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### ABSTRACT

The horrendous shooting down of 32 students and faculty in cold blood by a student at Virginia Tech University has once again highlighted the high price America is playing for the proliferation of small arms. The tragedy comes as the April 30 deadline nears for United Nations member states to submit their views to the Secretary General on the feasibility and parameters for a legally binding Arms Trade Treaty. This is a follow up to the historic meeting of the General Assembly on December 6, 2006, when 153 member states overwhelmingly voted in favour of working out such a treaty.



**KEYWORDS :** *historic meeting , proliferation , law enforcing agencies , counterterrorist militias.*

### INTRODUCTION :

There had been no real effort so far to regulate international trade in small arms (those that can be fired by one individual without help). One major reason is that the five permanent members of the Security Council – France, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and the United States – account for 88 per cent of the world's exports of conventional arms. Accordingly to U.N. estimates, there are around 640 million small arms floating around in the world, out of which only about 226 million pieces are in the hands of armed forces and law enforcing agencies. China with 41 million weapons has the largest military arsenal followed by Russia and North Korea in that order. India with a small arms arsenal of about 3 million weapons.

Even the weapons with armed forces and law enforcing agencies sometimes trickle down to the public for various reasons. These include the arming of vigilante groups and counterterrorist militias and questionable sale of military firearms to non-state actors – groups operating outside the pale of the law.

About 1 per cent of the global holdings, that is 6.4 million weapons – roughly the size of India's

arsenal – are believed to be in the hands of militants, insurgents, terrorists, and other anti-state forces. In the cold war era, legal as well as illegal trade and transfer of small arms and light weapons was used to destabilize societies and bleed nations by promoting insurgencies. The trend still continues as was seen during the ethnic war in Bosnia. Serbia armed the Bosnian Serb Irregulars to carry out ethnic cleansing of the muslim population.

Improvements in technology have made small arms more compact and lighter while adding to their firepower. The introduction of rocket – propelled weapons has qualitatively improved firepower. The modern day militant armed with the latest firearms coupled with real time communication systems is stronger than ever before to face organized state forces. The ease before to face organized state forces. The ease of global travel has increased his reach. Al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks in the U.S. brought into sharp focus the capability of a small number of terrorists to inflict serious damage to modern societies across the globe. They have also developed the capability to procure, finance, and transport small arms and light weapons across the world.

In south Asia, infiltration of political parties by criminal elements has introduced small arms as a tool to gain coercive power in public life. Poor governance and weaknesses in the criminal justice system have increased the clout of power brokers supported by armed gangs. Mandatory licensing of weapons and tight restrictions on automatic weapons had controlled the legal proliferation of weapons among the civilian population. Unfortunately, as criminals gained more political influence, the gun culture was ushered in as part of political life in most of the states in South Asia. This has vitiated the effectiveness of existing gun control laws.

In India, flaunting of weapons as a symbol and source of power has become common place in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Federalism, caste conflict, and a deepening rich – poor divide have given rise to the spread of weapon – related crimes. And, indiscriminate issue of weapon licences as political favoursh has armed entire communities in parts of India. The ever – increasing role of the gun as the arbiter in India movies is a visible assertion of this unhealthy social trend. This reflects the increasing social tolerance of the gun culture, with firearm-widelding heroes becoming youth icons. For the most part, the media also appears to have joined this populist bandwagon as seen by the soft treatment meted out to Bollywood star Sanjay Dutt, who is being prosecuted for illegal possession of an AK-47.

### The real threat

However, the real threat of weapons proliferation in civil society comes from the more than 250 militant and insurgency movements spawned in South Asia during the last four decades. Fortunately, only about 110 of them are currently active. India has the dubious distinct of witnessing 152 militant movements, of which 64 are believed to be active in some form or the other. Pakistan comes next, being the home of 51 groups of which 31 are said to be active.

Some of the group such as Al-Qaeda, Lakshkar-e-Taiba, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam are in the big league of global terrorist organizations. Though no firm data is available, the militant groups are estimated to be in possession of 100,000 to 120,000 weapons. Of course, the figure does not include small arms with criminal gangs operating in South Asia.

There is no dearth of illegal arms in and around South Asia. At the end of the Second World War and after the defeat of the Kuomintang in China, huge quantities of used weapons were unloaded in Southeast Asia in the early 1960s. Similarly the fall of south Vietnam and the end of conflicts in Laos and Cambodia flooded the grey markets of Asia with illegal weapons.

In Myanmar as many as 33 armed ethnic insurgent groups had been waging war for nearly four

decades now. Ethnic insurgent groups from India's Northeast also have sanctuaries in Myanmar and Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh after liberation, the fire arms held by the freedom fighters were never fully accounted for. Armed criminal elements found sponsors in almost all political parties. Thus over the years militant gangs have become a great menace in Bangladeshi society. Bangladesh is also home to the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami and Hizbut Touhid – two major terrorist groups with Taliban roots. The growing nexus between politicians and criminals has resulted in Bangladesh emerging as an important transit point for weapons moved from the Asean region. According to retired Major General Syed Muhammad Ibrahim, 128 crime syndicates in Bangladesh were using 400,000 illegal weapons.

Pakistan has a long history of arming militant groups in India and Afghanistan. Its involvement in support of the Islamists in Afghanistan to fight the soviet forces brought into the region a lot of weapons supplied by the CIA. As a result, armed violence has become common place in the Shia Sunni and other sectarian and ethnic confrontations in Pakistan.

In Sri Lanka, in the decade before India intervened in 1987, more than 37 Tamil militant groups came into being. Though all these groups except the LTTE surrendered arms after the signing of the Rajiv Gandhi Jayawardane accord in 1987, a number of illegal weapons found their way to the civilian population. A large number of illegal weapons found their way to the civilian population. A large number of army deserters with small arms have also been a source of criminal acts in the island. The Tamil insurgency had also introduced the gun culture in Tamil Nadu.

Between 1994 and 2005 in India, 47,311 people lost their lives in armed violence, with Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab accounting for most of the deaths. This figure does not include naxalite violence, which took 1,973 lives between 2003 and 2005. Most of these deaths were caused by small arms. These appalling figures speak eloquently of the catastrophe the nation is facing from uncontrolled spread of illegal arms and the spiraling militancy.

The militant's never – ending thirst for arms creates an illegal network of manufacturers, suppliers, financiers, transporters, and corrupt official, every point of this supply chain spawns more crimes – bribery, corruption, theft, illegal documentation. The list seems endless. The asian traders preference to keep secret accounts and to use the illegal hawala route for financial transactions aids the militants arms trafficking.

Thus it is essential that south asian countries unite not only in fighting terrorism but also in curtailing the proliferation of small arms. They should endorse the arms trade treaty at the U.N. and ensure it is introduced without any more delay. Otherwise, their war against militancy and terrorism may never be won.

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