

The Question of Dealing with the Cross-Border Proliferation of Small Arms

Background

Small arms (including revolvers, self-loading pistols, rifles, carbines, submachine guns and light machine guns) are distinguished from other conventional weapons by portability. From the Cold War era to the present day underground economy, the small arms trade is a lucrative industry (the Small Arms Survey places global small arms sales at \$4.3 billion US annually between 2006-2009) that exploits regional conflicts for economic gain. Of the 875 million small arms estimated to be in global circulation, approximately 2/3 are in the hands of private bodies. Apart from civilian casualties, the global proliferation of small arms contributes to terrorism, the use of child soldiers in violent conflicts, regional instability, and the weakening of national governments as non-state actors monopolize military resources. The destabilizing effects of small arms persist across generations because the weapons are portable, durable and low-maintenance, undermining long-term stability in areas such as West Africa, Latin America and Central Asia.

The issue of cross-border proliferation of small arms has surfaced at the United Nations in recent years with international recognition of the disproportionately large destructive capacity and potential of small arms. Some of the largest exporters of small arms (which include the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council) face responsibility for supplying arms, directly or indirectly, to conflict zones. A lack of transparency by weapons exporters such as the Russian Federation, China, Pakistan, Belarus, Iran and South Africa make it difficult to assess the extent to which terrorist organizations and other non-state actors are receiving state support. Once small arms fall into the hands of non-state actors that are unaccountable to international or domestic laws, regulating their distribution is an even larger challenge.

The problem of cross-border small arms proliferation

Though the uncontrolled cross-border proliferation of small arms is largely facilitated by illegal activities, virtually all illicit small arms were originally legally produced or acquired but later fell into the hands of unintended recipients. Regulation would thus require the separation of illicit from licit arms transfers to develop protocols for exchanges between state or non-state actors that control the distribution of small arms without constraining the legitimate market. For the purposes of this resolution, it is most useful to examine factors contributing to small arms proliferation from the perspectives of exporting and receiving agents:

Exporters

- *Inconsistent export policies:* lax export policies or enforcement of export restrictions allow manufacturers to export to conflict zones and organizations known to commit human rights abuses either directly or through private weapons brokers. Highly polarized conflict zones such as the Great Lakes region in Africa are actively armed by neighboring states and international agents with vested interests in the outcome.
- *Diversion in the arms transfer chain:* exports from state to non-state actors are the most vulnerable to expropriation or abuse. Without due diligence by export nations, complicit

transport companies and local governments allow arms to be diverted from the end recipient or re-exported.

- *Leakage from stockpiles:* domestic and international bodies gain access to large quantities of small arms as stockpiles in Eastern Europe and the Middle East from the Cold War are liquidated or improperly disposed of. Once in the hands of domestic criminal organizations, illicit small arms quickly reach the international black market and can help fuel conflicts around the world such as the recent conflict in Libya.

Recipients

- *Unstable and fragile states:* weak national authorities in unstable states cannot control the flow of small arms into the country as non-state actors and terrorist organizations flourish. Following violent conflict or radical popular movements, transition periods rapidly deteriorate when combatants are not properly disarmed, demilitarized and re-integrated. In the context of the Arab Spring, the international community is particularly concerned that regional instability and uncertainty will allow the proliferation of small arms to hinder long-term restructuring of the Middle East.
- *Smuggling from neighboring countries:* criminal organizations leverage lax domestic arms controls in neighboring countries to transport arms into countries with stricter regulations. In a similar manner to failed states, the influx of small arms signals the deterioration of conditions in middle-income countries such as Mexico, where 87% of arms seized originate in the United States that are smuggled across the border in small installments.
- *Porous borders:* in both of the above cases, ineffective border controls facilitate the international spread of small arms through weapons smuggling, clandestine shipping and transfers between non-state actors.

International initiatives

The 2001 UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons, reconvened in 2006, developed a Programme of Action that focused on regulating individual aspects of arms exports and trafficking. Among the proposed initiatives are measures to regulate brokering, stockpile management, weapons disposal, small arms transfers, and record keeping in addition to commitments by the international community to offer assistance in achieving these objectives. Ensuing initiatives include the 2005 International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons that committed signatories to marking weapons and maintaining records and the 2005 Group of Government Experts convened that strengthened brokering legislation, international cooperation and information sharing. A discussed Arms Trade Treaty would set common protocols for export, import and transfer of small arms, yet genuine progress on the non-proliferation of small arms has been hindered patchwork agreements and inconsistent international standards.

A particularly contentious issue during debate for exporting and importing nations will be holding state and non-state actors accountable for small arms transfers; despite consistent lobbying by African nations to limit small arms sales to non-state actors, major exporting nations have either vetoed or abstained from such measures. Delegates from African nations and other conflict regions such as the Middle East are expected to be heavily involved in debate and drafting resolutions, as

will exporter nations such as the United States, Russia and South Africa. When considering their position on small arms trade, resolving this impasse will require delegates to identify and balance unique strategic security concerns against economic or political interests. To limit access to small arms, possible solutions may pursue export restrictions for arms shipments to specified state or non-state actors (ie. terrorist organisations); others may strengthen of weak links in the global arms transfer chain through re-enforcing transportation security or end-recipient certification to prevent small arms from being misappropriated. Re-enforcing these restrictions will require increased international transparency and cooperation through monitoring of small arms transfers with verification protocols and support for weaker states to control the proliferation of small arms.

Sources

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