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Controlling Weapons of Mere Destruction

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Controlling Weapons of Mere Destruction

How would you describe yourself or your organization? (check all that apply) Communist/Socialist ____ Terrorist ____ Crazy ____ Neutral ____ Democratic ____ Dictator ____ Corrupt/Kleptocratic ____ Primitive/Tribal ____ Brutal/Nationalistic ____

So goes a supposed Boeing Corporation Warranty Registration Card circulating in the Pentagon. The black humor underscores the primary shortcoming of current arms control policies -- the near total inattention to conventional weapons proliferation. "Weapons of mere destruction," in the words of James Adams,¹ have been responsible for more deaths -- 24.5 million lives in 161 wars in the last 50 years -- than weapons of mass destruction, and the destructive power of modern conventional weapons has blurred the old distinction. The uncontrolled proliferation of conventional weapons is arguably the most destabilizing arms control issue in the post-Cold War era. The real challenge of the New World Order is to break out of an arms transfer cycle that pushes ever more advanced weapons on countries and regions still struggling for stability and legitimacy in the new international regime.

¹James Adams, "The Arms Trade The Real Lesson of the Gulf War," The Atlantic Monthly (November 1991) available from <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/defense/dpadams1.html>, Internet

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The Gulf War provided the first evidence of the danger of uncontrolled arms transfers in the post-Cold War era. In the intense Cold War competition of the 1980's Baghdad accumulated \$83 billion dollars worth of arms from abroad -- a quantity of weapons totally out of scale with its true security needs -- destabilizing an entire region.² The profligate NATO and Warsaw Pact arms transfers policies came home to roost when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. As the United States has learned in Iran and Afghanistan, once transferred, modern weapons can outlast the regime they were intended to support.³

Among conventional weapons, great devastation is wrought by the largely unmonitored, unregulated and generally unreported trade in light weapons. Light weapons have flooded nations from Rwanda, Liberia and Somalia, to Bosnia and now Kosovo, fueling internal disputes and hampering international efforts to resolve conflict. More than a dozen nations helped supply the Rwandan war. Although much of the killing was carried out with machetes, automatic weapons were also commonly used, making it

²Andrew J Pierre, "Viewpoint," Aviation Week and Space Technology, (December 15, 1997) 78

³William W Keller "The Political Economy of Conventional Arms Proliferation," Current History (April 1997) 182

possible for militiamen to kill 2,800 people gathered in a church in four hours.⁴

Although the United States probably did not supply the weapons used for the destruction in Rwanda, it nevertheless heads the list of world proliferators. As a chart compiled by the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency of the world's Top Ten Arms Exporters of 1996 shows, the United States is responsible for more than half of the world's arms transfers, dwarfing the activity of those pesky Russians and evil Chinese

The Top Ten Arms Exporters of 1996

	Millions \$	% of Total
United States	23500	55
United Kingdom	6100	14
Russia	3300	8
France	3200	8
Sweden	1200	3
Germany	830	2
Israel	680	2
China-PRC	600	1
Netherlands	340	<1

Source: ACDA WMEAT 1997

The US hold on a stunning 55 percent of the global arms market means that the United States has the opportunity to lead by example, and must do so if any credible

⁴Stephen D. Goose and Frank Smyth, "Arming Genocide in Rwanda", Foreign Affairs, (Sep/Oct 1994) 86-87

international conventional arms control regime is to succeed.

The United States' efforts at conventional arms control have nonetheless been halting. Shortly after the Gulf War, President Bush announced a plan for arms control in the Middle East. With respect to conventional arms, the plan called for the world's five major suppliers to exercise collective self-restraint. But in press briefings that followed the announcement, the administration made it clear that US arms transfers would continue. Under Secretary of State Reginald Bartholomew told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that "we do not believe that arms sales are necessarily destabilizing.... Quite the contrary,...[w]e will not seek a regime that halts arms transfers.... [I]t is in no way a contradiction for the United States to be simultaneously seeking an arms transfer regime with the other major suppliers and continuing to supply arms needed by peaceful states to defend themselves against aggressors."⁵

In a further step backward, in 1995, the United States issued an arms transfer policy that for the first time explicitly supported arms exports as a way of shoring up US military-industrial interests. A principal goal of the February 1995 Presidential Directive 41 was to enhance the

⁵William W Keller, "The Political Economy of Conventional Arms Proliferation," 181

ability of US defense industries to meet US defense needs by considering the impact of a sale on the US defense base.⁶ Foreign sales keep US factories producing, even when the weapons are not needed in the US arsenal.

Worse yet, at the direct urging of the arms industry, on August 1, 1997 the Clinton Administration lifted a twenty-year Carter Administration ban on exports of advanced weaponry to Latin American governments. While democracy has made gains in the region, and the human rights abuses and military dictatorships prevalent at the time the ban was initiated have lessened, there is still no security rationale for an expensive round of military modernization, and an arms race in the region will drain scarce resources from critical economic needs.⁷

This reversal of the long-standing ban on arms sales to Latin America illustrates the difficulty the United States has in promoting controls on conventional weapons. The US military considers foreign arms sales critical to US defense needs. In fact, an unstated but widely acknowledged political objective of the recent expansion of NATO is the prospect of new markets for US defense industries. Although the new NATO countries do not have money to spare to buy new

⁶Ibid

⁷Arms Sales Monitor Online Edition No 35 (6 August 1997) available from [http //www fas.org/asmp/asm35.html#latin](http://www.fas.org/asmp/asm35.html#latin), Internet

F-16's, the Pentagon is offering loan and credit subsidies to encourage purchases.

