Small arms and light weapons
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Background
Small arms and light weapons (SALW) kill and injure more people on a daily basis worldwide than any other type of technology developed by humans to harm other humans. The numbers are so high and so known that many have become desensitized. Yet the commitment of governments to address SALW issues at the UN has seemingly decreased, and civil society has suffered a similar malaise. A key challenge is that the resolutions on SALW at First Committee are virtually unchanged from year to year, giving a sense that the issue is stale and lacks urgency.

The inclusion of SALW in the recently adopted Arms Trade Treaty is worthy of celebration—especially considering some of the unfortunate exclusions under the Treaty’s scope. It also proves that, with appropriate levels of political will, breakthroughs are possible in multilateral arms control diplomacy.

Such breakthroughs are certainly necessary in other aspects of SALW control. On paper, the UN Programme of Action to combat the illicit trade in SALW (UNPoA) is an excellent framework to achieve SALW control. It has been used as such in many countries with proper implementation and reporting.
However, twelve years after its agreement as a global instrument, how much does the UNPoA have to show in terms of impact in the real world? Other than expensive meetings and tons of paper, what has been produced? How many lives has the UNPoA saved?

Current context
There are two ways to regain momentum on SALW issues at the UN: (1) taking the UNPoA seriously; and/or (2) creating new resolutions, processes, or instruments to tackle the most urgent issues missing in letter or practice from the UNPoA.

An essential aspect of “taking the UNPoA seriously” is collectively deciding to invest the needed political capital into its review and implementation process. The last Review Conference in 2012 was not underwhelming because breakthroughs were not possible—they simply were not wanted enough.
A Programme of Action needs less “recalling” and “emphasizing” and more “decides” and “establishes”. Operating under General Assembly rules, governments truly committed to decreasing armed violence should have pushed for a more ambitious document, and a vote if necessary.

Presently, breakthroughs in SALW control cannot be achieved at the UN operating under an unduly strict interpretation of, and misguided deference to, consensus. Likewise, resolutions that can be adopted without a vote—as were both SALW resolutions tabled at the last First Committee—are unlikely to have any real impact. Things that matter must shake the status quo.

If the UNPoA is deemed to be stalled beyond possible revival, committed governments could propose new resolutions to strengthen areas that desperately need progress. In particular, a proposal on a way forward towards legally-binding international controls of ammunition—not only of its trade, but from production to destruction—is urgently needed. In addition, robust and obligatory stockpile management standards, arguably the best way to preclude guns being diverted to the illicit market, could receive specific attention. And since excessive levels of arms production are usually a topic of complaint at First Committee, an attempt to restrain or limit production would certainly be in order, even if at first support came from only a handful of countries.

There is also a need to discuss proposals on emerging technologies that will undeniably demand some form of international standards, such as so-called “smart guns” and those produced through 3D printing. At worst, such initiatives would be politically symbolic; at best they could eventually result in decisions to strengthen the UNPoA.

When contemplating these options (strengthened UNPoA or alternative proposals), governments should give honest consideration to a “third way”: an analysis as to whether First Committee can be realistically expected to deliver results on SALW control in the medium-term. Can the UN provide the drastic changes to the status quo needed to truly make a difference on the ground? Is First Committee a productive forum to tackle global gun violence? If not, what are the alternatives?

Regardless of the option chosen, a way forward must be found for further international regulations on SALW and its ammunition.

**Recommendations for governments**

*During First Committee, governments should:*

- Call for the establishment an independent mechanism to assess UNPoA implementation.
- Propose that the UNPoA, and its International Tracing Instrument, become legally-binding.
- Propose a concrete way forward—whether through the UNPoA resolution or a new draft—towards legally-binding international controls of SALW ammunition—not only of its trade, but from production to destruction.
- Introduce new resolutions to remedy some of the UNPoA’s most damaging substantive gaps, whether in letter or implementation—including universal binding norms regarding production, stockpile management, and emerging technologies in the field of SALW.

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