

Committee: Disarmament & International Security

Agenda Item: Enhancing International Mechanisms to Curb the Illicit Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Conflict Zones

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Introduction

The illicit trade and trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALW) is one of the most enduring and detrimental factors in fuelling instability in current modern conflict settings. And those weapons; small, lightweight, and often cheap, are increasingly easy to smuggle across borders and hide among the civilian population. Consequently, they rapidly fall into the hands of armed groups, violent criminal enterprises, and terrorist players who use them to sustain violence and exert control. In too many conflict-affected areas, the proliferation of illicit SALW generates tensions, prolongs hostilities, and significantly complicates peace negotiations. Civilians, especially children and youth, are the most at risk as daily life is increasingly defined by insecurity and fear. Humanitarian access is limited, displacement increases, and weak governments are either unable to effectively protect their populations.

The world has been trying to tackle this mounting threat for over two decades now under various frameworks and accords. Instruments like the UN Programme of Action (PoA), International Tracing Instrument (ITI) and Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) look to regulate legal weapons trade, enhance national controls and limit the flow of illicitly transferred weapons into conflict zones. But those are still big holes, despite making gains. A serious number of Member States have insufficient border control, inadequate law enforcement, corruption and the growing professionalism of smugglers. In other cases, non-state actors, such as private firms, foreign intermediaries or even state-allied groups, may be involved in facilitating the provision of arms to conflict zones, further complicating accountability issues. Without effective monitoring, transparency, and cooperation between states, these international tools cannot fully achieve their intended impact.

Given these difficulties, the global community must redouble efforts to combat SALW trafficking. Countries require more-effective mechanisms for sharing information, tracing weapons, managing stockpiles and assisting regions that are too under-resourced to secure their borders. Delegates should consider why these weapons are in such demand, how they are being transported across borders and what kinds of solutions might be practical in different parts of the world. By understanding the roots of this issue and working together, it becomes possible to reduce violence, protect civilians, and build more stable conditions for long-term peace.

Definition of Key Terms

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW): Weapons that are easy to carry, like pistols, rifles, and small machine guns.

Illicit Trafficking: The illegal movement, sale, or transport of weapons from one place to another.

Conflict Zone: An area where fighting, war, or violence is happening

Arms Trade Treaty (ATT): A UN agreement that sets basic rules for how countries can legally sell or transfer weapons.

UN Programme of Action: A global plan that helps countries control the spread of small weapons and stop illegal trafficking.

Border Control: The security measures used to watch and protect country borders to stop smuggling

Stockpile Management: How a country stores, checks, and protects its weapons so they don't get stolen or trafficked.

Non-State Armed Groups: Groups that use weapons but are not official armies.

Tracing: Finding where a weapon came from, who owned it before, and how it travelled.

Corruption: When officials or people in power take money or favors to allow illegal actions, such as weapon smuggling.

Major Actors Involved

Russia

Russia is one of the most important producers and exporters of small arms. Although they mostly trade their weapons legally, some weapons end up in rebel groups and terrorist organizations through illegal channels. Russian weapons appear in conflict zones such as Syria, Ukraine, and parts of Africa. Additionally, Russia has easy access to armed groups all over the world due to their strong ties, and this increases weapon movement. Therefore, Russia can make illegal transfers easier.

United States

The United States has the largest legal arms industry in the world. They are one of the biggest exporters of small arms to partner Member States with their reliable supply. However, some exported weapons get stolen or sold on the black market such as the ones given to allies that have ended up in rebel groups, especially in the Middle East. Since there is a large domestic production, the tracking of every device gets quite difficult.

China

China is a significant manufacturer for affordable weapons around the world. Some of these weapons are bought legally, but later diverted to conflict zones. China's weapons are especially popular among Middle Eastern and African armed groups since they are easy to acquire, and cheap. Additionally, China's weak tracking system for armed devices makes smuggling weapons easier.

