

Introduction

Virginia Gamba

“Until recently, there was no policy debate over how to limit light weapons transfers; the issue was given little attention by most analysts, academics, journalists, or government officials. Despite the fact that these weapons have been responsible for much of the killing in the nearly 160 conflicts since World War II, they were largely ignored.”¹

In looking at the political environment without its Cold War lens, the international community has developed a new insight into regional conflicts and how lethal they are. Previously, decision makers, prompted to dangerous action by the urgency of deterring even worse scenarios, would find themselves forming alliances that were based on expedience rather than on integrity. Now, however, corruption, blackmail, repression, and intolerance are suddenly seen for what they really are: not tools of ideology, but obstacles to peace and development.

Slowness to appreciate this reality, however, is typical of significant transition. Yet, since all the value systems and parameters of judgement according to which situations were once interpreted have been altered, it is not surprising that an interest in the root causes of violence has emerged, a phenomenon not so much related to a reappraisal of direction as to a need to prevent devastating and destabilising conflict during the transitional era. Lacking a clear-cut set of norms as to what might constitute a threat to national and international security, decision makers have been forced to examine each conflict situation in a different light.

Ethnic and religious conflict, territorial disputes, and nationalism — without the constraints of an East-West divide — have now come into their own. Nuclear deterrence, a show of force on the part of the major powers, and strategic alliances do not work in preventing these conflicts. It is in this scenario that light weapons have surfaced as the most destabilising instruments of violence, and can no longer be ignored.

Light weapons, which originally were injected into regions as part and parcel of far greater arms transfer deals, almost as an afterthought, are now

acquiring their own proliferation dynamics. Initially built by a handful of suppliers, such weapons were sold almost indiscriminately. Yet they are the weapons of choice for use in insurgencies, civil wars and repression. They are also the *sine qua non* of organised crime, as a commodity both to be traded and to be put to use.

In this first volume of the *Towards Collaborative Peace* series, published by the Institute for Security Studies and titled *Society Under Siege: Crime, Violence and Illegal Weapons*, various contributors address two of the most important considerations which must be analysed before any discussion of potential control mechanisms for light weapons is possible. First, there are the issues of understanding the present-day environment in which light weapons proliferation has taken place, and how these weapons fit into that context. Secondly, light weapons proliferation in itself is focused on, with particular emphasis on the dynamics of the use of light weapons.

By examining the trends relating to new security threats to international peace and stability, decision makers and analysts can locate the dangers of light weapons proliferation in their exact context. In Chapter 1, Phil Williams develops the theme of new threats to security as a reflection on the changing nature of “*political relationships at both the national and international levels*”.² Here, globalisation processes and the shrinking of state authority enable a far more decisive and destabilising role to be played by transnational organised crime. As Williams puts it: “*One of the major tensions of the next century ... will almost certainly stem from efforts to reconcile traditional forms of political organisation and security planning with new economic, social and technological realities. Transnational criminal organisations ... are both contributor to and beneficiary of these tensions.*”³

Structural changes in the post-Cold War era make for transitions which can cause initial immobility in traditional international actors, for want of clear objectives, as well as confusion in states which are seeking to navigate the new and difficult waters of democracy and free markets. It is this general environment which best suits the interests of international criminal organisations, in particular because they “*operate across borders; use violence and corruption as a matter of course; have enduring associations whether based on hierarchical structures or looser and more fluid networks; have some kind of trust or bonding mechanisms which enable*

them to function effectively in high risk environments; and are entrepreneurial and profit-oriented”.⁴ All of these characteristics of transnational crime match the existing international environment in an unparalleled way. At a time when integration processes are under way and border controls are relaxed in many regions of the globe, the movement of goods and peoples is on the increase, a situation that can easily be exploited for illegal purposes. By the same token, at a time when new national identities or old nationalisms are emerging to link cultures and ethnic and religious groups across borders, these same bonding forces can be used for the pursuit of crime. Similar connections, forging links between the socio-economic hardships typical of emerging free-market economies and corruption in emerging democracies, that lack strong judicial and law-enforcement capabilities not to mention firm accountability processes, permit crime to flourish unimpeded.

