

GUN CONTROL FOR THE WORLD

All through history, efforts at controlling which countries get which weapons have failed. What do we have to do to get it right?

BY KEITH KRAUSE

IN THE WAKE OF THE CARNAGE OF THE PERSIAN GULF WAR, POLICY makers, scholars and journalists are debating how to control the global trade in weapons. The dispute turns on differing views of the fundamental nature of international politics. On one hand, those in the "never again" tradition proclaim the birth of a "new world order" that will address the underlying factors believed to have caused or exacerbated the conflict. On the other, pessimists see the reassertion of American global ascendancy and the resort to military means to resolve conflicts as illustrating the "same old anarchy."

From the US administration, contradictory signals mirroring both positions have emerged. Secretary of State James Baker argued in early February for "much tighter supply restraints on the flow of weapons" into the Middle East. But in March, the White House made public its intention to sell US \$18 billion of weapons to its Persian Gulf allies, and to use Export-Import Bank credits to finance arms exports around the world.

The Canadian position has at least the virtue of greater consistency. Both Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and former Minister of External Affairs Joe Clark argued during and after the war that "the world must learn from this war that an unrestricted arms trade in this region is no longer acceptable," and coupled these views with a concrete proposal for a "world summit on instruments of war and weapons of mass destruction."

But are we likely to see the successful control of the diffusion of modern weapons? Are these efforts sincere, or merely a means for governments to satisfy the public unease over the arms trade in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf war? Several international initiatives to control the arms trade were already receiving attention behind the scenes, and have now become more prominent. A new international non-governmental agency, "Armswatch," is being established in Europe to monitor and publicize the arms trade. This fall, the United Nations will release a proposal to increase the "transparency" of arms exports. And the US Office of Technology Assessment is studying the diffusion of military technologies and military production.

THESE INITIATIVES AND DIPLOMATIC ENERGY OR GOODWILL ALONE DO NOT guarantee success. With more than \$40 billion in arms being traded each year between almost fifty suppliers and more than a hundred recipients, the scale of the required efforts is vast. Controls on the arms trade will ultimately succeed only if they take into account the forces that lead states to buy and sell weapons and weapons-producing technologies.

There are good reasons to be gloomy over the prospects for successful control of the arms trade. The US continues to use arms transfers to friendly states as a foreign policy tool, as evidenced by the proposed \$18 billion sale, and the Soviet Union sees arms sales as one of its new sources of hard currency. Lesser producers, such as Britain and France, rely on exports to keep their defence industries at the technological forefront (up to half of the arms produced in both countries in the 1980s were exported), and producers in the developing world such as South Korea are eager to expand exports for their industries' survival.

Arms recipients too have shown little interest in restrictions, seeing such efforts as another bid to freeze a global distribution of military power which runs against them. Although eighty percent of the weapons traded *between* states go to the developing world, it "consumes" no more than twenty percent of the roughly \$280 billion of annual world weapons production. Most military hardware is produced by the US, USSR, UK, France and other major powers for their own forces.

It is not surprising then that controlling the arms trade without controlling arms production and procurement is seen by the developing world as hypocritical discrimination against states unable to produce arms for themselves. Overcoming this perception, therefore, requires that control measures be rooted in recipient states' own interests in managing or resolving their conflicts.

THE HISTORY OF ATTEMPTS TO CONTROL THE ARMS TRADE REINFORCES A pessimistic view. As far back as Charlemagne, rulers have tried to prohibit or restrict the export of weapons that could be used against them, almost always to no avail. In 1574, Queen Elizabeth I of England ordered arms exports to be halted after it was pointed out that the export of English cannon meant that "yor enimie is better furnished with them than or own country ships ar." Heavy fines were imposed for unauthorized exports, but the trade continued.

In the late nineteenth century, the European colonial powers sought via the Brussels Act (1890) to restrict the flow of weapons into Africa, in order to preserve their political and military control. But again, arms continued to be sold throughout Africa wherever commercial and political advantages outweighed immediate dangers.

Twentieth century initiatives have enjoyed equally little success. Between World Wars I and II, the League of Nations launched comprehensive multilateral negotiations to reduce the arms trade. Conspiracy theories about the role of shady arms dealers in triggering wars in the Balkans and elsewhere fuelled public sentiment against the arms trade, but governments could not agree on concrete measures. All that was accomplished was the establishment of a short-lived (and highly inaccurate) voluntary register of the trade in arms and ammunition.

The most recent attempt at control, the American-Soviet Conventional Arms Transfer Talks (CATT), founded on growing superpower suspicion and competition in the developing world in the late 1970s. Although ambitious, CATT did not address specific regional concerns, did not engage other major producers, and did not involve recipient states. The eight-year long Iran-Iraq war virtually eliminated all talk of partial controls on the arms trade, and was a bonanza for smaller arms producers willing to supply the weapons that major producers were (at least initially) reluctant to sell.

If new attempts to control the arms trade are to succeed, lessons must be extracted from this history of failure. The most prominent lesson seems to be that the problem must be broken into more manageable pieces. There are three strategies to accomplish this:

- Concentrate on specific regions or sub-regions that are excessively over-armed and conflict-prone. Although the Middle East stands out (the