

The UN Register of Conventional Arms:
A valuable confidence and security-building
arrangement

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1. Introduction

The UN Register of Conventional Arms is now in its eighth year. Set up in 1992, it is now a well-established global confidence and security building arrangement. Some 151 states now participated in the UN Register, and about 90 participate each year - a relatively high rate of participation for global information exchange measures. Although it is quite a modest transparency measure that is still far from achieving its potential, it remains the most important global cooperative agreement relating to conventional weapons. It is important to maintain and develop the Register and to promote participation and use.

Since it was established in 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has supported participation in the UN Register by its member countries. In 1996, the meeting of ARF Foreign Ministers endorsed a recommendation encouraging ARF members on a voluntary basis to send information that they provide to the UN register also to other members of ARF at the same time. It further endorsed recommendations that discussions on the UN Register in the framework of ARF should continue with a view to enhancing security in the region, and also that ARF participants should be encouraged to work together in the UN to promote global participation in the Register.

The consideration of the UN Register of Conventional Arms at this ARF seminar is therefore very welcome. In this paper I briefly outline the operation of the Register in its eighth year; discuss the achievements and value of the Register, and examine issues and priorities for its further development and use. A more detailed examination of the UN Register is provided in the publications of the Bradford Arms Register Studies (BARS) series, and recently particularly in BARS Working Paper No8 which is published this month.¹ A copy of this, and any other BARS publication, will be sent to any participant in this seminar on their request.

¹ Malcolm Chalmers and Owen Greene, *Entering a New Phase: the UN Register in its Eighth Year*, BARS Working Paper No 8, Bradford University, UK, February 2001.

2. The UN Register in its Eighth Year of Operation

The eight annual report of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms, dated 15 August 2000, contained data supplied by 84 member states relating to calendar year 1999: a significant increase on the 68 included in the previous year's annual report, but similar to levels customary in the mid 1990s.² A further 6 countries had replied by mid November, giving a total of 90 replies by the cut-off date of November 14 used in BARS annual working papers on the Register. On past experience, some additional countries could provide information relating to 1999 over the coming months.

Table 1: Total number of Register replies received

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Included in annual report	80	81	84	85	85	93	68	84
Received by November 14 in annual report year	82	84	87	92	90	95	77	90
Received by March 31 in year following annual report	83	88	92	94	92	97	79	N/A
Received by November 14, 2000	94	93	97	96	93	98	80	90

2000 saw four countries provide information to the UN Register that had never previously done so: Bosnia & Hercegovina, Sao Tome & Principe, Uzbekistan and Zambia. Their participation brings the total number of states who have participated in the Register at least once to some 151.

In addition to this year's completely new participants, a further 19 countries (Macedonia, Bhutan, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Nepal, Belize, Dominica, Ecuador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Jamaica, Paraguay, Trinidad & Tobago, Latvia, Turkmenistan, Burkina Faso, Seychelles, Qatar) had not reported by mid-November 1999, but did report this year. Ten countries that did participate in 1999 failed to provide information by the 14 November cut-off date. These 'lapsed participants' were Iceland, Indonesia, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Barbados, Belarus, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Lesotho and Iran. The net result of 23 additional participants and 10 lapsed participants was an increase of participation of 13, as shown in Table 2.

² *United Nations Register of Conventional Arms: Report of the Secretary-General*, General Assembly document A/55/299 of 15 August 2000.

³ *United Nations Register of Conventional Arms: Report of the Secretary-General*, General Assembly document A/55/299/Add. 1 of 20 September 2000 contains replies from Latvia, Qatar and Trinidad & Tobago, as well as additional information from Armenia and Spain. *United Nations Register of Conventional Arms: Report of the Secretary-General*, General Assembly document A/55/299/Add. 2 of 16 October 2000 contains a reply from Sao Tome and Principe. *United Nations Register of Conventional Arms: Report of the Secretary-General*, General Assembly document A/55/299/Add. 3 of 9 November 2000 contains replies from Dominica and Vietnam.

