Houston Area Model United Nations
Standard Committee

DISEC



Chair | Batul Mandviwala
Topic A: Combating the Illicit Trade of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)
Houston Area Model United Nations 52
February 4 & 5, 2027

Atilgan Ozdil/Anadolu Ag

Chair Letter

Delegates,

My name is Batul Mandviwala, and I will be your chair for the Disarmament and International Security Committee during HAMUN 52!

I am currently a senior at the University of Houston majoring in Management Information Systems, and I served as a Vice Chair for HAMUN 51 last year. I was also an active MUN member throughout high school, and I am extremely grateful for those experiences because it allowed me to develop a broad-minded and well-informed outlook of the world that we live in. This is why I have gone full-circle and am now staffing the same conferences I attended as a delegate!

The Disarmament and International Security Committee is one that is extremely relevant to today's world. Refugee crises, malnutrition, child soldiers, rogue militias, and forced labor all can often be traced back to the core issues that this committee discusses. You will be asked questions that are hard to answer, but you will also hone your ability to research and gain new perspectives. Ignorance stunts growth.

These conferences can seem overwhelming, especially for those attending them for the first time! Remember, the goal isn't to be perfect. HAMUN always makes for a memorable experience. You will meet new people, collaborate, and make surprising alliances. I ask that you do not shy away from speaking and contributing as much as you can. That's the best way to learn!

Please feel free to reach out with any questions! I look forward to meeting you all soon!

Batul Mandviwala
Chair of DISEC
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Topic Overview

INTRODUCTION

Small arms and light weapons (SALW) have become one of the most persistent challenges to international peace and security. These weapons include relatively portable conventional weapons such as assault rifles, mortars, grenades, and other military-style firearms. Although they are not new to modern conflict, their widespread proliferation became particularly significant during the twentieth century. During the Cold War, major and mid-level military powers supplied large quantities of small arms and light weapons to allies and proxy forces around the world. Many of these weapons were never recovered after conflicts ended and have continued to circulate through legal, illicit, and informal markets [1].

The continued availability of SALW introduces issues that go beyond traditional warfare. Illegally trafficked weapons can intensify existing conflicts, contribute to organized crime and terrorism, and weaken efforts to establish lasting peace after conflicts end. However, it is important to note that illicit trafficking does not always begin with an illegal transaction. Weapons originally transferred legally between states or held by military and civilian actors can later be diverted into illicit markets when storage, regulation, tracing, or oversight is meager. Their portability and long lifespan further complicate international efforts to track and control them. [3]



"The destruction of 820 pieces of SALW in Bosnia and Herzegovina" https://www.seesac.org/News-SALW/the-destruction-of-820-pieces-of-salw-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/

Today, the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) reports that armed conflicts are at historically high levels and that illicit SALW trafficking continues to have consequences for human rights, humanitarian crises, and socioeconomic development. At the same time, international discussions have started to recognize that controlling the supply of weapons alone may not be sufficient, in that we also must begin addressing the conditions that create demand for weapons. Technological developments, including 3D printing, have further complicated existing approaches to preventing the illicit proliferation of SALW. [2]

Despite these efforts, gaps in implementation, regulation, communication, and international cooperation remain. Addressing the illicit trade therefore requires not only stronger controls over weapons, but also greater attention to the conditions that create demand for them.



"Commission against the use of Small Arms and Light Weapons" https://www.modernghana.com/news/390945/commission-against-the-use-of-small-arms-and-light-weapons-i.html

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HISTORY

The history of SALW is closely connected to the development of modern warfare, state-building, and international arms transfers. While portable weapons have existed for centuries, the scale and accessibility of SALW expanded considerably during the twentieth century. In particular, conflicts and geopolitical rivalries created large international flows of relatively inexpensive and easily transportable weapons. The Cold War was an important period in this development, as weapons were transferred across regions in connection with conflicts and political competition. [4]

The consequences of Cold War-era arms transfers continued even after the Cold War ended. Weapons supplied during conflicts could remain in government stockpiles, be captured by armed groups, or enter informal and illicit markets. NATO describes the end of the Cold War as leaving behind a "dangerous legacy" of ageing arms and ammunition, along with other military materials that required disposal and improved management. In response to these challenges, NATO established the Partnership for Peace Trust Fund mechanism in 1999 to assist partner countries with issues including the disposal of conventional ammunition and SALW, as well as stockpile management. [6]



