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The Criminalisation of War Starts Here: Activism Against Arms Industry in South Korea

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Abstract: Critical criminologists highlight how warmaking is driven by political and economic interests, often paradoxically alongside efforts to regulate warfare. As the global arms race accelerates, rising arms trade and military expenditure risk masking the immorality of war and hindering peace efforts. This paper presents a case study of South Korea, an emerging non-Western actor in the global arms market, examining how arms fairs are increasingly promoted as operational spaces where war is depicted as a benign industry that can be normalised and integrated into economic and political agendas. The findings indicate that arms fairs play a crucial role in the arms trade by allowing states and weapon producers to lawfully portray military spending as a public good, while remaining silent on the humanitarian costs of war. Furthermore, based on the focus group interview with Korean peace campaigners, the paper suggests that the growing prominence of arms fairs has led peace activists to action, despite criminalisation, to disrupt these events with the aim of dismantling the political economy supporting arms producers and architects of war, and promoting non-violence and pacification. It concludes that scholarly focus should persist in highlighting the criminogenic aspects of arms fairs as an integral part of warmaking.

'War is only a cowardly escape from the problems of peace'
- Thomas Mann

Introduction

The ongoing global arms race continues to intensify amid persistent conflicts, including genocide and warfare in the Middle East. The Ukraine–Russia war remains unresolved, while the United States is warning of a potential conflict between China and Taiwan, often citing this as justification for expanding its military footprint in East Asia. On the other hand, numerous states are exiting key humanitarian disarmament treaties; notably, countries bordering Russia—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Finland—have already left or are in the process of withdrawing from the Mine Ban Treaty. At the 2025 Summit, NATO member nations committed to increasing their military expenditure by 5% of their gross domestic product, under significant pressure from US President Donald Trump, with South Korea and Japan also being urged to follow this target. This situation is likely to exacerbate the global arms race, as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reported that 2024 has already reached the highest level of global military spending since the end of the Cold War (Tian et al., 2024).

The acceleration of global violence presents compounded challenges to those who have long advocated for peace and undertaken collective efforts to oppose war and the militarisation of the planet. While war remains a sovereign act, its socio-political foundations have undergone a profound transformation due to the evolution of international law, which enforces stricter regulations and holds states accountable through sanctions, scrutiny, and humanitarian interventions (Glanville, 2013). This development signifies a shift towards prioritising ethical considerations and civilian protection over traditional, state-centric justifications for conflict (Bellamy, 2015). For example, critical criminologists have consistently questioned the legitimacy of warfare rooted in the 'just war' tradition, which primarily relies on two criteria (Hathaway & Shapiro, 2017; Lazar, 2017; Walzer, 2006 [1977]): *Jus ad bellum*, asserting that only legitimate authorities—principally nation-states—may wage war as a last resort and with just intent, and *Jus in bello*, which defines acceptable conduct during war based on principles of proportionality and humanitarian considerations.

The 'just war' tradition is so vast that a comprehensive critique would warrant another paper. For the remit of this paper, it is sufficient to underscore Ruggiero's (2023, 269) analysis of how these principles often falter in practice, becoming 'blank behavioural rules' and 'hollow normative principles' employed to justify warfare. He argues that rather than serving as genuine preventative norms, the concept of 'just war' is retrospectively legitimised by victors, while atrocities committed by the defeated are condemned as crimes against global peace—leaving similar actions by the victors unexamined and unaccounted for (Baars, 2013; Zolo, 2020). Recognising that 'there are no just wars' in practice (Fiala, 2008) and understanding war as a socially constructed phenomenon rooted in power relations rather than moral imperatives (Ruggiero, 2005), criminologists are well-positioned to shed light on how deviant acts of 'warmaking' (Tilly, 1985)—from weapon testing and production to military spending, training, and warfare—occur.

Building on this perspective, the paper examines how states exert their power to rationalise warmaking as a benign enterprise within their political economy, particularly through four key mechanisms: legalisation, marketisation, representation, and punishment. Particular emphasis is placed on arms fairs as sites that showcase new weapons and promote the use of force as a means to achieve peace and security, functioning within the broader context of arms production and trade. This observation of arms fairs is motivated by Ruggiero's concept of 'war as carnival' (2005), as well as by a preliminary investigation into the literature, which reveals that their broader implications for militarism remain insufficiently explored. Furthermore, considering that existing research predominantly focuses on Western contexts, the paper aims to elucidate the expanding roles of emerging non-Western actors in both fuelling and mitigating global conflict and violence.

