

# The Proliferation of Conventional Weapons: A Post-Cold War Problem

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## The Proliferation of Conventional Weapons: A Post-Cold War Problem

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SHANNON PASH, JAN 11 2013

### Summary

The proliferation of conventional weapons within the international system has presented problems to the world order for many decades. The changing nature of conventional weapons have made them a considerably more destructive force than previously realised, with a greater killing capacity and an efficacy over a much greater area. Conventional weapons proliferation has been an increasingly prevalent problem as the end of the Cold War altered the alliance systems and demolished the need to keep technological developments secret. The changing nature of warfare has also highlighted the destructive power of conventional weapons; the asymmetrical quality of current conflicts makes it almost impossible to confine the effects of weaponry to the battle field, particularly because in most cases there is no clearly defined arena of war. Currently, it is much more likely that civilians will be those most affected by weapons. Conventional weapons are utilised by insurgencies and terrorist organisations, which predominantly attack civilians and other soft targets. There are different types of proliferation to support the various uses of conventional weapons. Firstly, those used by States are generally legally sold or supplied to the country by another State or large munitions corporation. In cases where weapons are acquired by terrorists or insurgents, it is usually done illegally through an international black market, with the sellers doing so for either economic gain or ideological reasons. The acquisition of weapons is an attractive option within the international system as it provides those with access to them with a great deal of hard power, which is a more assertive tool for influencing others. Proliferation is an attractive opportunity for countries to make large amounts of economic gains, as conventional weapons are highly sought after globally, and more marketable to trade than weapons classed as 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' (WMDs). Despite this, there have been several serious attempts to stem the spreading of conventional weapons, one such example being the 1997 Ottawa Treaty aimed at eliminating the use of landmines due to their devastating effects. This Treaty has had some degree of success and can be viewed as a positive step to limiting the impact of mines, providing an example of a possible way to stemming the proliferation of weapons.

This report aims to outline some of the key points pertaining to conventional weapons proliferation, the causes behind it and the effects that it has in today's international system.

### Issues Presented by Proliferation:

The proliferation of conventional weapons has been an increasingly prevalent problem since the end of the Cold War. States and international companies involved in the manufacture of weapons no longer have the strategic ties that once bound them when selling or trading their goods.[1] The Cold War effectively divided much of the world into very defined groupings of politically aligned countries and their allies, which dictated countries to strategically share weapons and technology for a common goal. Since 1989, this cohesive approach has been lost, with non-state companies in particular demonstrating an inclination to sell conventional capabilities to the highest bidder.[2] The end of the Cold War also created another problem with the breaking down of the Soviet Bloc. Countries that had previously been under the direct control of the Soviet Union became independent States with large arsenals of both conventional and nuclear weapons.[3] These newly sovereign countries were, in many cases, financially unstable with a desperate need for funds. The arsenals left in their possession by the Soviet government were unsuitable for

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the smaller scale conflicts or civil unrest that these countries were likely to be faced with in the future, and were therefore unnecessary to maintain or continue housing.[4] This made the weapons and the technological knowledge of how to build them an attractive item to sell, with high prices being paid by other states and non-state groups. The immediate aftermath of the Cold War opened a new era of global issues with the proliferation of conventional weapons.

'Conventional weapons' is a term used to cover arms that are not nuclear, biological or chemical in nature, otherwise known as Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). Conventional arms include ships, aircraft, tanks, missiles, guns, rockets and other artillery.[5] Though not classed as WMDs, the increasingly sophisticated technologies used in the production of conventional weapons means that the destructive powers they possess have an increased killing capability.[6] This can be demonstrated through history by the increasing number of civilians killed during modern warfare, as aircraft and missiles made it more viable to attack larger scale targets and destroy greater fixtures of infrastructure. In the modern era, conventional weapons are viewed as an acceptable alternative to WMDs, despite the huge destructive force and killing power they are capable of unleashing.[7] One of the ways in which it has been attempted to combat the stockpiling of weaponry by States was with the Conventional Forces of Europe (CFE) Treaty, with negotiations beginning in 1989.[8] Signatories to this treaty are restricted by limits on systems used in conjunction with conventional weapons, and also by boundaries on the number of weapons each party can possess. Part of this treaty aimed to shift the conventional power of the State to other actors by encouraging the conversion of State military conventional arms to civilian use.[9] The effect of capping the number of weapons a State can possess often meant a transfer of weapons from one State to another. This has resulted in a spreading of conventional weapons, rather than the desired limiting of their capabilities. An example of this is the civil wars witnessed across Africa during the 1990s, in which arms sourced from CFE countries, particularly those in Eastern Europe, played a significant role in the destructive force of the conflicts.[10]

A major difference exists between the issue of legal international sale of conventional weapons by States and weapons manufacturers, and the black market sales that occur predominantly between non-State actors. It is legal for States and corporations to sell weapons to another country for economical gain, or as a legitimate military aid for the other country.[11] Alternately, there is also an illicit black market trade supplying non-governmental organisations such as terrorist groups and paramilitary formations with conventional weapons, both for economic gain and ideological reasons.[12] However, the matter at hand is the continuing proliferation of these devices, which encompasses these two distinctly different avenues of acquisition.

