Tackling small arms trafficking in the OSCE

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Introduction
In November and December 2001, two teams of OSCE experts travelled to Central Asia to help the region combat the illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons. Long plagued by weapons trafficking, the Central Asian states continue to face instability caused by the situation in Afghanistan, where millions of weapons have accumulated over two decades of conflict. Countries like Uzbekistan have become increasingly concerned about the cross-border traffic in both weapons and drugs, as it threatens to undermine security within their territory. In Tajikistan, widespread weapons availability among the civilian population is a legacy of that country’s own civil war. In response to these challenges, the OSCE teams proposed a number of measures which could assist the Central Asian states in stemming the flow of small arms and light weapons throughout the region.

How did an organisation like the OSCE, which is better known for norm- and standard-setting in the military sphere, become involved in combating illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons in Central Asia? The answer lies both in the membership of the organisation and the nature of the problem.

Once regarded as the orphans of arms control, small arms and light weapons\(^1\) are now recognised as causing a majority of deaths and injuries in combat and non-combat situations. Many of the low-level, low-intensity conflicts which have characterised the years since the end of the cold war are fought largely with small arms and light weapons. Often used indiscriminately, these weapons can be responsible for just as many fatalities among civilians as among combatants. In fact, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has estimated that, in certain situations, up to 64% of the casualties in conflict areas are borne by civilians, often women and children.\(^2\)

Unlike heavy conventional weapons, such as tanks or artillery, small arms

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2 The OSCE Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons defines these weapons as ‘man-portable weapons made or modified to military specifications for use as lethal instruments of war. Small arms are broadly categorized as those weapons intended for use by individual members of armed or security forces. They include revolvers and self-loading pistols; rifles and carbines; sub-machine guns; assault rifles; and light machine guns. Light weapons are broadly categorized as those weapons intended for use by several members of armed or security forces serving as a crew. They include heavy machine guns; hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers; portable anti-aircraft guns; portable anti-tank guns; recoilless rifles; portable launchers of anti-tank missile and rocket systems; portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems; and mortars of calibres less than 100 mm.’ OSCE Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons, FSC.DOC/01/00, 24 November 2000. Hereinafter referred to as ‘small arms’.
and light weapons are widely available. The United Nations has estimated that there are over 500 million small arms and light weapons in circulation around the world, but the real number may be considerably higher.\(^4\) Small arms are cheap and easy to conceal, which means they are highly portable and can be relatively easily smuggled across borders. Rapid-fire military assault rifles are becoming increasingly widely available, particularly among rebel groups, terrorist organisations and organised criminal gangs. Even shoulder-fired rockets, mortars and light anti-tank weapons have found their way into the hands of individuals and non-state groups. Often, their firepower now outpaces that of the police or military. Furthermore, automatic assault rifles, such as the Russian-designed AK-47 or the German G-3, are very durable, require little or no logistical support, and are relatively easy to use. Even children and teenagers can be trained to use them.

**Putting the issue on the international agenda**

Initially, it was civil society groups and research institutes that identified the problems caused by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Encouraged by the success of the campaign to ban anti-personnel landmines, a vocal group of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) began to press for stricter controls and enhanced transparency for small arms and light weapons transfers.

The failure, or even the absence of comprehensive disarmament as part of peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations, with Somalia as a particularly conspicuous example, convinced many NGOs, as well as the United Nations, that small arms control should be addressed more comprehensively at the national and international level. In his 1995 ‘Supplement to An Agenda for Peace’, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali identified the control of small arms and light weapons, particularly through ‘micro-disarmament’, as a priority for the world body.\(^5\) Later, the UN General Assembly established a Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms, which made a number of far-reaching recommendations.\(^6\)

By 1999, the United Nations General Assembly had already agreed to convene a major international conference on the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons by the end of 2001. This will be considered below, within the context of OSCE initiatives, which were by this stage already well-developed.

Almost concurrently, the European Union also began work on a number of agreements on conventional weapons, including the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Transfers, a regional agreement with common criteria for arms exports.\(^7\) The EU

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