Ukraine

Ukraine has become a major hotspot for SALW flows as a consequence of wars. Considering the fact that Ukraine has been at an ongoing war since February 2014, massive amounts of weapons are being imported at that ongoing war. Some weapons get stolen or illegally trafficked by armed groups which operate independently and spread those weapons across borders. Since the control of the government weakens; black markets grow, seizing the opportunity. This creates a risk that weapons leave Ukraine and end up in other regions.

Türkiye

Türkiye is located at the heart of Middle Eastern and European trade routes. They share borders with Iraq and Syria, which makes them a transit country for smuggling weapons between regions. Moreover; the amount of refugee flows makes Türkiye's border controls more difficult, which increases weapons' movement between regions.

Syria

Syria having long wars makes it the world's largest destination for illegal trafficking of weapons. During the war, multiple Member States have sent Syria a numerous number of weapons to different fighting groups. Due to the fact that there are so many weapons, tracking them becomes almost impossible. Weapons get distributed between rebel groups, gangs, and terrorist organizations. A significant number of those weapons moved to Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Türkiye. Syria has extremely strong black markets due to the instability in the region.

Iraq

Iraq having decade-long wars has left a variety of untracked weapons. The weapons from past conflicts never get collected, resulting in rebel groups smuggling them. The border control of Iraq is way more puzzling than regular borders because of the region's large deserts. Furthermore, corruption of the government during war periods makes it chiefly easier to smuggle weapons in Iraq's large deserts. Many Member States have previously sent weapons to Iraq, some of which have leaked out for security matters.

General Overview of the Issue

The illegal trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) is one of the most damaging factors contributing to prolonged, violent, intractable 21st-century armed conflict. SALW includes pistols, rifles, machine guns, grenades, and missile systems that are portable. They are easily concealed, inexpensive to transport, and easy to use. For this reason, many actors in theaters of armed conflicts use them, from rebel groups to militias, terrorists, criminal organizations, and occasionally, national armed forces who lose track of their caches.

This is not a new trend. After the Cold War, millions of weapons left behind or in poor storage made their way to the black markets and subsequently, battlefields in Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans, and Southeast Asia. Over the years, weakened national security forces, corruption, and increasing instability in regions have led to a lack of protection to prevent SALW from getting into the hands of those who shouldn't possess them. Elevated demand, however, but non-state armed groups meant that illicit networks flourished. Therefore, the problem of SALW trafficking is one that permeates beyond war-torn nations but across borders and regions.

There are many layers to the issue. Economically, SALW trafficking is an underground booming enterprise; traffickers and groups either sell SALW and make a profit, or upon arrival, acquire resources (oil, minerals, transportation routes) through use. Sociologically, populations living in vulnerable environments either purchase or accept SALW to defend themselves against aggressors or with the false hope that the SALW can provide safety through self-defense. Politically, the intersection of weak institutions and corruption, combined with poor border integration, makes it easier for traffickers. Geographically, extended borders - many of which are unmanned, mountainous, or desert areas compounded with coastlines - make it difficult to survey vast areas of access for SALW. Culturally, in nations where SALW are deemed signs of protection, honor or increased stature through subordination or violence, demand increases.

Where illicit trafficking of SALW is concerned, possible actors are both state and non-state, armed groups, criminal enterprises, international bodies, etc. Yet each region has different problems where illicit trafficking is concerned: Africa/Middle East has lax border enforcement, so arms cross like it attempts restocking in ongoing fight efforts, Latin America has countless organized crime enterprises who value firearms above all else, Southeast Asia has a few insurgent groups who are able to take advantage of already established smuggling routes and Europe has black markets of weapons from those stockpiles no longer viable from previous war efforts. Thus, solutions range from specific regional circumstances to cross-border enforcement, better stockpile management, legal developments, and cooperation from regional entities to more. Illicit SALW trafficking can be alleviated with international realities like the UN Programme of Action and the Arms Trade Treaty, but these international realities are applied inconsistently and not acted by supportive enforcement so while on an international level are beneficial, sub-regional and regional understandings make more sense with international realities as guiding factors.

