

Some of the information which could be requested for a register may be considered by some countries to be of a sensitive nature for national security reasons, to be politically embarrassing or to be classed as vital economic or police intelligence. In some cases, this may appear to be more a question of mindset rather than fact, but it still may deter some nations from participating. Regrettably for those nations, there are few secrets in the world today. While the extent of light weapons transfers, holdings and production may never be completely revealed, national capabilities in gross terms can be accurately gauged. To prove this point, one must only search the open literature and internet sources.⁴³ Therefore, reticence to reveal register information on the part of any one nation is likely to prove to be without solid basis.

In fact, vagueness of details may breed a more dangerous situation. One of the strengths of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms is the fact that official information is available, thus dispelling unfounded and potentially dangerous estimates by outside agencies which may be inaccurate and which may lead to incorrect reactions by other nations or economic competitors.⁴⁴

Limited confidentiality in a register may be attractive to some nations in order to satisfy the criticism that information freely given would be a bonus for other nations who do not participate in the register. There is the possibility that information could be shared only among participating countries and kept confidential or secret from non-participants. This is certainly one method of operation which may work under certain circumstances, for instance when there are a small number of nations involved. It may be a way to introduce the operation of a register in an incremental manner to participants with a view to moving to full transparency at a later date.

If a level of confidentiality were introduced into the operation of a register, however, it would be difficult if not impossible to maintain. There is little assurance that confidentiality, of whatever level, would be completely effective. If only some material were to be given a level of confidentiality, there would be a need for guidelines to protect it. A system of checks would need to be instituted to ensure that only appropriate material is being released in a prescribed manner. The transmission of data and the physical handling of it under some level of confidentiality would increase costs.

It may be that a lack of confidentiality in the register would increase the hesitancy of some nations to participate. While efforts to convince such nations that their fears are unfounded should continue, they could be offered the opportunity for partial participation. None of the information provided by a participant should be dependent upon submissions being complete. While the ideal is that all nations will participate fully, even partial information in the initial stages of the register's maturity would be useful. (In fact, it must be accepted that some nations will not be able to provide all the information which they might wish because of the lack of an ability to collect the information.) Nations wary of disclosing all their available information should be encouraged to contribute what they feel comfortable with, or capable of, divulging in the hope of fostering further, full participation later. In other words, the register should be structured for maximum inclusion in every way rather than pointedly excluding participation in any way.