The F-16 plant in Forth Worth, Texas is a typical example of the incestuous relationship between US defense industries and the US government. The plant is owned by the US government and is provided rent-free to Lockheed-Martin. The US no longer buys F-16's -- the factory is producing planes purely for foreign export -- thus the US is directly subsidizing weapons for foreign export. Why not privatize the plant, or sell it to the company? The Air Force wants to keep the factory under its supervision and "warm," in case it is needed someday.⁸

US arms sales and transfers to countries whose money might be better spent continue. In the first three months of 1998, the Defense Department notified Congress of 21 separate arms transfers to developing countries. The Arms Export and Control Act requires congressional notification of sales or transfers valued at \$14 million or more. Among those on the receiving end: Argentina got anti-tank weapons; Estonia and Lithuania got 40,000 rifles and ammunition; Greece got aircraft, machine guns and ammunition; and Turkey got howitzers and armored vehicles. The Pentagon also recently reported on its leading weapons debtors. Several countries, including Ecuador, Liberia,

⁸William Greider, Fortress America (New York Public Affairs, 1998) 64-65

Somalia, Sudan and Zaire, were \$900 million in arrears.⁹ Apparently, they were too busy using the weapons on internal foes to pay the bills.

Current efforts at international conventional arms control are minimal at best. In 1991, the United Nations initiated the voluntary UN Register of Conventional Arms which publishes data on international arms transfers as well as information provided by member states on military holdings, procurement through national production and other relevant policies. The UN register has been somewhat successful. Most arms exporters participated, including some countries which have been secretive about their arms transfers. Unfortunately, some arms importers, including nations in the Middle East and Asia, did not. Furthermore, the register includes only major weapons systems, such as aircraft, ships, missiles, and tanks. It does not include light weapons and small arms.

In another effort, in 1996, representatives of 33 states met in Vienna, Austria to establish the little-known Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies. Its purpose is to promote transparency and greater responsibility with regard to transfers of conventional arms and dual-use goods and

⁹Arms Sales Monitor Online Edition No 37 (10 April 1998) available from <http://www.fas.org/asmp/asm37.html>, Internet

technologies, and to prevent destabilizing accumulations. The Wassenaar agreement makes sense, but has received scant attention in the mainstream press and arms control community.

Given the significant economic benefits of the manufacture and sale of conventional weapons and the lack of agreement that the spread of such weapons can be dangerous, further international controls on conventional arms transfers will be difficult. It may in fact be far more difficult than the control of chemical, nuclear and biological weapons. Still, the international community needs to continue to try to build a structure to manage and restrain the flow of conventional arms.

Key elements necessary to a conventional arms control regime are transparency, national regulation, and multilateral controls. The public disclosure of arms transfers is the first step in improving the chances that undesirable arms transfers can be limited. The UN Register of Conventional Arms currently includes disclosure of only seven categories of heavy weapons. The US should take the lead in increasing the categories of weapons included on the list. Including light weapons on the register would enable the international community to detect unusual activity in

recipient nations and to respond appropriately, perhaps before violence makes intervention too costly.¹⁰

Controlling individual national markets will also be key to limiting the transfer of destructive weapons. The level of controls within individual countries varies from state to state. The collapse of central control in Russia, in particular, has left existing stockpiles in the hands of crime syndicates and local governments. The black market transfers of light weapons can be controlled only if governments tighten their internal controls on arms trafficking and cooperate with other countries to monitor and suppress gun traffickers. Recent events in the United States have shown that even well-ordered societies have difficulty controlling light weapons.

Although comprehensive international agreements will be difficult, international organizations could also begin by taking small steps such as establishing shared or linked databases of arms transactions. The international agreement on landmines could also serve as a model for the prohibition of weapons which are particularly inhumane.

It will be extremely difficult to make progress on conventional arms control as long as world leaders view conventional arms and light weapons as a relatively

¹⁰Michael T. Klare, "The New Arms Race: Light Weapons and International Security", Current History (April 1997) 178

insignificant problem. In particular, the US position as the major world arms supplier means that any credible effort on the part of the United States to push conventional arms control must begin at home. A number of suggestions have been made which could provide greater transparency in US exports and make them easier to monitor -- giving interest groups a chance to muster support to oppose sales.

For example, the Congress should reinstate the provision of the Arms Export Control Act which requires regular reports on the price and availability information provided to foreign governments which inquire about specific weapons purchases. The Congress could also require notification of excess defense article transfers and leases of military equipment to foreign governments. Congress should also amend the Foreign Assistance Act to require reporting of actual arms transfers under commercial sales, which are licensed by the State Department rather than the Defense Department.

Ending taxpayer subsidies of US arms suppliers should also be considered. US weapons manufacturers benefit from huge federally-funded research and development. Congress could reduce funding or require fees on exports of major military equipment. The Congress should also prohibit the use of government funds to pay for US arms exhibits at international weapons shows. Prior to 1991, manufacturers rented equipment and paid insurance and transportation costs

to take government-owned equipment to marketing shows. Now such equipment is provided free of charge, costing the taxpayer millions of dollars annually.¹¹

Such efforts on the part of the US government to improve transparency and reduce taxpayer subsidies in its own arms marketing would put the United States in a morally stronger position to press for international regimes to monitor and control both conventional and nuclear arms transfers. It would also be prudent to take the opportunity provided by the unprecedented role that the US is now playing in world affairs to reduce the flow of arms around the world. Perhaps we will save ourselves from having to build a new generation of fighters to protect ourselves from the F-14s and 15s sold around the world. More critically, we might avoid the threat of having a US commercial jetliner shot down by a US-made missile which might make its way inadvertently to the hands of an Afghan terrorist.

¹¹Arms Sales Monitor Online Edition No 37 (10 April 1998) available from <http://www.fas.org/asmp/asm37.html>, Internet