

The International Trade in Military Goods

1. What are "military goods"?

The world's militaries are large, complex organizations. They buy almost every kind of product, from guns to butter. However, only some of these items are "specially designed or modified for military use," the internationally accepted definition of military goods, established by the members of the Wassenaar Arrangement. Wassenaar is a group of 33 countries that are committed to co-ordinated action to prevent weapons and key high-technology products from falling into the wrong hands (more details are included under Question 7).

The Wassenaar definition includes weapons and ammunition, as well as specialized military vehicles, aircraft and vessels, training simulators and other electronic equipment. It is a broad definition covering things normally considered "military," such as tanks and combat aircraft, as well as gun models now normally used by hunters and target shooters rather than armed forces. It includes some products — for instance, certain types of radios used in harsh environments such as offshore oil rigs — that civilian government agencies, police forces, businesses or private citizens might also buy. These products are included because they were originally designed for military use.

In addition to its controls on military goods, Canada carefully screens exports of "dual-use" goods. These differ from "military" goods because their ordinary use is commercial and civilian. However, they are high-tech goods with possible strategic military value (e.g., advanced materials, specialized metal alloys, global positioning systems and remote sensing equipment). Exporters require permits for these goods because the materials or technology may be of interest to users who could represent a potential threat to international peace and security.

Wassenaar deals only in conventional military technology; it does not cover "weapons of mass destruction." Those nuclear, biological, chemical and toxic weapons and related technologies are covered by separate agreements designed to prevent or control their trade. Canada does not trade in weapons of mass destruction and fully supports international agreements designed to prevent transfers of relevant technologies without appropriate safeguards.

Goods that are subject to export controls are listed in Canada's Export Control List (ECL). Goods that are not listed in the ECL are not controlled (i.e. their trade is not regulated). Uncontrolled items include automobiles, helicopters, food or office equipment that are "off the shelf" or not "specially designed or modified for military use." This includes basic commodities that militaries routinely use such as boots or concrete.