an emphasis on arms sales to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. By positioning the defense industry within the broader theoretical framework of domestic politics, and more specifically, the interest group theory in foreign policy, this thesis has revealed how business interest groups with economic incentives pushing them, when institutionalized and well-resourced, are capable of influencing state behavior in foreign policy affairs. My research question broadly falls under the literature on the role of domestic politics in foreign policy-making. However, the role of interest groups in foreign policy-making is the specific focus.

In my hypothesis, I have tested whether an increase in the lobbying expenditures of the military-industrial complex has increased the arms deal made with Saudi Arabia. I have drawn upon extensive qualitative and quantitative data for the analysis. My qualitative findings, composed of historical context, policy documents, and lobbying records, have shown that the military-industrial complex is potent and influential as

an institution in the US. Thus, this makes it very successful in developing entrenched relationships with the executive branch of the government. Though originating from President Eisenhower farewell address in 1961, it still endures by becoming a self-sustained organization of defense contractors, policymakers, and military elite, forming the American politics' ultimate 'power elite.'

Through the prevalence of the 'revolving door' mechanism, the military-industrial complex has exerted influence over the country's weapon production and procurement processes and foreign policy inclinations. As many former high-ranking military officers occupy powerful positions in defense companies, their past experience as government employees gives them an advantage in navigating the lobbying process on behalf of the firms that employ them. One way they draw on is making campaign donations through Political Action Committees, or funding the publication process of think tanks so that they write reports supporting the interest of the military-industrial complex. They are experienced in who to lobby, which bill to lobby, and most importantly, how to lobby. The influence is further amplified by mass media manipulation and the portrayal of third-party interventions of the US as essential for the sake of both the national security and the internal security of the invaded state so that they can justify the approval of foreign arms sales in Congress.

The sale of weapons, especially to Saudi Arabia, has served as both an economic and foreign policy tool for US, bolstering the bilateral ties and demonstrating the superiority of US power in the eyes of other states. Despite the fact that Saudi Arabia is worst in human rights advocacy and has an inhumane presence in the Yemen War against Houthis, arms sale is still a very determinant feature of US-Saudi Arabia

relations, which is the biggest exporter of American weaponry. This means that the American military-industrial complex also encourages conflict in other countries to create a permanent arms flow. In addition to being economically rewarding, this bilateral relation is geopolitically intricate, encompassing concerns over regional stability, energy security, and human rights. Thus, it shows how capable the defense industry in the US is when it is time to disregard moral and legal concerns.

The qualitative results support the thesis's main argument, It is quite unsettling: that the military-industrial complex's lobbying efforts are crucial in promoting arms sales and influencing US foreign policy to serve corporate interests rather than the country's national interest. More generally, normative ideals and strategic needs are not always the governing elements in foreign policy decisions, especially when it comes to those concerning major arms sales between countries, corporate interest comes into prominence. Instead, they are often the result of domestic political pressure, highlighting the importance of considering the two-level game in which foreign policy does not exist by itself as one single, untouched being. In this case, domestic politics presents itself as a powerful defense corporation with an ambition to shape arms deal policy in the US. This take helps me to realize that the expanding corpus of realist literature, consisting of assumptions of states being rational and unitary actors, has been challenged, thereby highlighting the necessity of accounting for domestic actors and their needs more seriously.

Furthermore, the 2017 US-Saudi Arabia arms deal case study also verified the hypothesis. The case demonstrates the strength of the lobbying efforts of the military-industrial complex in facilitating an arms deal. Despite numerous channels

of opposition within the Senate over the prospective use of the weapons by Saudi forces in the Yemen war, defense corporations pushed the deal forward.

Moreover, when it comes to my quantitative results, I have chosen five defense firms, Lockheed Martin, RTX (formerly Raytheon), Northrop Grumman, Boeing, and General Dynamics, as representatives of the military-industrial complex in the US since it was unattainable to review every single company under the defense industry due to lack of space and time. I have run three correlation analyses for between the years 2010 and 2024. My independent variable for the first two correlations is the annual lobbying spending on a dollar basis for each of the five defense companies, and my dependent variable is the annual arms sale to Saudi Arabia, either in the form of the amount of the contract on a dollar basis or the number of contracts rewarded each year. The first two correlation analyses reveal a positive relationship between the variables for some companies, but they range from weak to moderate positive correlation. Even though there are negative correlation results, they are still weak when I compare them at the -1/+1 spectrum. However, my third correlation indicates a strong positive correlation for each defense company. As a lobbying effort, I have changed my independent variable from lobbying spending on a dollar basis to the number of lobbyists these firms have hired yearly. The more they hire a lobbyist, the more contracts these five firms receive from the US Department of Defense separately.

These results demonstrated that the engagement with a lobbying activity contributes to these defense contractors' arms sales to Saudi Arabia. However, the money allocated to lobbying cannot generate the expected results for some of the defense

firms. They can still be rewarded with contracts by the government without spending millions on lobbying. The relationship between the lobbying expenditure in dollar basis and the contract earnings vary from company to company, meaning that there is not such a strong relationship than I have anticipated while formulating my hypothesis. Maintaining long-lasting relationships with the policymakers constitutes a primary motivation for defense firms because personal connection is the most effective way of ensuring arms contracts from the government. This is due to the influential nature of the military-industrial complex. They have already infiltrated into the decision-making mechanism of the state, so the lobbying money may not be a significant tie-breaker. On the other hand, the number of lobbyists hired by defense firms bears more significance. It shows us that the one-on-one communication and relationship the lobbyists have nurtured with the policy-makers in defense politics influences the approval of arms sales to Saudi Arabia. It can be said that the effectiveness of lobbying does not rely solely on financial expenditures; rather, its success lies in the personal influence each lobbyist is able to exert. Ultimately, my hypothesis is partially verified.

As with every research, this research also has its limitations. The data on the major arms sale contracts rewarded to defense companies on the government website of the Defense Security and Cooperation Agency only goes back to 2010. There is no other source that I can consult to fill in the missing years. Even though there is abundant information regarding the content of the contracts for every month of the years 2010 and 2024, there is sometimes missing information on the primary contractor's name. Therefore, it is hard to calculate the total amount of arms sales allocated to each defense firm. As a backing for my qualitative findings, I may have conducted

interviews with the lobbyists of each of these five defense firms hired on how to lobby their interest in Congress if my residency was in the US. That would have been an excellent primary source to investigate the relationship.

Another limitation of my research is that I used overall U.S. lobbying data but focused exclusively on the Saudi Arabian case. In other words, there was no way to separate the lobbying data by country, as the source channels did not provide any breakdown for each specific country. The defense firms engaged in lobbying, but their efforts targeted the entire U.S. policy-making process, not just policies related to arms sales to Saudi Arabia. The data on lobbying expenditures and the number of lobbyists and revolvers hired by defense firms are not exclusive to Saudi Arabia; they represent the firms' broader lobbying operations. In contrast, the data on U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia are specific and exclusive.

This topic can open several doors to new possible future studies. A comparative case study would be a brilliant starting point to examine the role of the military-industrial complex's lobbying efforts on global arms sales. This comparison study can be across countries, alliances, or regime types. Someone with a comprehensive quantitative data analysis background can structure a multivariate regression analysis while incorporating control variables such as geopolitical crises, oil prices, and human rights indexes. Furthermore, my thesis focused on a particular variable: arms deals. However, future studies can explore whether lobbying by the military-industrial complex influences other foreign policy areas, such as the type of sanctions or cybersecurity and AI defense policies.

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