

The United Nations Conventional Arms Register (UNCAR): Present Challenges, New Directions

I. Introduction

In December 1991 the United Nations General Assembly passed resolution 46/36L entitled *Transparency in Armaments* (hereafter referred to as TIA), creating the *United Nations Register of Conventional Arms* (hereafter referred to as the Register). The vote was 150-0, with Cuba and Iraq abstaining and China and Syria not present. The Register was put into operation on 1 January 1992, and in April 1993 member states of the UN began voluntarily submitting data on weapons transfers and background information on military holdings, procurement through national holdings, procurement through national production (PNP) and relevant policies for the calendar year 1992.

The basic operating philosophy of the Register of Conventional Arms was one of cooperative security. Given the end of the Cold War and a very costly Gulf War, a consensus was emerging that the international community could do more to prevent such conflicts from erupting by developing a system of transparency in armaments designed to "reduce the occurrence of dangerous misperceptions about the intentions of states and to promote trust among States."¹

Eight years later the international community is taking stock of the participation in and impact of the Register as a cooperative security regime. On one level an average of between 80-90 countries now regularly report data on conventional weapons as a matter of course and, for the most part, in accordance with the Register's procedures. A web site has been set up by the UN Department of Disarmament Affairs (UNDDA) that makes these data available to the international community at large. It is fair to say that a great deal of official information on arms transfers, holdings, PNP and policies now exists, compared to a previous era of maximum secrecy and mistrust.

But the Register was designed to be a first step in achieving greater goals. The preamble of the TIA resolution referred to enhancing confidence, easing tensions, strengthening regional and international peace and security, and restraint in military production and the transfer of arms, all of which could lead to "a world free from the scourge of war and the burden of armaments." It is clear that the Register has fallen short of playing what many hoped would be a major role in a cooperative security regime that would address the key problem stated in the first paragraph of the TIA resolution, the "excessive and destabilizing arms buildups pos(ing) a threat to national, regional and international peace and security, particularly by aggravating tensions and conflict situations."

¹ . GA Resolution 46/36L, preambular paragraph 3.