In this regard, South Korea is chosen for a case study, which is an emerging non-Western actor in the global arms trade and conflict, motivated by two main reasons. First, South Korea is a symbolic space where militarism, colonialism, the Cold War, and development intersect (Doucette, 2024; Moon, 2005); emerging from the Korean War and decades of military dictatorship, it has grown into one of the world's largest economies with substantial military expenditure, expanding its arms trade with countries engaged in conflict and violence such as Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Indonesia, Bahrain, and Thailand. However, South Korea's arms trade has so far faced limited scrutiny compared to Western countries. Secondly, South Korea has a rich history of peace activism that resists militarisation, with peace activists

deliberately challenging societal militarisation and disrupting arms industries—an area that warrants further scholarly attention. Their activism highlights gaps in the existing legal frameworks that regulate, justify, and promote the arms trade, revealing contradictions between these frameworks and pacifist approaches to peace. Moreover, the fact that this activism is often met with criminalisation warrants critical criminologists' investigation, with a focus on how dissent against state-facilitated businesses such as warmaking is targeted and silenced.

The paper is structured as follows: First, it examines theoretical discussions regarding the evolution of legal regulations governing warfare, highlighting their shortcomings in protecting life and promoting peace. It also explores how the legitimisation of warfare is often driven by political and economic interests, thereby rendering warfare a form of ordinary business. The paper then contextualises the political and social conditions that have enabled South Korea to emerge as a global arms producer. Subsequently, a case study of peace activism in South Korea is presented, focusing on efforts to disrupt arms fairs—particularly the incident involving the prosecution of peace activists. This analysis illustrates the power dynamics of resistance and criminalisation within the broader context of warmaking. The conclusion examines how criminological studies should support these efforts to reclaim justice for peace without resorting to war.

The Political Economy of Warfare: Locking Society into Violence

Understanding the diverse causes and dynamics of the global arms trade has been explored through different theoretical perspectives, each offering valuable insights into why states engage in and perpetuate arms proliferation. As many summarise (Glaser, 2000; Kydd, 2000; Willardson & Johnson, 2022), realist perspectives see it as a rational response to the anarchic nature of the international system, where states compete for power and security through the accumulation of weapons, often driven by concerns over potential threats and mutual distrust. In contrast, liberal theories emphasise the role of international institutions, treaties, and economic interdependence in potentially mitigating arms proliferation, arguing that cooperation and diplomacy can reduce incentives for excessive armament. Constructivist approaches highlight the influence of shared norms, identities, and perceptions, suggesting that the arms race is shaped by socially constructed ideas about security, threat, and sovereignty, which evolve over time. While these perspectives are pertinent for examining various aspects of arms trade dynamics, this paper primarily follows Marxist theories, which interpret the arms race as an extension of global capitalism—fuelled by the economic interests of a military-industrial complex seeking profits and maintaining dominance, often at the expense of social welfare and sustainable development (Coulomb & Bellais, 2008; Egan, 2022).

The Marxist framing of the arms trade as a capital-driven enterprise is complemented by insights from the political economy of warfare, which examines how economic interests and political power are intricately interconnected in sustaining and perpetuating conflict. It argues that warfare is not driven solely by security concerns or ideological motives but is fundamentally rooted in economic structures and vested interests (Elveren, 2019). For example, the military-industrial complex, resource extraction industries, and arms manufacturers often benefit financially from ongoing conflicts, creating strong incentives to sustain hostilities. Mills' (1956) observation on the power of elites remains pertinent, as political elites, working in collaboration with other powerful groups, may see warfare as an opportunity to consolidate influence, control valuable resources, or maintain economic dominance. This observation can be translated into criminological language as 'the crimes of the powerful' (Rothe & Kauzlarich, 2016), which refer to illegal or unethical acts committed by individuals or entities with significant social, political, or economic influence—such as states and corporations—that serve their interests often at the expense of broader social welfare and justice. These perspectives reveal that the causes, duration, and character of warfare are heavily shaped by the intertwined interests of politics and economics, framing warfare as a nexus of political enterprise and economic activity (Sbicca, 2012). The arms race further intensifies this dynamic by increasing dependence on military industries, fostering a cycle in which societies become growingly reliant on defence expenditure.

As Coe and Vaynman (2019, 342) describe armament 'is a costly measure states use to wage their disputes' instead of relying on peaceful negotiations and diplomacy. However, because military spending has growingly transformed into profiteering businesses, the military-industrial complex is 'created, protected, privileged, and subsidized by the state…without demonstrable public benefits, and without any built-in safeguards for the public interest' (Adams, 1968, 656). With profits derived from arms sales and governmental subsidies, arms producers lobby lawmakers to secure lucrative contracts while

defying accountability to the public and to those in areas such as battlefields and training ranges where their weapons are used and tested. Fichtelberg (2006, 686) critically observes that 'the ethical codes of most defense contractors do not acknowledge any unique ethical responsibilities incumbent upon these firms arising from the special nature of the goods that they produce. Rather, they invariably discuss their responsibilities towards shareholders and to the firms, subcontractors, and governments which they do business'. In the absence of effective democratic oversight mechanisms, arms production and sales are often hidden behind the guise of military secrets, while governments and corporations assert the arms industry is well 'controlled' under international law.