Table 2: Changes in replying status, by year of reply

Year of reply	New participants	Re-entries	Drop-outs	Replies by November 14	Change in total
1993	82	N/A	N/A	82	N/A
1994	24	N/A	22	84	+ 2
1995	11	6	14	87	+ 3
1996	11	11	17	92	+ 5
1997	4	13	19	90	- 2
1998	5	13	13	95	+ 5
1999	4	5	27	77	-18
2000	4	19	10	90	+13

N/A Not applicable.

Lapsed Participants: Although the total number of participants increased in 2000, several key states that previously participated regularly failed to provide data before mid-November. Russia and Belarus have provided data to the Register since its formation, and have hitherto always provided it before our cut-off date of mid November. As of mid February 2001, however, the UN had not received information from either country. In Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines have similarly not provided information, despite having been regular participants during most of the Register's lifetime.

It is still too early to say whether these lapses are temporary or permanent in nature. In all four cases, there is a strong possibility that there are specific bureaucratic and short-term political explanations for these absences. If Indonesia and the Philippines do not participate in 2001 (and hopefully also Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar), the norm of participation amongst ASEAN members will be significantly weakened. Moreover, if Russia's failure to reply were to be repeated in 2001, it would deal a severe blow to the Register's claim to provide near-universal coverage of major exporting states. If the situation next year were to be that the bilateral dispute between China and the USA (on reporting exports to Taiwan) remained unresolved, so that China continued to refrain from providing data, then the global register would be very seriously weakened. There are grounds for optimism that these problems will not arise and most if not all of the above lapsed participants will resume participation. But the UN Register continues to need wide attention and support.

Regional Participation. There continue to be significant variations in participation rates between regions and groups of countries. This year, the most striking change at a regional level has been a sharp rise in participation in the Americas. This appears to be a result of the OAS's 1999 agreement to the 'Inter-American Convention on Transparency in Conventional Weapons Acquisition' during its annual general assembly meeting. Aggregate participation in other regions appears relatively stable (see Table 3), although there have been significant changes in which countries have participated in some regions.

28 of the 33 states in Asia and Oceania (the exceptions are Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, North Korea and Palau) have now participated in the Register at least once. Similarly all of the 50 UN member states in Europe and the former Soviet Union have now participated at least once (plus Switzerland). So too have 33 of the 35 states in the Americas (all except Haiti and Surinam). By contrast, 9 of the 18 states in the Middle East, together with 23 of the 48 states in sub-Saharan Africa, have never taken part.

Table 3: Participation in the UN Register by region, by year of reported transfer

Region (numbers of countries in brackets)	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
UN Members								
Europe (36)	29	30	30	31	32	32	32	33
Asia & Oceania (33)	18	20	21	20	18	20	15	16
America (35)	14	14	19	15	18	15	13	21
Former Soviet Union (15)	5	5	9	13	11	11	9	9
Sub-Saharan Africa (48)	8	11	5	9	7	9	3	6
Middle East (18)	7	3	2	2	2	4	2	2
Sub-Total (188)	81	83	86	91	88	91	74	87
Non-UN Members	1	1	1	1	2	4	3	3
Total	82	84	87	92	90	95	77	90

Note: includes only those reports received by November 14 of the following calendar year.

The major exporters and importers: According to the Yearbook of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the total value of exports of major conventional arms during 1999 was \$20.6 billion (at 1990 prices and using trend-indicator values). The trade was relatively highly concentrated, with only fourteen countries exporting conventional arms worth more than \$100 million during 1999.⁴ Thirteen of these fourteen states reported information to the Register on their transfers for that year. The only exception was Russia, whose estimated exports of \$3.1 billion account for 15% of total global exports. SIPRI estimates China's exports during 1999 at \$79 million, and those of Belarus at only \$38 million. Taking account of these and other (smaller) non-participating exporters, countries accounting for around 84% of global exports reported to the Register for 1999 (using SIPRI estimates). Of the 30 top arms exporters between 1995 - 99 noted by SIPRI, 25 reported to the Register this year.⁵

⁴ *SIPRI Yearbook 2000*, p. 372.

