

Implications for the Control of Conventional Weapons Proliferation

The Pros and Cons of Efforts to Control Conventional Proliferation

The nature of the problem is now clear: conventional weapons are widely available and frequently used, they are legitimately possessed for self-defence, their export is economically attractive, and their control is extremely difficult to engineer. As the Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade said in 1991:

the international community has yet to come to grips with the problem posed by the huge volumes of conventional arms transfers. While agreements are in place or under negotiation to control or eliminate weapons of mass destruction, there is as yet no remotely comparable process for conventional weapons. We need to acknowledge openly the difficulties which stand in the way of conventional arms control; compared with weapons of mass destruction, they are relatively readily available; trade is well established and lucrative; and considerations of national sovereignty, and the legitimate responsibility of any government to ensure national security, mean that countries are reluctant to forgo the right to acquire conventional arms.³¹

But from this two diametrically opposing policy positions can be advocated. On one hand, pessimists can simply conclude that the obstacles to meaningful control are too great, and hence that policy attention should focus exclusively on weapons of mass destruction, which in any case pose imminent and pressing threats or problems in several areas.³² On the other, one can argue that conventional weapons should be brought, albeit slowly, into the arms control and non-proliferation arena.

There are essentially four arguments against devoting attention to conventional weapons under the rubric of "controlling proliferation." The first is that since no "zero" prohibition for control exists, agreement on "how much is enough" is much more difficult (if not impossible) to engineer than for weapons of mass destruction. Nuclear, chemical and biological weapons (and to a lesser extent missiles) are under a presumption that their possession is illegitimate, and that any spread beyond the existing possessors (in the case of nuclear weapons and some ballistic missiles) should be forestalled. The importance of "zero-based" controls in reaching agreements was highlighted by the process leading to the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty: any solution other than the "double zero" posed tremendous negotiation and verification difficulties. However, there are few areas of

³¹ Speech of Gareth Evans to the UN Conference on Disarmament Issues, Kyoto, Japan, 27 May 1991. Reprinted in SIPRI, *1992 Yearbook*, 291.

³² This was substantially the position advocated by the British Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, in 1991. Cited in SIPRI, *1992 Yearbook*, 292.