As warmaking becomes one of the most state-facilitated enterprises in modern societies, the production and possession of increasingly destructive weapons have come to serve as key indicators of a state's material power (Farrell, 2005). Nowadays, alongside conventional weapons, new and emerging military technologies are developed and deployed in 'degenerate wars' (Shaw, 2008), where their use often blurs the lines between combatants and civilians, exacerbating violence and complicating ethical and legal standards surrounding warfare. The presence of these weapons amplifies the relentless arms race, leading to the development of increasingly destructive systems such as weapons of mass destruction, AI, and aerospace technology, while undermining efforts for 'peace without weapons' (Lichterman & Cabasso, 2002; Wallace, 2016). Media often frames warmaking as inevitable that requires 'heroic sacrifice' (Christoyannopoulos, 2023), a narrative exploited by elites who depict military actions as delivering justice against perceived enemies (Klein, 2011). For example, acts of killing are portrayed as 'rightful punishment,' as seen in the US-led wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Yemen (Degenhardt, 2010; Dunford & Neu, 2019). These stories promote the image of war as restoring order and enforcing norms, often dismissing or justifying atrocities such as the No Gun Ri Massacre and herbicide warfare in Indochina, which are rarely acknowledged publicly and framed as 'collateral damage' (Morris-Suzuki, 2009; Oatsvall, 2013).

By contrast, the extensive costs of warmaking are often concealed and even employed to facilitate militarised adaptations that escalate socio-ecological risks. These adaptations are frequently portrayed as technological innovations within the defence sector, purportedly aimed at enhancing climate and environmental security, thereby masking their true implications. For example, new weapons and systems are showcased as contributing to net-zero targets and environmental protection, such as lead-free bullets, ESG investments in arms manufacturers, and hydrogen-powered jet fighters (Post & Le Billon, 2024). At the same time, the military and conservative think-tanks justify the necessity of increased military expenditure in the face of intensifying risks of war that arising from 'resource scarcity'. This framing of 'low-carbon green warfare', however, dangerously conceals the reality that much of military activities, from fossil fuel consumption to environmental warfare, are significant causal factors in climate breakdown and the destruction of ecosystems (often referred to as 'ecocide') (Depledge, 2023; Hwang, 2022).

In this context, the arms industry is being legally promoted and protected by states, even as, paradoxically, global legal frameworks for regulating arms trade and transfers continue to develop. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), adopted in 1998, which now forms the cornerstone of international criminal justice, and in principle, signatories of the Rome Statute may face criminal sanctions if their military actions fail to comply with international law—particularly the Rome Statute, international human rights law, and international humanitarian law. Even so, as Baars (2013) and Hamilton (2020) find, corporations implicated in armed conflicts have avoided criminal sanctions while 'legally compliant' arms exports are politically rationalised as essential for national security and economically championed as vital drivers of employment and economic growth (Cockburn, 2021). Weapons thus emerge as highly valued commodities, with profit motives fuelling war preparations that often overshadow social and ecological concerns. Consequently, substantial public expenditure and private investment increasingly target the development, proliferation, and enhancement of military capacities—an entrenched trend not only in the United States, the world's leading military spender, but also across Europe (Newlove-Eriksson & Eriksson, 2023) and Asia (Bitzinger, 2015).

In parallel, it appears that the regulation of the arms trade—despite addressing 'illicit' arms trafficking as a key aspect of the global security agenda—has largely developed alongside, rather than as a direct result of, the creation of legal sanctions against specific acts of warfare. The Arms Trade Treaty, signed in 2013, exemplifies this, as it prohibits arms transfers to parties that may commit genocide, crimes against humanity, or terrorism, while its mandate acknowledges 'the legitimate political, security, economic and

commercial interests of States in the international trade in conventional arms'. While the treaty requires states to implement due processes and safeguards for 'ethical' weapon sales, it effectively normalises arms production itself (Cooper, 2022), neglecting the arbitrary distinction between 'legal' and 'illegal' weapon use in practice. Although the Rome Statute prohibits certain acts as 'war crimes', the act of killing itself is not criminalised. In this socio-legal context, 'soldiers do not have to excuse themselves for anything, unless they refuse to kill' because 'war is the supreme expression of conventionality' (Ruggiero, 2005, 248). The same applies to arms producers and traders, whose activities are similarly embedded within this logic.

The legal protection of the arms industry extends beyond direct measures such as administrative exemptions and financial subsidies to encompass broader mechanisms aimed at suppressing dissent and consolidating its privileged position within national and international frameworks. Historically, pacifists advocating non-violence have been dismissed as naïve heretics (Ryan, 2023), portrayed as enemies' collaborators, and subjected to criminal punishment and state violence, including red tagging. During the world wars, conscientious objectors faced severe penalties, with some sentenced to death (Goodall, 2010). Today, many countries continue this trend, with objectors facing repeated legal sanctions, restrictions on mobility and employment, and social marginalisation—effectively amounting to 'social death'.[1] Punitive measures rooted in the state's monopoly on force target both external enemies and internal dissent, constituting a 'war on dissent'. As many social movement theorists observe, such tactics are employed by both authoritarian and liberal-democratic states to silence dissent by portraying protesters as threats to social stability or national security (Della Porta, 1997; Fernandez, 2008; Selmini & Di Ronco, 2019). These strategies often involve criminalisation, marginalisation, or delegitimisation of non-conforming voices, thereby undermining democratic participation and suppressing critical debate. By framing protesters as threats, states seek to justify repressive measures, silence opposition, and maintain control over dominant narratives, ultimately hindering efforts to challenge unjust power structures and promote social change.