⁵ *Ibid.* The three further non-participating arms exporters here are Moldova, North Korea and Qatar: none of which were recorded by SIPRI as having exported significant amounts of major conventional arms during 1998 (although they did earlier in the 1994-98 period). Note that the 32nd ranked arms supplier during 1994-98 note here, South Africa, did not quite make the table of 31 top exporters for that period listed in the 1999 SIPRI Yearbook: its exports during 1994-98 were not estimated to amount quite to \$100 million according to SIPRI assigned 1990 values.

The Register's coverage of major importers is less comprehensive. Of the 35 top importers during 1995-1999, seven did not provide information to the Register for 1999. This included three (Taiwan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt) out of the top five. Other Register non-participants amongst the top importers were China, UAE, Kuwait, Indonesia and Iran.

'Background Information' and Reporting Holdings and National Procurement

The UN Register of Conventional Arms was originally established on the assumption that it would cover military holdings and procurement from national production as well as arms transfers. In the absence of consensus on this matter, however, the guidelines for providing annual information for the Register simply invite states to provide 'available background information' relating to their military holdings and procurement from national production. In practice an increasing number of states provided such information in a systematic and consistent way.

In 1997, 'available background information' provided by member states on their military holdings and procurement through national production began to be published in the annual Register report. This year, the UN published information on military holdings from 27 countries, subsequently increasing to 28 with the late provision of such data by Australia.⁶ This is a slightly lower number than in recent years, which have varied between 31 and 34. However, for the first time, a majority of those providing military holdings data also provided data on the models or types of weapons in their inventories. While transparency on military holdings of the first six Register categories is slowly increasing, however, many states remain reluctant to reveal any but highly aggregated numbers for holdings of missiles and missile launchers, and there is now wide understanding that provision of data on holdings of missiles raises special issues.

As in past years, fewer states provided information on their procurement from national production than for military holdings: 22 states provided information on procurement from national production this year. This general trend seems likely to be because relatively few countries manufacture the major conventional weapons systems that are covered by the Register. In a significant development, however, several countries now seem more willing to provide type/model data for procurement through national production than for military holdings.

Discrepancies: There is no independent verification of the information that governments provide to the UN Register. Whenever both importing and exporting states participate in the Register, however, it is possible to cross-check their replies for consistency. Given continuing practical problems, for example in the definitions used for when transfers take place, the replies of importers and exporters cannot be expected to match in every case (at least in the reported timing of transfers). Yet if the replies of states are accurate, and if

⁶ *United Nations Register of Conventional Arms: Report of the Secretary-General*, General Assembly document A/55/299 of 15 August 2000 provides information on the military holdings of 26 countries. *United Nations Register of Conventional Arms: Report of the Secretary-General*, General Assembly document A/55/299/Add. 1 of 20 September 2000 provides information on Armenia. A/55/299/Add.4 provided additional data by Australia.

they follow the guidelines for reporting set out by the UN, there should be a reasonably high level of matching. However, there are continuing problems with discrepancies

It is unlikely that a large proportion of these mismatches are a result of intentional misreporting. A close examination of discrepancies has indicated that bureaucratic errors and confusions have generally turned out to be the explanation. In some cases, mismatches have stimulated fruitful investigations by the countries concerned that have revealed weaknesses in countries' national monitoring and control systems, which could then be rectified. Nevertheless, the continuing level of discrepancies is a cause for concern.

Overall summary of status of UN Register: overall, the UN Register of transfers of major conventional arms has become a mature and well-established regime. It maintains relatively high participation for an international information exchange arrangement. Some 151 states have participated at least once, about 90 participate each year, and there is a core of about 60 sustained participants. The dip in overall participation last year (down to 80) appears to have been a temporary blip. The Register has continued to cover the great majority of the large exporters of major conventional weapons and most of the major arms importers. Moreover, the quality of the information provided has been gradually improving, particularly through the supply of qualitative information on weapons types and models in the remarks column.

Nevertheless, the Register continues to require sustained attention and support if it is to provide a useful contribution. The lapses in participation by some important participants are a cause for concern, even though these do not represent a withdrawal of political support for the Register but rather specific bureaucratic or political issues. Moreover, the continuing 'turn-over' in participation, particularly amongst states with little or no transfers of major arms systems to report, remains an issue. After the 2000 Report of the UN Group of Governmental Experts on the UN Register,⁷ a new procedure has come into operation this year that makes it even simpler for countries with repeat 'nil return' to participate, but it seems clear that further work is needed to raise awareness and promote use of this. More broadly, however, the register is still far from reaching its full potential, and it is underused to promote security dialogues and confidence.