The role of transnational criminal organisations in the global context might not be new, but its potential for destabilising the current transition from one world order to the next has never been greater. As Williams explains, “*criminal organisations add turbulence to domestic politics, and challenge the normal functioning of government and law*”.⁵ And this at a time when intra-state conflict, as well as problems associated with governance, are the two most important threats to security worldwide.

If transnational crime is one of the engines that drives national and regional insecurity to the forefront of international relations, attention must also be paid to the fuel it consumes: the black markets. Thus the growth of parallel economies is explored in Chapter 2 of this volume. Here Tom Naylor analyses the modern black market with its myriad of connections and commodities. In tracing the rise of the black market, he demonstrates its dynamics by looking at one of its many commodities: arms.

According to Naylor, in examining current global insecurities, it is not enough to dwell on transitions, structural breakdowns and the rise of ethnic and religious identities. “[T]he current epidemic of political violence” Naylor proposes, cannot simply be explained in terms of the developments mentioned above, “[t]here is another reason for much of the current carnage, namely the triumph of a ‘free market’ in the instruments for effecting political and social change by violent means”.⁶

Thus, not only is the ability of states to limit, control or oversee the arms market constrained, due to the structural changes mentioned by Williams in Chapter 1, but today those constraints are no longer operational. *“Weapons are easily available to all who have the ability to pay, and the global explosion of illicit activity has put the means of payment within the grasp of a remarkably diverse set of insurgent groups, paramilitary forces, militant religious sects and unabashed bandit gangs.”*⁷

As Naylor explains, it has generally been possible during the last fifty years for the international community to retain some control over arms transfers: a mixture of controls in the *“production of heavy weapons and a controlled ‘black market’ in light arms”*⁸ were in existence, but it was a market that could not compete efficiently against the formal sector. From the 1980s, however, these controls collapsed completely *“because of changes on both sides of the market equation”*.⁹ The fall of supply-side controls in relationship to arms transfers may then be juxtaposed to the rise in black markets. The result is a disturbing picture of the inability of states to control flows of new weapons, the overwhelming importance of existing stocks in setting prices in the world market, and the blurring of the line dividing supply from demand. Not only is the number of weapons in existence overwhelming, but the arms business itself has become *“almost completely commercialised just at the point in history when it is capable of doing the greatest damage”*.¹⁰ The disadvantages of trading arms in the black markets vis-à-vis formally controlled markets, gradually diminished and have, ultimately, disappeared. It is the loosening of transfer constraints, the emergence of second-hand regional supermarkets and the long life of weapons already in circulation that now permit the black markets to operate at an advantage, trading not only for money but against other prime illegal commodities, such as endangered species, drugs and counterfeit goods. *“The result,”* Naylor points out, *“is that a modern covert arms deal is likely to take place within a matrix of black market transactions.”*¹¹

The problem of controlling light weapons in such circumstances thus becomes exposed. Although much could be done today to curb the supply side of light weapons transfers, it will never be enough: *“[T]he arms market has been, and always will be, driven from the demand side.”*¹² Since *“[a]ttacking the problem of arms proliferation from the demand side requires addressing squarely the other main causes of the current wave of*

*violent conflict,”*¹³ that is the topic covered by the next three chapters in this volume.

Chapter 3 takes on the challenge of looking at the dynamics of the light weapons trade itself at the end of the twentieth century. Here, Lucy Mathiak argues, although the end of the Cold War might have brought a general reduction in the international trade for major conventional weapons, this does not seem to be the case for light weapons. Governments continue to supply light weapons, for much the same reasons that they did during the Cold War. The quest for international security and for controlling unstable regional transitions is still part and parcel of governmental decisions concerning the supply of light weapons in general, and small arms in particular. *“In some instances,”* argues Mathiak, *“internal threats are defined in ways that coincide with the articulated security agendas of supplier countries, as is the case with some of the United States’ anti-narcotics initiatives.”*¹⁴ Whereas recognised international actors are undergoing a change in their military doctrines making them revalue conventional versus nuclear weapons, *“[d]eveloping countries have built indigenous arms production facilities ... to become self-sufficient and end vulnerability to embargoes”*.¹⁵ Thus, neither on the part of developed nor developing communities, has there been a reduction, either in the willingness to use conventional weapons, light weapons included, or in the ability to produce them.