Methodology

This paper is based on a small-scale study guided by the working thesis that arms fairs and their associated legal frameworks function as state apparatuses that reinforce the militarisation of society, while exploring how peace activists navigate and challenge these mechanisms through their campaigns. It employed a multi-method approach comprising focus group interviews with peace activists who have monitored South Korea's arms trade, alongside an analysis of legal documents and court rulings related to protests at arms fairs. As the precise size of the arms trade is not disclosed to the public for 'security reasons', media reports and government statistics were collected to illustrate South Korea's growth in the global arms market. The study also examines statements submitted by activists to the judiciary. It investigates the motivations behind their resistance at these events, the responses of judicial authorities such as police and prosecutors, their perspectives on peace, and the challenges they anticipate facing in the future. The interviews were conducted in Korean, and to ensure transparency, the English translations were reviewed and verified by the activists themselves. Where possible, data were triangulated and cross-examined to enhance their credibility.

The focused group interview was conducted with members of a peace NGO called *World Without War.* Founded in 2003, *World Without War* is a collective of peace activists that emerged as an advocacy campaign for conscientious objection to military service in South Korea. It is an affiliate of *War Resisters' International*, which promotes solidarity among grassroots anti-war and pacifist organisations, grounded in its founding declaration condemning war as a crime against humanity. Since the mid-2000s, this peace group has actively expanded its mission to oppose arms suppliers and to scrutinise their activities publicly, arguing that 'increased arms trades or an obsession with more destructive weapons' lead to the normalisation of militaristic responses to conflict and social issues.[2] The interview, conducted on 29 August 2024 with five of the eight peace campaigners who were prosecuted for their direct action at the arms fair DX Korea 2022, focused on discussing the following issues: (1) the reasons why peace activists resist the arms trade, (2) how they navigate the justice system in the face of prosecution for their actions, and (3) the grounds on which peace activists defend their peace actions against the rationalisation of warfare. The participants in the conversation have various experiences in peace activism, ranging from conscientious objection to military service to feminist peace action, disarmament, and human rights

1 See the UN Human Rights Council's report (A/HRC/56/30).

2 More information in Korean about the group can be accessed at http://www.withoutwar.org/?page_id=10658

advocacy. To protect their privacy, further details about the participants cannot be disclosed to prevent the identification of individual interviewees.

From a Country in War to a Country Complicit in Wars: The 'K-Defence' Industry in a Militarising World

Before presenting a case study of peace activism aimed at disrupting arms fairs, this section illustrates how South Korea has evolved and established its emerging position in the global arms trade, positioning itself as a 'freedom fighter' against communism and, more recently, terrorism, while simultaneously developing its arms industry as an economic enterprise. The Korean government has purportedly securitised the division of the Korean Peninsula, claiming that it is 'the only region in the world' that remains divided. While this framing is somewhat misleading—considering countries such as Ireland, Cyprus, and others (Smetana & Ludvík, 2019)—its core message is clear and compelling: against the backdrop of the Korean War, the country must remain continually prepared for war should the 1953 Armistice Agreement be broken. The overarching message is that war could occur at any moment; therefore, South Korea's survival depends on maintaining strong military capabilities to counterbalance North Korea's weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear warheads (Hwang & Hwang, 2024).

Soon after the Korean War, South Korea strengthened its military alliance with the United States over the decades, extending its security and defence policies to position itself as a 'freedom fighter' against global communism beyond East Asia. Under Park Chung-hee's military dictatorship, South Korea sent over 300,000 soldiers to participate in the US-led Many Flags campaign against the Viet Cong, despite domestic anti-war opposition (Kwon, 2020). Kim (2009) notes that both South Korea and North Korea missed opportunities for reconciliation after the Korean War due to US and Soviet intervention, while repressive regimes in both states committed violence to maintain societal control. The South Korean government has historically demonised civilians as North Korean spies, justifying violent repression in incidents such as the Jeju April 3rd Incident, the Bu-Ma Democratic Protests, and the Gwangju Uprising. Following democratisation, Roh Moo-hyun's administration established transitional justice commissions to investigate past human rights abuses and foster reconciliation, primarily focusing on atrocities committed during military regimes. However, these efforts were limited to addressing domestic wrongdoings before 1987, neglecting ongoing state violence linked to militarism after democratisation, including forced displacement related to the expansion of US and Korean military bases and South Korea's war crimes in Vietnam during the 1970s (Han, 2005).