3. The value and achievements of the UN Register of Conventional Arms

The UN Register of Conventional Arms is a modest voluntary arrangement. It was never expected to be sufficient on its own to transform international security situations. Nevertheless, it has significant achievements, in my view, even in its present partially developed form.

⁷ Report of the UN Group of Governmental Experts, *The Continuing Operation of the UN Register of Conventional Arms and its Further Development*, UN General Assembly Document A/55/281, 9 August 2000.

The UN Register was established as a transparency measure to contribute to confidence building and to assist efforts to monitor and prevent destabilising and excessive accumulations of conventional arms. The guidelines for the information to be provided were successfully designed to contribute to this goal while avoiding disclosure of information that could endanger military security.

In view of the well-known difficulties of achieving any global cooperative security agreement relating to conventional arms, the mere establishment and continued operation of the UN Register may be considered an achievement in itself. Further, although it is important to promote wider and more consistent participation in the Register, participation levels have been consistently high relative to other global information exchange arrangements.

In my view, in practice the UN Register has significant achievements in several respects. In summary, these are the following.

First, the Register has established a de facto international norm of transparency in conventional arms transfers. Though this is still weak and contested, all governments must now take it into account. Participation in the UN Register is an important indicator that a state recognises its responsibility to take into account the concerns of others in its arms transfer and procurement practices, and to be willing to enter into dialogues on related issues.

Second, the Register provides quantitative and qualitative information on the great majority of transfers of major conventional arms each year. Contrary to initial expectations, some of this was not previously available in the public domain. Many states have proved willing to provide information even on transfers that they might prefer, for political reasons, not to draw attention to or confirm.

Third, since its information is officially-provided, the Register provides a legitimate basis on which to develop regional and international consultations amongst governments, contributing to security dialogues, particularly in regions and sub-regions where regional security dialogues and cooperation are not well established.

Fourth, the Register provides publicly-available information, empowering legislatures, citizens and even some civilian branches of government in their efforts to strengthen accountability of the military and political leaders. Generally, the most powerful real reasons why relevant government ministries are reluctant to provide information on arms transfers relate to domestic politics and bureaucratic competition: provision of public information tends to legitimise comment from other branches of government and from legislatures. There are several examples of where participation in the UN Register has contributed to civilian oversight of the military and to democratisation processes.

Finally, the requirement to provide annual reports to the Register has stimulated many governments to establish and improve their national systems for monitoring and controlling arms transfers: a key condition for promoting restraint. This has proved to be

a very important side benefit of the UN Register. Previously, even well developed and well organised governments lacked national data collection systems enabling **them** to monitor their own arms transfers each year.

The Register can be used to achieve further benefits in each of the above areas. There is moreover important scope to develop international mechanisms to encourage greater international use of the data provided to the Register, as well as to develop and extend the scope of the Register.

4. The further development of the Register

The initial agreement to establish the Register envisaged more than a register of conventional arms transfers. Many countries argued persuasively that a register of arms transfers alone unfairly privileged those states with a substantial domestic arms industry, which could procure their weapons through national production. Moreover, information about national holdings is of greatest relevance and concern, and it was envisaged that the scope of the Register would subsequently be extended to include national holdings as well as procurement from national production and transfers.

Several UN Groups of Governmental Experts have since been convened, in 1994, 1997 and 2000. One of their main tasks has been to try to achieve consensus on ways to further develop and extend the UN Register in the ways that were originally intended. So far, it has not proved possible to achieve consensus on substantial further development of the Register, although each Group of Experts managed to achieve agreement on one or more significant improvements. The main way in which the Register has facilitated enhanced transparency on military holdings and procurement from national production has been through the provision of 'additional background information' by a substantial number of states.