"Abandoned Cold War Stockpiles"
https://wildernessmarksman.com/abandoned-cold-war-stockpiles-that-still-raise-eyebrows-today/



"Boxes of ammunition fallen apart and rotted due to improper storage"
https://www.osce.org/fsc/4245

The growth of international arms transfers also demonstrated the difficulty of distinguishing between legal and illicit weapons. Weapons can begin their life within legal systems before being diverted through unauthorized transfers, inadequate controls, or other forms of misuse. The European Parliamentary Research Service notes that SALW can enter the illicit sphere at different stages, including manufacture, transfer, possession, storage, and disposal. This made controlling the trade increasingly dependent on effective national regulations and international cooperation. [5]

Consequently, governments began developing legal frameworks to regulate firearms and arms transfers more systematically.

Earlier national legislation focused largely on domestic possession, licensing, and control, while later approaches steadily addressed the cross-border movement and diversion of weapons. At the regional level, the European Union adopted measures concerning firearms and arms transfers, including efforts to establish common standards among member states. The EU also adopted its 2005 Strategy on Small Arms and Light Weapons, reflecting a growing recognition that illicit accumulation and trafficking required coordinated policies rather than isolated national measures. [5]

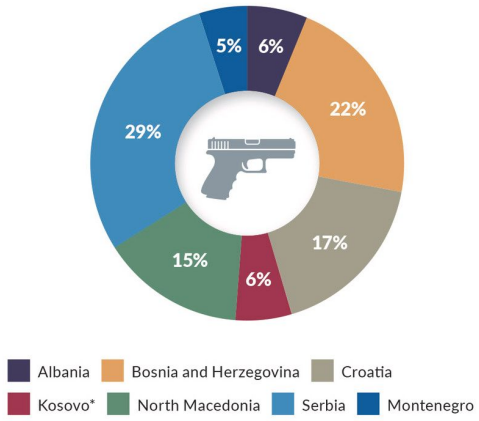
By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, SALW had therefore become recognized not simply as instruments of warfare, but as a broader international security and governance concern. This historical development established the foundation for the international efforts to combat illicit SALW that followed.

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CASE EXAMPLES

While the Cold War is considered a large influence in the spread of SALW across multiple regions, there are other, more recent events that have led to the spread of these weapons.

Post-Yugoslav Balkans: The Yugoslav wars from the 1990s left Eastern Europe with stockpiles of weapons, and even decades later, these stockpiles still circulate. Serbia alone has around 1.5 million unregistered firearms along with 1.1 million registered ones, and an AK-47 that once cost €180-300 on Bosnia's black market now sells for much more amid rising demand in Europe. Post-war border issues and organized crime networks have turned the region into a hotspot for smuggling weapons into Western Europe. This shows how post-war surpluses can outlive the war itself, even by decades. [7]



"Illicit weapons in the Western Balkans" https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/see-obs-002/02-illicit-weapons-in-the-western-balkans-a-threat-to-europe.html

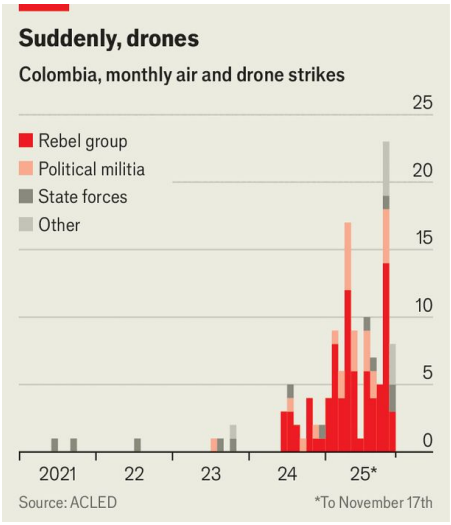
Libya (Gaddafi's fall): In 2011, Muammar Gaddafi's regime collapsed, and Libya's arsenal of around 200,000 tons of weapons spilled across borders as fighters dispersed throughout the Sahel. This was a direct reason for the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in Mali and armed groups like al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, though newer research suggests Libya's role has been overstated relative to diverted regional stockpiles. This is a strong case for discussing how state collapse (rather than deliberate trafficking policy) can trigger regional spread of SALW, and how a UN arms embargo (that has been in place since 2011) can still fail to stop weapons flow. [8]