Under a civilian-led government, South Korean military personnel—now in new uniforms but maintaining their existing influence—are positioned to collaborate with arms producers to capitalise on opportunities arising from domestic and global military tensions. This partnership enables them to justify ever-increasing military expenditure and to develop, produce, and export more weapons worldwide. Against the backdrop of the fragile security situation on the Korean Peninsula, a significant portion of South Korea's economic resources has been allocated to military capabilities, making the country one of the top 10 military budget spenders and the ninth-largest arms exporter globally (Tian et al., 2024). The country's commercial approach to maintaining military strength became more apparent following the establishment of the Defence Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) in 2006, which functions as a governmental control tower overseeing weapon testing, procurement of munitions, arms sales, and research and development in the defence sector.

South Korea's rapid growth in the global arms market is demonstrated by its increasing sales figures. Projected to reach 20 billion dollars in 2024, the country's arms exports have nearly tripled from 7.3 billion dollars in 2021. As of 2024, it is known that South Korea has signed arms sales agreements with twelve countries, including Indonesia, Poland, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Norway, Romania, and the Philippines. In 2025, the newly elected Korean president Lee Jae-Myong pledged to expand the country's arms industry—known as 'K-Defense'—with the goal of becoming one of the top four arms exporters worldwide. South Korea's arms exports include a range of products—from conventional munitions and policing equipment such as tear gas, water cannons, and grenades, to advanced heavy weapons like the K2 Black Panther tank, K9 Thunder self-propelled howitzer, T-50 Golden Eagle jet fighter, and Hyunmoo ballistic missile systems. Furthermore, leading Korean defence firms—such as Hanwha, Korea Aerospace Industries, Korean Air, and LIG Nex1—have partnered with international companies to develop cutting-edge aerospace weapons and technologies, including unmanned fighters, drones, and

ballistic missiles. In March 2025, Hanwha Aerospace has signed a contract with the Romanian government to establish a factory for the production of K9 self-propelled artillery, expected to be operational by 2027. This marks the first time a Korean arms manufacturer has engaged in local production within a foreign country.

At the same time, the Korean government has been proactive in the proliferation of 'ethical' arms trades. By signing the Arms Trade Treaty in 2016 and also as a member of the Wassenaar Arrangement, the country has positioned itself distinctively as a responsible and legitimate state in the global theatre of arms control, in sharp contrast to its northern counterpart, often referred to as a 'rogue state', which exhibits irregular and illegal behaviours in weapons testing and production that threatens global peace and security. Under the pretext of deterring North Korea, South Korea has expanded its military bases and installations, routinely hosting large-scale military exercises—such as 'Ulchi-Freedom Shield'—involving U.S. Forces Korea and other partner countries, where new munitions and military technologies are regularly tested (Kim, 2023).

War Begins Here! Activists Challenging the Normalisation of War as a Benign Industry

Against this backdrop, this section presents a case study illustrating how arms fairs have become central to the arms trade and are exploited as functional sites that rationalise weapon production and proliferation while promoting war as 'entertainment'. It demonstrates how arms fairs are legally protected (legalisation), how war experiences are (un)represented (representation), how weapons are showcased as market commodities (marketisation), and how dissenting voices are criminalised (punishment). Additionally, as previously mentioned, the case study explores why and how peace activists organise actions to disrupt arms fairs and expose the state's capacity to suppress dissent through criminal prosecution.

War Begins From Here: Arms Fairs as Playgrounds for War Merchants

Many countries have a long history of hosting arms fairs, where the word 'fair'—commonly associated with festivals—belies their purpose of showcasing weapons and military systems capable of effectively destroying potential enemies. Notable international arms fairs include DSEI in the UK, IDEF in Turkey, MSPO in Poland, and IDEX in the UAE. These events serve as major platforms for displaying military technology, facilitating the global arms trade, and fostering networks within the defence industry, with both international and domestic manufacturers exhibiting their latest products, innovations, and experiments.

In South Korea, various arms fairs are held with governmental support and subsidies. They include KADEX (defence), ADEX (land forces equipment), Aerospace & Defense Exhibition (aerospace technologies), KPEX (policing), and MADEX (maritime defence) under the Defense Acquisition Act that promotes arms trade, with the former two promoted as the largest arms fairs in Asia. In these arenas of weaponry, optimistic terms such as prosperity, defence, security, and public safety are widely employed. Governments, arms producers, dealers, and academic and think-tank professionals are brought together, allowing new trends in warfare and military technologies to be observed and examined. It is reported that tens of thousands of visitors, including overseas delegates from governments and militaries as well as arms manufacturers, attend these events.