- Most recently, the 2000 UN Group of Governmental Experts agreed to measures to facilitate access to and use of the data submitted to the UN Register, particularly through extended use of electronic data-bases. It also agreed a procedure to facilitate participation by states that are rarely involved in transfers of major conventional arms. In spite of very detailed and fruitful discussion of the possibility of revising and extending some or all of the existing seven categories of weapons covered by the Register, not consensus could be achieved for substantial development of the Register.

In my view, this is unfortunate, and means that the UN Register cannot play as useful a role as it could. One focus for debate has been the balance between efforts to further globalise participation in the UN register and measures to extend and develop its scope.

Some have argued that it is necessary to universalise participation in the Register before proceeding with its further development. There are anxieties that there may be a trade-off between wide participation and further development of the Register. These are serious and legitimate concerns.

However, there are also important counter-arguments. Most importantly, in its present under-developed state, the UN Register does not seem to address the main security concerns of many states. The Register does not presently cover many types of weapons that are of substantial and direct concern. These include many systems that contribute to force projection or as force multipliers. Also omitted, for example, are medium or light mortars, small arms and light weapons. These are of great concern in many regions, including regions where participation in the register is presently low or inconsistent. Additions or adjustments to the categories of weapons covered by the register to include such weapons could help to make the Register more relevant to many countries' concerns, and enhance participation.

That is, substantial development of the Register, if carried out wisely, could actually encourage wider participation in the Register. It is also an important political fact the global arrangements are strengthened if they are periodically strengthened and developed: it helps to maintain political attention and momentum.

It is also important to be realistic about the reasons why some states do not participate. In many cases the reasons are lack of government capacity or profound crises or conflicts in the country which mean that attention is not given to the Register irrespective of its design. Moreover, some states will not in practice participate without profound political changes in their country or region. This may be true amongst most states in the Middle East for example. It is not clear that it is useful to postpone further strengthening and development of the UN Register for the benefit of existing participants until these longer-term changes occur.

One particular issue of relevance to this seminar relates to development of international information exchange and transparency measures for small arms and light weapons. There have been proposals to add an additional category to the UN Register to cover small arms and light weapons. It is clear that there are good reasons for enhancing international transparency and information exchange for these types of weapons, as noted above. However, there are some doubts about whether the UN Register is the most appropriate vehicle for this. It may be better to design information exchange arrangements for small arms differently, so that they contribute more directly to enhanced cooperation on preventing and reducing small arms proliferation and illicit trafficking.

My own preference in this area is as follows. It is **practical** and useful to consider ways in which existing categories of weapons covered by the register could be adjusted to include certain categories of light weapons (such as light mortars, grenade launchers, shoulder fired missiles, heavy machine guns). But transparency measures for small arms (such as pistols and assault rifles) are probably best developed separately from the existing UN Register. The types of information that could most usefully be exchanged is not necessarily data on numbers of weapons transferred, but rather information such as national laws, regulations and procedures; national focal points and contacts; national marking or record keeping systems; or information relating to weapons seizures,

stockpile security and management, and the identification and disposal of surplus small arms.

It would be useful in this context for regional groups such as the ARF to consider regional information exchange arrangements relating to small arms and light weapons, designed according to specific regional circumstances. A global information exchange or transparency arrangement for small arms could be developed separately from the UN Register, most immediately through the UN 2001 Conference. In principle, some transparency arrangement for small arms could also be developed as an annex to the present Register (for example, as an additional category of background information, but with some agreed guidelines), but it should be separately designed from the existing Register.

Appendix 1: The Register 1993-1999: Participation by ARF members

	Reply for 1992	Reply for 1993	Reply for 1994	Reply for 1995	Reply for 1996	Reply for 1997	Reply for 1998	Reply for 1999
Australia	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Brunei					*	*		
Cambodia								
China	*	*	*	*	*			
DPRK								
India	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Indonesia	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Japan	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Laos								
Malaysia	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Mongolia	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Myanmar								
Nepal	*	*	*	*		*		*
New Zealand	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Philippines	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Republic of Korea	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Singapore	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Thailand		*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Vietnam			*	*	*	*	*	*
Russian Federation	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
CANADA	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
USA	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
EU STATES	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Notes

1. Replies relating to calendar years 1992-1998 are those received by the UN as of 15 November 1999.