For Mathiak the problem of the proliferation of light weapons is concomitant with their ongoing capacity for fuelling or checking current types of conflict, particularly those that are internal vis-à-vis external in nature. The problem is compounded by the immense quantity of weapons available and the efficiency of black markets in circulating the existing stocks. In many cases this has resulted in the production of *“societies in which possession of weapons is the norm”*.¹⁶ This, in turn, has meant *“the escalation of robbery, the rise of murder and injury rates and ... other forms of gun-related violence,”* especially challenging to *“... fragile states, in which social and personal insecurity is endemic”*.¹⁷

To exemplify the context, economics and dynamics of light weapons proliferation, as described above, the fourth and fifth chapters of this

volume link the growing demand for small arms with current internal conflict, and with the increased availability of second-hand stockpiles as a result of ineffectual disarmament during peacekeeping operations, respectively. Both chapters use the region of Southern Africa to make these connections. By referring to a specific region, both open the debate on a particularly pervasive problem. How do increased availability and the demand for small arms influence the creation of a culture of violence in Southern Africa? This is a theme that will be further developed in subsequent volumes of this same series.

In Chapter 4, Peter Batchelor looks at three case studies in Africa: South Africa, Rwanda and Angola to demonstrate how internal conflict fuels the demand for small arms. In all cases, he points out, demand comes from *“both state and non-state actors, and is particularly noticeable in countries where groups have mobilised to fight for or demand political change”*.¹⁸ Perhaps because South Africa is not considered a war-torn society like Angola and has not suffered the massacres that tainted Rwanda, it is the most forceful case for demonstrating the links between *“political conflict and violent death.”*¹⁹ Batchelor concludes, *“the critical link between political violence, instability and the proliferation of light weapons in the province [KwaZulu-Natal] can be clearly established ...”*.²⁰

One of the most interesting aspects of this case is that South Africa has a considerable arms industry of its own, as well as an important number of home-made weapons, thus demand can — at times — be met internally, particularly through the theft of licensed weapons and/or from army or police depots. And yet, clearly this supply is not enough and an ever-increasing number of guns are being smuggled into the country: *“A large percentage ... of the illegal small arms seized by the police in KwaZulu-Natal,”* Batchelor indicates, *“is not locally manufactured, but from foreign producers and suppliers.”*²¹

None the less, it is not only the demand for an ever-increasing number of light weapons that serves to fuel the political conflict in Africa. As Batchelor notes, it is *“influenced by the high levels of crime and violence, which in turn are supported by the easy availability of small arms from both internal and external sources”*.²² In fact, he argues, *“there is a direct*

relationship between the demand for small arms, the supply of small arms, and the proliferation of small arms”.²³ If the demand side is mostly fuelled by intra-state conflict and political violence, the supply side is influenced by the existence of international criminal organisations, black markets, ineffective control over existing stocks, weak or ineffective national legislation controlling arms transfers and gun-licensing practices, and the huge stocks of small arms and ammunition which circulate in the region, as a result of ineffectual or negligible disarmament and demobilisation actions during peacekeeping operations in Africa.

If countries such as South Africa have problems related to an increase in the availability of illegal small arms, one can hardly conceive of the problems faced by countries which are recovering from civil war, such as Angola. The hundreds of thousands of light weapons, ammunition and landmines which exist in societies like Angola and Mozambique constitute the single, most important source of a “new proliferation” of weapons in Southern Africa. Devoid of their political value once conflict is ended and ignored by peace processes brokered by the United Nations, small arms acquire an economic value of their own as soon as peace is established. These weapons, now mere commodities on the black market, filter through porous borders and circulate throughout the entire region bringing instability, violence and death.

