

Hold your weapons – are BAE so bad?

In response to Lida Mirzaii's "We have to be realistic about military research", [Peter Campbell](#) goes one step further, and says BAE are not the bad guys we make them out to be

Sunday 3 February 2008

In response to Lida Mirzaii's piece, "We have to be realistic about military research" *Peter Campbell* goes one step further, and says BAE are not the bad guys we make them out to be.

Life is full of moral dilemmas. In an age where almost any decision regarding change can be morally objected to, from the banning of foxhunting to the decision to allow same sex couples to adopt, here at last is an easy one. The news that York receives £8m of funding from BAE Systems and others to aid research in the electronics and computer science departments is seen by some as shocking and by others as immoral. Ultimately, however, we should see it as encouraging. While many arguments may be raised against BAE, there is actually a lot going for it, particularly from an economic perspective.

Firstly, the company is a major employer, with thousands of families' dependant on the income they receive from BAE. Within the UK alone, BAE offer jobs in engineering, project management, customer support, commercial, procurement, finance, and human resources to name but a few. At a time when graduate employment has started to drop, a company that offers vocations in such a wide variety of areas within an expansive industry is surely to be encouraged.

Secondly, the company contributes a huge amount to the UK economy in two different ways. The tax paid by both the company and by its employees amounts to a fearsome sum, injecting valuable money into the economy, and the substantial exports of goods, largely to Australia, Sweden and the US, helps Britain's balance of payments, thus creating a greater in-flow of foreign currency.

Thirdly, their partnership in Airbus, the aeroplane-manufacturing giant, helps prevent a US-owned monopoly of the industry.

But finally, and most importantly, they fund technical research throughout the UK, thus enabling the UK to remain within the premier league of industrialised nations. Now why is this important? Surely we cannot stop other nations, such as China, South Korea or India overtaking us economically? Would it not be better to adopt a moral approach and pay the industrial "league-table" consequences? Well actually no. With our international status comes an automatic audience, such that we can exercise diplomatic power in negotiations and can have our views heard in order that we might then contribute to global matters in an effective manner. Thus, were we to let our position internationally decline by not researching or updating our systems we would then have a diminished power of persuasion on the international stage. Those of you who are concerned about the Arms Trade might be interested to consider under which set of circumstances we would be best placed to help stop the illegal arms trade, as well as the deeply sensitive issue of human trafficking.

All this can therefore lead us to the conclusion that investment into research by a company of such economic standing can only be viewed as good. Whether or not you morally object to the work of BAE in supplying Britain and America with arms, to take a stand against research that enables Britain to remain

one of the most developed nations makes no sense at all.

To those of you who would doggedly take the moral high ground, I say this: Do not let this issue become the new sweat shop story. Whether it is to design new landing gear for aeroplanes at Heathrow or to develop communications devices for British troops struggling to restore peace to Helmand province, the work of BAE is not the evil that is often portrayed. I would even go so far as to say that it is an inherently good thing to have York University funded to research in order to aid Britain's industrial standing and therefore international attention.

Investment of this magnitude is important, nay vital in establishing York University's place within our national infrastructure.



8 comments

Graeme

3 Feb '08 at 11:47 pm

Finally, someone is willing to point out the wider issues surrounding the Arms trade and BAE.

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Dan Taylor

5 Feb '08 at 12:07 pm

Exactly; it's a well written piece. The arms-trade is vital to the British economy and research programmes at a University level. I'm suprised you managed to get this one in Nouse...

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David

10 Feb '08 at 11:32 am

So it's ok to support an immoral company as long as it's good for the economy? Right. Glad you've cleared that one up.

This article relies on an unstated and implausible assumption; that what's good for Britain is what's objectively good and should be the only standard by which a company is measured. In fact, British interests may well not match with world interests. In particular, I submit that the interests of people around the world in not having their families or themselves killed by weapons developed by BAE outweigh the relatively trivial interests of a few graduates in getting a job with BAE.

I'm sure it's quite easy to be pro-BAE when you're unlikely to be on the receiving end of any of the weapons they've developed. And this doesn't just encompass those that British troops are fighting, don't forget that BAE have also supplied Saudi Arabia; a regime with an appalling human rights record.

To answer your question, the circumstances under which we would be best placed to tackle the arms trade and human trafficking would be those whereby we helped channel graduates into organisations that directly target these problems rather than into unethical companies like BAE who, if they did help us solve any of these problems, would do so only as a by-product, and who, I believe, propogate rather than diminish human suffering overall.

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Chris Northwood

10 Feb '08 at 3:52 pm

First off, BAE Systems no longer own Airbus UK, they sold it to EADS last year.

David: No, it's okay to support BAE because they don't just focus on military applications, but also on things with civilian applications.

Also, at the end of the day, unfortunately the state of the world is that we need the ability to defend ourselves. If we stopped all military investment in the UK, we would either have to rely on external countries (which is never really wise, look at why the EU is developing Galileo instead of relying on American GPS) or let ourselves fall behind in military hardware, possibly leaving us vulnerable to unknown states such as North Korea or China.

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David

10 Feb '08 at 9:11 pm

Hi Chris, thanks for your response. I'm afraid I'm not convinced though. BAE do produce technology with civilian applications as well but a company that is only half-bad is still not an ethical company and is not worthy of association with this university. I also doubt that the university imposes any serious restrictions either on what the money it currently invests in BAE goes towards or in what uses the research it does on behalf of BAE is put to. I think it is safe to assume that to at least some degree the university is aiding BAE's military applications as well as its civilian ones.