Somalia: Somalia has had a UN arms embargo since 1992, yet illicit weapons still reach al-Shabaab (a Somalia-based, al-Qaeda-affiliated militant group) through smuggling, diversion from Somali National Army bases, and clan militia networks. Weapons that have been seized from al-Shabaab were manufactured as recently as 2021, proving the group maintains access to illicit supplies. The UN Security Council has repeatedly renewed authorization for member states to intercept any banned arms, but there are clear limitations when it comes to embargo enforcement in a weak state with porous maritime borders and inadequate stockpile security. [9]

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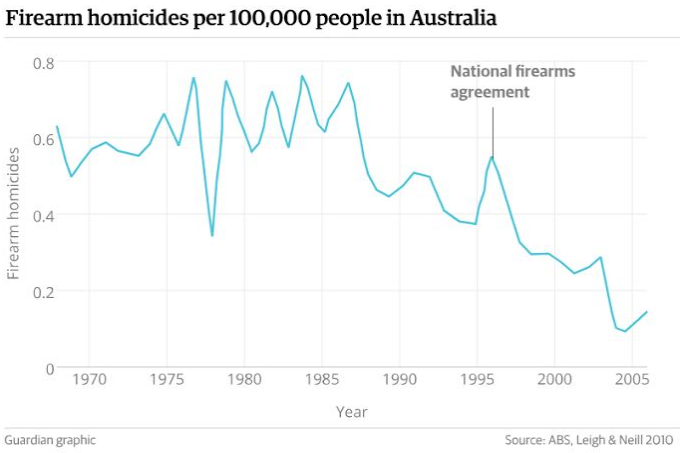
These examples illustrate various efforts in recent years to battle this proliferation:

Columbia / FARC: In 2016, the Havana peace accord was signed by the government of Columbia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a Columbian militant group, ending over 50 years of conflict. By mid-2017, 6,804 FARC fighters registered and gradually turned over 8,994 weapons to the UN Verification Mission. The process used deliberately non-defeat language ("dejación de armas," or "laying down arms") to encourage voluntary compliance. Surrendered weapons were melted down into public art as a symbol of peace. However, this case also shows the limits of disarmament. Dissident FARC factions have since re-armed, illustrating that DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration) success doesn't guarantee it sticks. [10]



"Columbia's armed groups" https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2025/11/25/colombias-armed-groups-are-experimenting-with-deadly-drones

West Africa / ECOWAS: Sixteen states participating in ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States, signed a non-binding Moratorium in 1998. However, when voluntary compliance proved insufficient, civil society pressure helped convert it into the legally binding 2006 ECOWAS Convention. This gave West Africa stricter arms controls than any other region in the world. This case is useful for showing an evolution from soft to hard law. Implementation still varies by state. [11]



https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/15/it-took-one-massacre-how-australia-made-gun-control-happen-after-port-arthur

Australia's National Firearms Agreement (1996): After 35 people were killed in the Port Arthur massacre, Australia enacted uniform gun laws and mandatory buyback (government-mandated surrender of banned firearm categories). Australia collected more than 640,000 firearms, mainly rifles and shotguns. The annual gun death rate fell from 2.9 per 100,000 in 1996 to 0.9 per 100,000 by 2016. Researchers still dispute how much credit the NFA itself deserves, however. This is a useful domestic case on buyback programs and the ongoing debate over measuring policy effectiveness. [12]

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PAST UN ACTIONS

UN Programme of Action on SALW (2001): This global framework was adopted by consensus at a UN conference in July 2001 after three preparatory committee sessions. It's the first global framework meant specifically for illicit SALW, and states pledged to improve their national small arms laws, import and export controls, stockpile management, and international cooperation regarding these initiatives. It is not legally binding. US pressure during negotiations led to the removal of stronger provisions like limits on civilian ownership and transfers to non-state groups. Since adoption, the PoA has operated on a review cycle. Review Conferences take place roughly every six years and are meant to assess implementation. The 2006 conference failed to reach a consensus outcome document, which illustrates how the same voluntary structure that made adoption possible also limits actual enforcement. [13] [14]

