



Stopping the Destructive Spread of Small Arms

How Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation Undermines Security and Development

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Introduction and summary

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons is an immediate security challenge to individuals, societies, and states around the world and an enormous hurdle to sustainable security and development. Small arms fuel civil wars, organized criminal violence, and terrorist activities. They also undermine multimillion dollar development programs and other assistance to fragile states. Fragile and failing states should be of particular strategic interest to the United States because even small insurgencies, if unchecked, can erupt into larger civil wars and possibly destabilize entire regions. In some cases fragile and failing states can also become bases for terrorist groups directly hostile to the United States.

In many conflict zones small arms and light weapons are the weapon of choice, the main instrument of death and destruction, and are often used to forcibly displace civilians, impede humanitarian assistance, prevent or delay development projects, and hinder peace-keeping and peace-building efforts. When conflicts end or abate small arms often remain in circulation, which may lead to additional violence and suffering since fighting can resume or conflicts may erupt in neighboring regions. In nonconflict areas small arms may be used in criminal violence or may be used in homicides, suicides, and accidents. And they are frequently the primary tools of terrorists bent on sowing chaos and discord.

The weapons can exact a staggering toll. For example, in January 2010 narco-traffickers armed with assault rifles massacred 16 people—mostly teenagers—attending a birthday party in Ciudad Juarez on the U.S. border. In November 2008 roughly two dozen terrorists from Lashkar-e-Taiba with AK-47-type assault rifles, 9 mm pistols, and grenades killed nearly 200 people and wounded 350 in Mumbai, India.

Approximately 875 million small arms are in circulation worldwide, and only about a third are in the hands of legally constituted security forces. Because small arms are simple to use, durable, and easy to conceal they are especially prone to misuse, and their misuse directly and indirectly affects hundreds of thousands of people and severely undermines sustainable development in scores of countries around the world.

As we'll show in this report, the Horn of Africa exemplifies the challenges the proliferation of small arms and light weapons pose for sustainable regional security and development. Somalia is the quintessential failed state that illustrates the cost of small arms and light weapons proliferation and the challenges of recreating the conditions for sustainable

development in a heavily armed environment. Despite numerous internationally sponsored peace conferences and billions of dollars in assistance, much of Somalia remains engulfed in civil war and has become a breeding ground for international terrorism.

The insecurity also spreads across borders. In neighboring Kenya (a close ally of the United States), armed violence is common in the pastoralist areas of the northern and northeastern regions of the country. Access to guns has also exacerbated urban crime and political violence in Kenya.

But small arms and light weapons are not only a problem for poor countries. Mexico is an example of how small arms can plague a medium-income country. Small arms are widely used there by organized criminal groups involved in the drug trade and kidnapping. Their use in Mexico has led to large numbers of homicides, undermined local authority, and greatly increased the cost of security for Mexican citizens. The violence is fed by a stream of readily available and powerful weapons from the United States—Mexico's main source for small arms. At the same time, the U.S. government is spending hundreds of millions of dollars to help the Mexican government combat arms trafficking and criminal violence.

A wide body of international and regional agreements and initiatives has been developed to tackle small arms proliferation, and national small arms policies, programs, and standards vary from country to country. The United States has wide-ranging small arms laws, regulations, and policies, and is often hailed as the “gold standard” for comprehensive policies and practice concerning the transfer, management, and control of small arms and light weapons produced, maintained, and exported within its borders.

But even though the U.S. government has sophisticated laws, regulations, and controls for the legal arms trade, permissive gun ownership laws and lax supervision of certain gun markets have made the United States a significant source of illegally diverted guns, especially in Mexico and other countries in Central America.

The Obama administration has ample opportunities to shape a new and more assertive U.S. position on small arms, but it must navigate the complex domestic political realities of small arms in the United States. A new approach should include greater engagement on small arms issues internationally and stronger domestic efforts to prevent illegal gun trafficking. The United States should actively participate in existing and proposed processes and negotiations and promote meaningful and practical approaches to countering small arms proliferation and misuse.

The administration, Congress, and the public also need to be better educated about the costs and consequences of small arms proliferation and a commitment to develop appropriate U.S. programmatic and policy responses must be cultivated. Raising awareness would counter confusion and misinformation about efforts to address small arms proliferation and misuse and assist real and sustainable progress. Such awareness promotion

would include increasing dialogue, through interagency meetings, reports, and statements, on how small arms proliferation and misuse can undermine U.S. security and development goals. This could then encourage policy initiatives and budgetary support for efforts to combat the illegal spread of small arms.

There are four specific steps the United States can take in the short term at the national, regional, and global level to help promote strategic engagement on the small arms issue.

First, at the national level, the United States should increase its assistance for programs that prevent the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons. Export controls, responsibility, and appropriate vetting of end users are important steps, but it is equally important for the United States to ensure that surplus, obsolete, and potentially destabilizing weapons are removed from circulation. It is these weapons that are most often used in brutal conflicts in countries such as Colombia, Darfur, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sri Lanka, and Somalia.

Second, at the regional level, the Senate should ratify the OAS Convention—the 1997 Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives and other Related Materials, which aims to combat illicit small arms trafficking in the Western Hemisphere. The United States played a key role in drafting the OAS Convention and made sure it was in line with U.S. laws and regulations. But for more than a decade the convention has languished in the Senate. Ratifying it would send an important and powerful message to the Western Hemisphere that the United States is serious about halting illicit arms trafficking, and it would provide another tool to deal with the flow of weapons between the United States and Mexico.

Sustainable security and small arms

The Center for American Progress's sustainable security approach to U.S. national security policy argues that the challenges arising from stunted economic development around the globe can present very real threats to American security. The core of the sustainable security approach is to use the nexus between development and security as both a means of identifying threats to our interests and a method for dealing with them. Small arms and light weapons, as this paper details, weaken the impact of development assistance aimed at improving levels of human security. Development projects that have involved years of planning and implementation—and millions of dollars—can be reversed with alarming speed.

Sustainable security, in short, looks at how to best utilize U.S. resources and influence to promote peace and security and eliminate threats rooted in instability.

Third, at the global level, the United States should lead the development of a legally binding arms trade treaty that would establish common international standards at the highest level on the export of conventional weapons, including small arms. Under the Obama administration, the United States has already reversed the Bush administration’s position on small arms and demonstrated it is willing to be a constructive partner in developing a treaty and in the U.N. process to control small arms. U.S. laws and regulations comply with or exceed the vast majority of principles that have been proposed in a potential international arms trade treaty, and the United States should ensure its national arms export control system serves as an example for other states.

Finally, the Obama administration should build small arms initiatives into development programs. When the United States undertakes programs on security sector reform and judicial sector reform, particularly in fragile states, the action plan should include steps to address small arms proliferation and misuse. General U.S. support for programs that address weapons demand is critical and requires several key integrated measures, starting with the reform of law enforcement agencies and military forces to ensure they are representative and provide security to all their citizens as well as adhere to international human rights and humanitarian laws.

Top small arms exporters and importers for 2006

The United States is both a top importer and exporter

Top small arms exporters (2006)	Top small arms importers (2006)
United States	United States
Italy	France
Germany	Japan
Brazil	Canada
Austria	South Korea
Belgium	Germany
	Australia

Source: Small Arms Survey 2009: Shadows of War, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 8.

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