The twentieth century was one of the most violent, destructive and bloody periods in the history of the human race. In scores of armed conflicts, ranging from border disputes to global wars, perhaps hundreds of millions were killed, with many more suffering injury, loss and displacement. Almost all these conflicts were fought with standard military weapons. This means that in the relatively recent past the world has seen hundreds of millions of people – combatants and non-combatants – killed or injured largely through the use of commonplace artillery, machine guns, rifles, pistols, grenades and such like.

The predisposition for armed violence shows little sign of abating. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, there have been between twelve and twenty major armed conflicts in every year of the new millennium. And the toll on non-combatants is as high as ever. The Control Arms Campaign, a consortium of non-governmental organisations, estimates that at least a third of a million people are killed every year by conventional weapons, with countless others enduring all the other miseries of armed conflict.

There have long been calls to do something about this carnage, and in particular to find ways to control the scale and percent at the start of the century, rising to some fifteen percent during the First World War, to about 65 percent by the end of the Second World War, and culminating in around ninety percent during the 1990s.

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impact of the international trade in conventional weapons. Most conceivable approaches have been attempted over the years: there have been loose political agreements, confidence-building initiatives and legally-binding measures, and these various efforts have been tried nationally, bilaterally, regionally and internationally.

Yet the international market in conventional weapons has so far proved stubbornly resistant to effective regulation; the world is flooded with small arms and light weapons in particular, making it all too possible for tension to escalate into highly destructive and long-running conflict. Over the past eighteen months, however, a new and ambitious initiative has acquired a great deal of momentum, in diplomatic circles and among other key constituencies.

REALISTIC AMBITIONS


At first glance, the resolution is yet another dose of all-too-familiar UN rhetoric about arms control, disarmament, non-proliferation and international peace and security. It did not actually do very much either, other than call for more research and analysis, and more meetings of more committees and a report to the General Assembly’s First Committee at the UN on October 6. But the language is more subtle and clever than might at first appear, and the idea behind the treaty is both more realistic and ambitious than previous efforts at arms trade regulation.

TIGHTENING TRADE

The treaty would be founded on the recognition that all states have the right to defend themselves against aggression and, by extension, to go to the international market place to acquire the weapons and military equipment they would need; particularly if they have no indigenous military industry. In important respects, therefore, the international arms trade is legitimate, and even desirable.

By tightening and universalising the trading rules of a ‘responsible’ international arms market, a treaty would aim to crowd out illegal and informal arms trafficking and, over time, dry up the pool of illegal conventional weapons and limit the death and damage with which we have become too familiar.

The initiative has acquired impressive diplomatic momentum. Of the 192 member states of the United Nations, 153 voted for the resolution at its launch, and a remarkable hundred or so have made submissions to a group of governmental experts established by the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon to examine the ‘feasibility, scope and draft parameters for a comprehensive, legally binding’ treaty.

Even more impressive is that the treaty is supported not only by non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International and Oxfam, but also by legitimate defence manufacturers and exporters. Human rights non-governmental organisations and the arms industry have in the past not been the easiest of bedfellows.

If the treaty is to succeed, the unlikely fusion of realism and idealism which drove the original resolution will have to be sustained; ways will have to be found to ensure that the process retains the support of its diverse constituencies and that organisations such as Oxfam and BAE Systems remain happily together.

The challenges are significant, to say the least. In the first place, about twenty countries are sceptical of the whole thing, and several of these are among the world’s largest importers and exporters of conventional weapons; it is difficult to see how the treaty could succeed if it has anything less than universal support, particularly among the major players in the international arms market.

Enforcement will be another problem. Unlike previous initiatives which have been ‘politically binding’ – an expression which can be little more than a contradiction in terms – the treaty is intended to be ‘a comprehensive, legally binding instrument establishing common international standards’. But who or what will enforce the treaty, what resources will be necessary to enable enforcement, and what sanctions will be imposed on defaulters?

SOBER EVALUATION

Then there is the vexed question of performance indicators. How will success or otherwise be judged? Appallingly, around the world perhaps as many as one thousand people are killed every day through the use of conventional weapons. Some might argue that the goal must therefore be simply to prevent such killing. The moral principle behind this position is impossible to contradict. But in the context of international arms control, rhetoric of this sort is at best naïve and at worst damaging, setting the bar so high that the treaty could only fail.

Almost by definition, illegal and informal arms trading is unlikely to be stamped out. What is required, therefore, alongside the diplomatic effort at the UN, is a sober evaluation of the nature of the problem – what are the scale and dynamics of the illegal arms trade? Who are the main players and where are their activities most vulnerable to disruption? – followed by an assessment of what the treaty could reasonably be expected to achieve.

The best should not be made the enemy of the good: the black and grey markets in conventional weapons will not be eliminated altogether and it follows, however brutal the logic, that there must be an ‘acceptable level’ of illegal arms trading; identifying and then getting to that point – perhaps in stages – should be the goal of the Arms Trade Treaty.

The treaty promises neither universal disarmament nor world peace. But if it can continue to be developed as an agreement which is both global in scope and binding in international law, and if the diverse support base can be sustained, this will be a remarkable and valuable achievement in international arms control and disarmament.