Arms Trade Treaty (2013 / 2014): This is the first legally binding treaty regulating international conventional arms trade. It was adopted by the UN General Assembly on April 2, 2013 with 154 votes in favor (Iran, North Korea, and Syria voted against, with 23 abstentions including Russia and China). The ATT entered into force on December 24, 2014, and requires states to assess export risks, including whether weapons could be used for war crimes, terrorism, or gender-based violence. Its main weakness is participation. The US signed in 2013 but never ratified it, and in 2019 the Trump administration formally announced it would not seek ratification and considered the US signature revoked. This is, of course, an action with no real legal mechanism, since unsigning is not recognized under international law. Major arms exporters Russia and China never joined at all. [15] [16]

Security Council Arms Embargoes: The UN Security Council has used Chapter VII authority to impose case-specific embargoes. Somalia's was imposed in 1992, and is one of the longest running embargoes in UN history. Sanctions committees are also tasked with monitoring violations. Nonetheless, these arms embargoes reveal the gap between UN prohibition and real-world enforcement. Al-Shabaab continues to acquire weapons through smuggling networks and national army stockpiles, despite the embargo. As a response, the Security Council has repeatedly renewed authorization for member states to intercept vessels carrying illicit arms. This makes embargoes a useful contrast to PoA and ATT, as they show the UN's enforcement-oriented tool. As always, it has practical limits without the resources or political will to fully police them. [17]

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BLOC ANALYSIS

Major Arms Exporters:

This bloc includes the world's arms-producing and exporting states. The US, France, Russia, Germany, and China together account for roughly 70% of the global arms trade. These states generally frame SALW policy around national security, economic interests (defense industry), and alliance commitments, and are wary of binding international mechanisms that could restrict their trade flexibility or sovereignty. This split is visible within the bloc itself. European exporters like France and Germany have ratified the ATT, while the US, Russia, and China have not. [18]

Conflict Affected / Importing States:

This bloc includes states that bear the direct consequences of illicit SALW flows. Somalia, the DRC, Mali, and South Sudan, many of which are already under UN arms embargoes, are in this bloc. These states generally push for stronger international controls and better enforcement, as well as more funding and technical support for stockpile security and border monitoring. They often lack the domestic capacity to enforce the rules they support. These states are often frustrated that global frameworks are more focused on the regulation of legal exports while doing too little to stop weapons diversion once they actually arrive in the region, especially from poorly secured military stockpiles. [19]

Transit and Trafficking States:

This bloc includes states that sit along major trafficking routes. Balkan states, West African coastal and Sahel-adjacent states, and parts of Central Asia are key examples. These states prioritize border security, customs capacity, and regional information-sharing over broader ethics or legality of the arms trade. Their core challenge is to intercept these trades, not the production of the weapons or the armed conflict. The Balkans is a well-documented smuggling corridor into Western Europe, and Niger has become a key transit point for weapons moving from Libya into the Sahel. This block's cooperation can determine whether other blocs' policies succeed in practice. [20]

TOPIC A: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How can the international community balance a state's right to self-defense and legitimate arms trade with the need to prevent illicit diversion, and where should that line be drawn?

- Given that frameworks like the PoA and ATT rely heavily on voluntary compliance, what realistic enforcement mechanisms (if any) could gain buy-in from both major exporters and import-dependent states (two opposing blocs)?

- Since a large share of illicit weapons originate from diverted legal stockpiles rather than black-market manufacturing, should the international community prioritize funding stockpile security and DDR programs over tightening export controls? Can both be pursued together?

- How should the international community respond to emerging challenges like 3D-printed "ghost guns" and craft-produced weapons, which fall outside the scope of existing treaties built around state-to-state transfers?

- What role should regional organizations (like ECOWAS) play compared to global frameworks (like the UN PoA or ATT), and are binding regional agreements a more realistic path forward than trying to achieve global consensus?

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