More generally, it's a kind of playground mentality that the only way to avoid attack and have influence is to be bigger and stronger than the opposition. Translating this to the world stage is unduly pessimistic. If we do accept this then we resign ourselves to always having to bow before the US since there is no realistic prospect of our ever equalling their military strength, whatever action we take. The situation with China will soon be the same. I prefer to hope that we will always stand up to other nations where we believe them to be wrong and back up our words with reason rather than weapons. Similarly, I hope that other nations will always stand up to us when we are in the wrong, regardless of how strong or weak we are at the time. Perhaps this is idealistic but I hope not. Progress is being made and people across the world are beginning to see not only that might does not make right but that the mighty can be defeated through non-violent means and that even the weakest nations and individuals can make a stand against tyranny.

I believe that the issue should be considered in the absolute terms of how much military hardware is produced globally rather than the relative terms of how the UK's position in relation to China is affected. An increase in military investment in the UK (such as in BAE) will only lead to an increase in military spending in China and enable the Chinese government to more easily justify this increase to its citizens (this may in fact mean that the UK's position in relation to China is not improved but as I've said I don't believe this is the key issue). In both countries those who would benefit from more worthy investments will lose out; this would be particularly serious in China where poverty is more widespread than in the UK and where it's even more certain that provision for the poorest in society should be a much greater priority than military investment.

The only real way to help curb the trend in worldwide arms spending is to set an example by taking responsibility for what we do, irrespective of what other nations are doing, and cut down our own military investments. You are probably right that an immediate cessation of all military investment could be disastrous but a more gradual climbdown would not be. Discouraging association between universities and arms manufacturers seems a pretty reasonable first step. Universities are, after all, meant to be places of learning, aspiration and understanding whereas the production of weapons seems symptomatic of the belief that the possibility of understanding between people is already doomed to failure. I think it represents a rather sad state of affairs where reducing rather than increasing our arms spending (and thereby freeing up money to combat problems in our country and worldwide) is at all controversial. I think it is something that needs to be done to avoid a global arms race and a situation of tension and a constant threat of war that would be detrimental to everyone. Ultimately, either we live together or we die together and every weapon produced pushes us closer to the latter of those two options.

P.S Sorry that this response is so ridiculously long; if I was a better writer I'm sure I could have made my points much more succinctly. Secondly this is by no means all directed at Chris, or the writer of the original article (which this poorly-written diatribe probably rivals in length) but is intended as a more general response to the issue.

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Ben

10 Feb '08 at 10:55 pm

David- If we only encouraged graduates to join so called "ethical" firms then there would not be much choice. Most banks for example invest in rather dubious schemes. What is best for the British economy is best for all of us. If the economy fails the we all suffer in an economic crash. If British economy is doing well we all reap the economic benefits in terms of low inflation, low unemployment and good standard of living. You may be happy to choose who you work for but others are less fortunate. Sadly there will always be a need for some forms of millitary weapons so why not use that market to benefit our economy and our lives.

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Chris Northwood

11 Feb '08 at 1:13 am

David: Thanks for the response, it is insightful (if only Nouse had Slashdot style moderation). I agree with most of your points about the current state of the world generally with the playground style mentality, however unfortunately that's the world we live in and if the UK as a sole agent decided to break from that mentality we do stand open to potential weakness. However, we don't always use our military might as the only bargaining chip, for example strategic alliances with words (e.g., NATO, the EU, the UN, etc) rather than weapons are also very effective at ensuring our safety. I do not believe that in this current world climate that this alone will be enough, and we need to have the ability to defend ourselves if need be. To take your point about the US - yes, they could attack us and probably win, but we would quite likely be able to deal significant damage to them as well, and certainly not make it a walkover to them.

As for your point about military spending, I do agree - why are billions being spent on companies such as BAE, when our frontline troops in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq don't have basic equipment? We were in a global arms race (the cold war), but we finally realised that it wasn't a good thing, stopped and made peace with each other. The race now has new entrants however, and we shouldn't be complacent with our allies.

The problem with ethics and morals is that it is unique to each person. My current housemate works in an animal research lab that batch tests anti-cancer drugs on rats. She obviously has no ethical problem with this job, but the people who picket her workplace do. At the end of the day, the University academics aren't going to research areas that they feel they can't ethically or morally, but who are we to dictate other peoples ethics?

As a Computer Science student, one of my lecturers does do research for BAE. He mentioned it in a lecture once. What was he researching? A system for distributing toilet waste around the new A380 superjumbo to ensure the best possible weight distribution.

I'm not claiming that BAE is ethical, however I do think that the terms "ethical" and "unethical" do get banded around a lot, and, like many things in the real world, ethics is not a black and white matter, but more of a spectrum. Take for example the recent Viking Raid charter - Gildan didn't let employees unionise. Some condemned them for this action for being unethical, but as far as the spectrum goes in my eyes, this is only a fairly light shade of grey.

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Adam Alcock

22 Jan '12 at 11:05 pm

I wrote a similar piece last year in The Yorker. It is an unfashionable thing to say, but you are quite right. BAE is a company like any other. If we all behaved morally all the time we wouldn't eat chocolate bars, drink coffee, dress in affordable clothing, drive cars, use the internet and so on. Weapons are essential to peace in real world. BAE plays a crucial role in this process of negotiation. Without companies like BAE we wouldn't have been able to prevent genocide in a number of rogue states.

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