Timeline of Important Events

Date:	Event:
1965-1989	Weapons supplied during the Cold War eventually ended up in proxy groups and circulated on the black market.
1990s	Post-Cold War conflicts in Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East
15 November 2000	UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime opens for signature
20 July 2001	UN Programme of Action (PoA) on SALW

3 July 2005	UN Firearms Protocol becomes effective
2 April 2013	Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) adopted by UN General Assembly
3 June 2013	ATT opened for signature
24 December 2014	ATT enters into force
2015-Present	States, regional organizations, and NGOs have worked to curb illicit SALW trafficking through capacity-building, stockpile control, legislation, and border security, though effectiveness varies across regions.

Related Documents

1. UN Programme of Action (PoA) - 2001
2. International Tracing Instrument (ITI) - 2005
3. Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) - 2013
4. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2117 - 2013
5. UNODC Firearms Protocol - 2001
6. Small Arms Survey Annual Report

Past Solution Attempts

International efforts to combat small arms and light weapons trafficking have emerged over the decades. The UN Programme of Action (PoA) was created in 2001, encouraging states to implement stockpile management, marking and tracing, border control, and legislation at will. The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) was passed in 2013 (in effect 2014), with legally binding agreements for state parties to regulate arms transfers only if diversion to unauthorized non-state actors is assessed as likely; unfortunately, many of the world's top exporters are not parties. The UN Firearms Protocol came into force in 2005, criminalizing the illicit manufacturing and trafficking of firearms and facilitating international cooperation for prosecution and law enforcement, which is a far-fetched step, however, in many countries. The African Union (AU), European Union (EU), Organization of American States (OAS), and other regional organizations have SALW programs that seek to determine better legislation, stockpile security, and border control. In post-conflict situations, weapons from former combatants are collected through Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR programs), although this requires long-term efforts for successful reintegration.

Possible Solutions

One major solution would be to strengthen the border controls and to encourage citizens to cooperate regionally. Weak and unprotected borders are the biggest reason why small weapons move into conflict zones. Improving the security of borders would reduce the flow of illegal weapons. These security measures can be taken by the usage of extended tools such as scanners and databases, in order to identify the hidden weapons more effectively. Additionally, a strong security bound between Member States who share a border would make it harder for weapon traffickers. Support from international organizations such as INTERPOL would also strengthen the cooperation across borders. Also, early-warning systems would help identify the tracking routes before weapons reach armed groups.

Another solution would be to improve stockpiling security, marking, and tracing. Since there are so many poorly secured military stockpiles, they are a major source of illicit weapons. Improving physical security would prevent theft and smuggling. Regular inspections and updated inventory systems would contribute significantly to the security of weapons.

Useful Links

1. “More Publications.” *United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs*, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/publications/more-publications/>.
2. “International Crisis Group.” *International Crisis Group*, <https://www.crisisgroup.org>.
3. “Arms Control.” *Amnesty International*, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/arms-control/>.
4. “Arms and International Humanitarian Law.” *International Committee of the Red Cross*, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/arms-and-international-humanitarian-law>.
5. “Illicit Firearms Trafficking.” *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, <https://www.oecd.org/conflict/illicit-firearms-trafficking.htm>.
6. “Security and Firearms Industry Overview.” *Michigan State University GlobalEDGE*, <https://globaledge.msu.edu/industries/armaments/security-and-firearms>.
7. “Arms.” *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/topic/arms>.
8. “United Nations Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA).” *United Nations*, <https://www.unroca.org/>.

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“Firearms Protocol.” *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, United Nations, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/firearms-protocol/index.html>.

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“Programme of Action on Small Arms (PoA).” *United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs*, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/convarms/salw/programme-of-action/>.

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“Firearms Trafficking.” *Europol*, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime-areas/europol-in-action/firearms>.

“Arms Trafficking – Research.” *RAND Corporation*, <https://www.rand.org/topics/arms-trafficking.html>.

“Silencing the Guns Initiative.” *African Union*, <https://au.int/en/flagships/silencing-guns-2020>.

“Arms Trafficking Analysis.” *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/arms-trafficking-and-organized-crime/>.