In Chapter 5, Jakkie Potgieter looks at one of the principal causes for the indiscriminate proliferation of illegal small arms in Southern Africa: the mismanagement of disarmament and demobilisation processes during peace support operations by the United Nations. Three case studies are developed: UNAVEM II, UNAVEM III and ONUMOZ. By investigating ineffectual disarmament and demobilisation in Angola and Mozambique, it is possible to trace to light weapons stockpiles the firing of both internal conflict and criminality, the case in both Central and Southern Africa.

Reflecting on the nature of ‘second generation’ UN peacekeeping operations as they were put into practice in Africa in the 1990s; the problems associated with ineffectual mandates and sloppy implementation; and the scourge of weapons they have left in their wake, Potgieter argues that one of the principal problems with United Nations peacekeeping operations today is that, though the needs of these missions are extensive

and diverse, the activities are still based on “*traditional concepts of peacekeeping operations*”.²⁴ There seems to be no willingness to adapt missions to “*the context of a changed operational environment*”.²⁵

Yet as long as the United Nations fails to take the demobilisation and disarmament components of its missions seriously, it will never achieve its objective of lasting regional peace. As it is now, “[*r*]egions awash with weapons, not collected during peace processes, or, if collected, never destroyed, struggle to regain the stability so necessary to successful reconstruction and development”.²⁶ By looking at Angola and Mozambique and the effects of the United Nations missions in these countries, in so far as ineffectual disarmament to the detriment of the region is concerned, Potgieter brings urgency to the debate when he observes: “*What remains a sorry fact ... is that the lack of effective arms control and disarmament during peace support operations ... has denied the international community a historic opportunity for disarming the region.*”²⁷ For the international community to ignore this admonition would be for it to allow the disempowerment of one of the few possible controlling mechanisms it has at its disposal today.

In an environment which thrives on chaos, where international criminal organisations traverse the globe at will, and where black markets operate with impunity, the rejection of any possible control of light weapons, given the opportunities present during peacekeeping operations in Africa, is nothing short of tragic.

Finally, and as reference to the information offered by this volume in the wider context of the TCP book series, it is appropriate that the last chapter helps set the scene for ensuing publications. In Volume II, for example, the TCP book series will explore the potential that regional organisations have for developing small arms control mechanisms. It is perhaps fitting that we consider regional organisations as the appropriate mechanisms for solving this massive problem. After all, as is shown in Chapter 5, the greatest damage brought about by the indiscriminate proliferation of existing stockpiles of weapons is to the region which immediately borders a stricken country. It is, therefore, appropriate to explore control options that might be put to good effect by regional organisations and local communities, where both international and national measures have so far failed.

Endnotes

- 1 British American Security Information Council, Project on Light Weapons: *Bridging the Gap: Light and Major Conventional Weapons in Recent Conflicts* by Natalie Goldring, paper prepared for the annual meeting of the International studies Association, Toronto, Ontario, 18-21 March 1997, p 2.
- 2 Chapter 1: P Williams, “*Transnational Organised Crime and International Security: A Global Assessment*”, pp. 11-41 at p. 11.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 6 Chapter 2: R T Naylor, “*The Rise of the Modern Arms Black Market and the Fall of Supply Side Control*”, pp. 43-72 at p. 46.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Chapter 3: L Mathiak, “*The Light Weapons Trade at the End of the Century*”, pp. 73-102 at p. 81.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 18 Chapter 4: P Batchelor, “*Intra-State Conflict, Political Violence and Small Arms Proliferation in Africa*”, pp. 103-128 at p. 105.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- 24 Chapter 5: J Potgieter, “*The Price of War and Peace: A Critical Assessment of the Disarmament Component of United Nations Operations in Southern Africa*,” 129-168 at p. 133.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 155.