In those arms fairs, visitors are invited to engage more closely with warfare by playing war games, meeting military experts and scientists, and participating in entertainment events. The situation regarding the deployment and use of Korean weapons in war and atrocities is shrouded in a veil, while the government denies arms exports to war zones and mass media advertise economic gains through arms deals. However, some evidence has been found by NGOs indicating that Korean weapons have been used in battlefields and human rights violations although these instances have largely remained out of the public eye. While South Korea has resisted transparency, particularly in 2024 by not disclosing its arms trade information in the UN Register of Conventional Arms, media reports and government briefings have celebrated 'successful arms exports' globally. As a result, Korean-made weapons have been sold and potentially deployed in various contexts, including streets, battlefields, and sites of war crimes and genocide, revealing the arbitrary and problematic nature of the so-called 'ethical' arms trade. Despite a ruling from the International Court of Justice on Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine, many Korean corporations, underlying the government's silence and implicit consent, have continued partnerships with the Israeli military and government.

Notable companies involved include Korea Aerospace Industries, Hanwha Systems, Hyundai Rotem, HD Hyundai Heavy Industries, and Poongsan, which produces cluster munitions (World Without War, 2023).[3]

This is why peace campaigners regard arms fairs not only as integral components of the arms trade but also as symbolic sites of resistance against militarisation and war preparations. On the necessity of disrupting the arms industry through the peace movement, Interviewee C emphasised that

> 'weapons made in Korea are used in other countries, far removed from our daily life, resulting in fewer opportunities for critical reflection on weapons beyond perceiving them as merely sophisticated and expensive toys'.

Building on this perception, one interviewee described their actions at arms fairs as aimed at 'breaking the silence', stating that these actions 'directly compel socially harmful activities like arms sales' and that 'secondary effects can be generated by drawing public attention to these actions' (Interviewee C). Adding to this point, Interviewee A stressed:

> 'At first, I was pondering how important it is to conduct resistance actions against arms expos in the context of monitoring the arms trade. After all, a fair is an event, and opposing the fair itself won't stop arms trades… Now I see that events like arms fairs publicises the arms trade to the public, so I believe that demonstrating our actions directed at these events holds significant meaning'.

Positioned in public spaces outside battlefields, they make weapons highly visible and accessible to visitors. Recently, arms fairs have increasingly been designed as 'family-friendly' theme parks, offering children and parents the chance to 'play' war games, explore new military vehicles and drones, learn about environmentally friendly and advanced technologies, and take pictures acting as soldiers (saluting, posing with guns, etc.). Paradoxically, while these activities create a sense of 'remoteness' from war and violence for ordinary visitors—who are often not the buyers—they tend to omit critical discussions about how these weapons are ultimately deployed, against whom, and for what purposes, thus systematically remaining silent on their real-world human costs and consequences. Peace activism and protests at these events, with a larger goal to transform a war-dependent economy, aim to expose the unseen consequences of weapons and counter the war economy. Consequently, they have launched various campaigns, including resistance actions against arms fairs, solidarity events such as public talks, research initiatives, and special day actions like the Global Days of Action on Military Spending (GDAMS). These 'breaking the silence' efforts are particularly important in highlighting peace voices within society, especially amidst media narratives that tend to neutralise the destructive nature of weapons with words and metaphors (Flusberg et al., 2018). In this regard, Interviewee E underscores the unfairness experienced by both victims of war and visitors to arms fairs:

> 'Well-crafted narratives surrounding employment and economic profits from the arms trade are fundamentally unjust because such accounts undermine the lives of people and ecosystems in the areas where bombardments occur'.

Their views are supported by an examination of the design and outcomes of arms fairs, whose success is primarily measured by market value, more specifically surplus. In these expos, no programmes are arranged for victims and survivors of war to testify to the consequences of deadly weapons before arms traders, while young children are invited to touch and test different firearms. Exhibitors at the fairs are subsidised by the government, and host organisations, led by high-ranking veterans, receive approximately USD 225,000 in government funding per event. Spending large amounts of public money, the 2022 DX KOREA, held amid the Russia–Ukraine War, hosted 60,000 visitors and delegates from 40 countries, and generated profits of USD 7.5 million, which were solely enjoyed by the host organisations rather than the public. This number was only reported later by the Korean newspaper Hankookilbo on 19 May 2024, amid disputes among the host organisations of DX Korea over the sharing of profits. The increasing profits from arms fairs can be understood within the wider context of Korea's arms sector, which became the fifth largest manufacturing industry in 2021 for the first time in its history (Park &

3 See Footnote 46 in the latest UN Special Rapporteur's report submitted to the UN Human Rights Council (A/HRC/59/23) https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session59/advance-version/a-hrc-59-23-aev.pdf

Won, 2025).

Criminalising Protest? Interference with Business vs. Freedom of Expression

If legalisation, representation, and marketisation are mechanisms that the state employs to directly rationalise arms trade, criminalisation is the mechanism that is used to create a landscape favourable to arms trade. The criminalisation of peace actions at arms fairs exemplifies this point. During the 2022 DX KOREA, eight anti-war activists carried out the 'tank action' by consensus, with two climbing onto a tank and performing Irish folk songs with a violin and guitar, symbolising resistance and peace amidst militarised spaces. Interviewee D described 'the tank action' as an artistic protest aimed to deliver an anti-war message by disrupting the event and drawing attention to the horrors of militarisation. This action was inspired by Disrupt Land Forces, an Australian peace group, whose member in his 70s read a poem from atop an armoured vehicle during the 2021 Land Forces exposition in Australia.[4]

(c) World Without War

Interviewees recalled that the direct action at the arms expo aimed to increase 'the visibility of our action to spread our anti-war message more widely (Interviewee B)' and to 'do something I could do well, which in this case was playing a violin (Interviewee E)' because:

> 'Arms fairs gloriously boast how effective the displayed weapons are and…they create a surreal place where the truth—that these weapons are killing people and destroying habitats—is forgotten. I wanted to resist this space artistically' because 'arts, at times, helps us see the unseen, feel the unfelt' (Retrieved from defendant's statement).

In this regard, they evaluated the action as successful, but they did not foresee the prosecution that followed. Arrested after five minutes of action, the eight activists were eventually indicted for the crime of 'interference with business'. In South Korea, this law has been widely used to restrict and punish labour strikes and other forms of direct action, effectively oppressing the freedom of association and collective activities and create the 'chilling effect' (Porteux & Kim, 2023; Watts, 2019). For the activists, the prosecution came as a surprise because they believed their action 'was designed to minimise the risks of even a police investigation' (Interviewee D).

The legal dispute between the prosecutor and the defendants centred on two key criteria: the justifiability of the motive behind the action and the nature and extent of damage incurred. As for the former, the

4 A video footage is available at https://fb.watch/uqCbQytZH0/.

defendants emphasised their cause as well as procedural injustices that arms fairs. One of the defendants

> 'It is not our first time to enter these arms fairs, and we have taken various approaches to raise our oppositional voices. We have appealed to the arms fairs organising committees to contemplate on who are targeted by weapons sold in these spaces, to where this endless arms race is bringing us, and precarious situations faced by those who suffer from the arms trade… We never heard back, so we decided to step closer to them to have our voices heard more clearly' (Retrieved from defendant's statement).

The prosecutor sought a total of 17 million Korean Won in fines, but after conflicting decisions in the first and second rulings—where the first trial resulted in an acquittal and the second in a conviction—the Supreme Court sided with the defendants and discharged them from criminal charges. The final decision from the Court was based on the reasoning that (1) the 'tank action' lasted only 11 minutes at one of the 1,350 booths, (2) it was unlikely to have exerted enough force to disrupt operations, and (3) excessive restrictions on protests could infringe upon the right to freedom of expression, which requires appropriate protection. This court ruling is significant not only because it represents a precursor case that dismissed the excessive criminalisation of dissent by the judiciary but also because it opened new opportunities for future actions aimed at stopping arms fairs.

Equally, however, the same ruling presents some dilemmas, as reflected by the interviewees. Reflecting on the final judgment, Interviewee D said, 'We were found not guilty not because our action was justifiable, but because it was not physically harmful'. This suggests that if their actions at the arms fair had caused physical damage or significant disruption, they could have faced criminal sanctions. In this context, the lawsuit reveals critical issues regarding justice in South Korea, particularly that legal protection for peace activism remains dependent on the absence of harm. Since the Supreme Court did not examine the criminogenic nature of arms fairs and arms trades— which was central to the campaigners' motive for their actions— it remains unclear whether future tank actions or other collective peace activities at arms fairs will be similarly protected. In other words, the lack of legal protections for peaceful activism—despite the legal, political, and economic support for arms fairs as part of the arms trade—continues to be a risk factor that may silence and limit peace and disarmament efforts.

Nevertheless, the interviewees pledged to continue their activism and efforts towards the pacification of societies. Interviewee D observed that 'arms fairs and the government's policies that generate demand for the arms trade are, in themselves, sites of societal education' by discouraging critical questions such as 'how many casualties have been and will be caused by these weapons' and 'how ordinary people might disrupt a society organised around the profit of the arms trade'. Interviewee D interpreted arms fairs as a means to 'domesticate the oppressed'—using Freire's (1972) terminology—and, in response, regarded their activism as a form of peace education. Recently, these peace activists have launched a bigger campaign group called *Stop Arms Fair South Korea*, together with other human rights and grassroots peace campaigners. The expansion of the group, with a more diverse membership, would also support additional activities such as monitoring South Korea's arms trade, signing petitions to ratify humanitarian disarmament treaties, and advocating for bans on supplying weapons to governments that are perceived to violate international law and norms.

Furthermore, it should be highlighted that these actions are grounded in the principle of non-violence, which Interviewee A underscore:

> 'I hear people will fight with knives if lacking guns, and with fists if lacking knives, as if war is inevitable. However, I believe that because we have been educated differently in societies, war will not occur in our contemporary world if no guns exist. So, I think it is important to envision that the abolition of weapons will lead to the abolition of wars'.

This reflects a broader belief, shared by many scholars and pacifist critics (Galtung, 1996; McGarry & Walklate, 2019; Lummis, 2023), that modern society is already capable of resolving conflicts peacefully rather than through war. Although the focused group interview did not thoroughly address this point, it can be suggested that criminalisation should be reoriented towards facilitating the pacification of society, thereby opening new possibilities for the role of criminal justice—and criminologists—in de-escalating war and violence. Moreover, as Kauzlarich (2007) notes, rather than entrenching the binary of

'ally' and 'enemy' within war logics in pursuit of peace, it may be more productive to explore historically grounded restorative approaches to addressing wars and associated injustices. Such efforts should focus on deconstructing the political economy, whose expansion is driven by the proliferation, normalisation, and perpetuation of warfare, while simultaneously empowering social movements and forces that disrupt this vicious cycle of violence (Kaldor, 2008; Amster, 2019).

Discussion and Conclusion

Following the previous analysis of arms fairs where warmaking is normalised and also resisted, this section further explores how a criminological perspective on war can advance scholarly critiques and activism against the arms industry. From a pacifist viewpoint, as articulated by Ruggiero and others, war is the ultimate crime, yet it remains a legitimate enterprise prioritised over peaceful, non-violent alternatives. At this point, a criminological discourse on war intersects with critical perspectives from peacemaking and peacebuilding criminology, critical military studies, peace studies, the sociology of war, green criminology, and peace activism. This multidisciplinary dialogue would create opportunities for democratic challenges to the legitimisation and normalisation of the war industry. While not an exhaustive list, several measures—discussed during the interview—are proposed to reframe war as a criminal conduct: decriminalising and challenging harmful narratives and social stigmas that portray peace activists as 'betrayers', 'spies', or 'traitors'; ending arms production and decommissioning arms industries within the framework of a 'just' transition; and confiscating profits gained by arms manufacturers, treating them as criminal proceeds to be redirected towards societal pacification—beyond conventional 'peacebuilding' efforts limited to war-affected areas—and promoting divestment from the arms industry.

South Korea provides a compelling illustration of this point. Once a country devastated by the Korean war on the verge of the Cold War, it has re-born as one of the major arms traders in the world, both competing with and collaborating alongside Western countries in weapon production and development. Its military expenditure is projected to continue increasing in the near future, as the 'K-defense' industry is heavily subsidised by the government as a next-generation sector, supported by 'cheap' production costs. Political oppression, including militant and criminal responses to peace activism—often justified by national security concerns in the context of the 'special' division situation—plays a crucial in creating a 'business-friendly' environment in the defence sector while deepening economic dependence on war. Although South Korea claims its political legitimacy over North Korea based on liberal values and democratic procedures, it paradoxically contravenes these principles through its arms trade, which is framed as legally compliant and necessary to deter evil forces in the world. This approach serves to obscure the kleptocratic nature of the arms industry. Despite obstacles, peace activists have paved pathways to disrupt arms trades, thereby connecting themselves to a wider global peace and disarmament movement. Following Carter's (2005) view, these non-violent direct actions embody participatory democratic principles, emphasising the essential need for transparent and accountable control over warmaking.

This study's theoretical and practical contributions can be summarized as follows. It enriches sociological and criminological insights into war by highlighting how arms fairs conceal the criminogenic facets of the arms trade—an area that remains underexplored. While trade contracts are negotiated privately, these fairs publicly display weapons and technology, effectively masking the act of killing under rhetoric of peace and security. They function as forums where arms producers, officials, brokers, academics, students, and buyers converge—often hosting 'family-friendly' social events in front of weapons to obscure moral and legal concerns about the goods traded. Recognising war as the crime of crimes prompts critical questions about criminalising 'spoilers of peace'—those who wage and profit from war—rather than 'spoilers of war' like peace campaigners. Despite legal challenges, the active efforts of civil society organisations to monitor and challenge the arms industry—through campaigns such as name-and-shame, solidarity actions, and boycotts—are crucial for laying the groundwork to broaden pacifist scholarship and practice. Such activism raises vital questions about how criminology, as an academic discipline, can further support social movements that uphold the right to life and promote global disarmament. Engaging with peacebuilding theories and activist-research methods within critical criminology could bridge the gap between academia and civil society, fostering pathways towards a war-free world (Belknap, 2015).

Furthermore, reframing 'war' as a crime—while advocating for a shift from punitive to restorative justice—offers a critique of militarised notions of punishment and highlights the need for justice- and peace-oriented alternatives. Promoting social gatherings such as 'peace fairs' instead of arms fairs provides

spaces for dialogue, understanding, and solidarity. Recalling Harvey (2000), these alternative spaces can nurture hope by serving as sites where new social and political possibilities are imagined and realised. They enable collective agency and resistance against oppressive structures, offering opportunities to envision and build emancipatory futures, challenge dominant narratives, and inspire transformative change towards a more just and peaceful society.

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