## How the Use of Conventional Weapons has Developed:

The main uses of conventional weapons have changed dramatically since the close of the Cold War, with a reduction in the prevalence of traditional warfare (armed confrontation between military forces of state against state) and a sharp increase in asymmetrical war, in which a larger State actor takes on a smaller, guerrilla style force. There is also a greater degree of non-State actors attempting to use hard power- the force or threat of violence- to influence the international political agenda.[13] This group includes non-government factions, such as those involved in the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in 2011, and terrorist groups of the likes of Al Qaeda.

Conventional weapons have been used across a wide range of conflicts in the past few decades, with one of the most well documented being the Al Qaeda attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in September 1999.[14] There has been a predominant fear amongst Western States that such terrorist groups could acquire WMDs, however this act has demonstrated that the power of conventional means, when used effectively, can also be wholly devastating.[15] Conventional weapons provide terrorist groups with tools that are relatively easily accessible and, because of the increasing range of most conventional weapons, have the capability to wreak havoc transnationally.

The destructive power of conventional weapons can be observed by the impact their presence has on the severity of conflicts. The African continent has been wracked by civil wars for decades, and weapon accessibility has played a significant role in many instances.[16] Death rates in these internal conflicts correlate to the numbers and types of weaponry available to the opposing parties.[17] Whilst the deaths of 'soldiers' directly involved in these conflicts are expected, higher civilian deaths in conflicts where artillery or aerial capabilities are involved are a common trend in

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civil wars.[18] Although conventional weapons are generally agreed as being justifiable instruments of conflict, their destructive powers can greatly alter the severity of a given confrontation.[19] Where conventional weapons were once capable of one burst before reloading, such as in the case of the American Civil War, or effective over only a short distance restricting their destructive powers to the battle field; their sphere of devastation has expanded to make modern conventional weapons capable of destroying entire villages from as far away as another continent. This increasingly destructive nature makes conventional weapons a different category of threat from that they once posed.

## **Landmines – An Example of Attempting to Reduce the Use of Conventional Weapons:**

One example of this phenomenon is the devastation wrought by landmines and their widespread use in warfare. Whilst classed as conventional weapons, mines pose an indiscriminate hazard to both soldiers and civilians, often remaining dangerous for decades after a given conflict has concluded.[20] This instrument has been employed across many continents, and has created such a problem for civilians faced with the dangers they pose and for the international system that there has been major inroads to banning their uses in modern settings.[21] The banning of antipersonnel mines by the Ottawa Treaty in 1997 was a huge achievement in the attempts to reduce the amount of future damage caused by these devices.[22] Despite this progress, the landmines already sown are believed to claim the lives of approximately 10,000 civilians annually, with tens of thousands more being injured.[23] The move to ban landmines has been driven by a plethora of actors; some being civilian organisations, such as the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, NGOs (National Global Organisations), including the International Red Cross and States affected by the devastation of landmines such as Laos.[24] Nations not directly affected have also played a significant role; individual officers of the Norwegian Army tasked with training personnel in landmine clearing are cited as being avid advocates of this move.[25] The future benefits for reducing the use of landmines in State conflicts are tangible, and offer a guide for the possibility of limiting other devastating conventional weapons.

## **Power Politics and the Desire for Weapons:**

The proliferation of these devices is fuelled by desire for hard power within the international system. This means the power to force others into considering a view with the possibility of violence or economic cohesion, rather than employing soft power, the persuasion of others using political influence and connections, as well as popular media cooperation between parties.[26] The use of soft power is a more attractive option for the greater international system as it creates a more agreeable and flexible atmosphere for negotiations. On the other side of the equation, hard power provides a stimulus for economic growth within countries and companies that are capable of supplying weapons to support claims of hard power.[27] It is akin to the situation surrounding the United States during the Second World War, where the war effort created thousands of jobs, stimulated the economy and assisted in enabling the nation out of the Great Depression.[28] In today's international system, the premise that a situation of war will fuel economic output and create jobs continues to be applicable. For example, the United State's involvement in Iraq has supported thousands of jobs in, amongst other areas, the military sector, munitions production, intelligence, nation building and communications. This economic incentive makes it attractive for powerful States to encourage the demand for conventional weapons, rather than attempting to quash it.

## **Economic Side Effects of Conventional Weapons Trade:**

The ability to supply and manufacture arms, whether conventional or those under the category of WMDs is one of the contributing factors for the economic disparity between the predominantly divided northern and southern hemispheres.[29] The technologies involved in weapons development can have significant civilian benefits, such as reactors providing nuclear power rather than using electricity. However, in an attempt to prevent the spread of weapons production, those already with the knowledge of how to create them generally decline to share the data. This is often negatively perceived by those countries wishing to gain access to these technologies, as it can be seen as an attempt to further divide the economic strengths of some States.[30] Those without weapons production capabilities are relegated to the role of 'buyer', whilst those in possession of those capabilities are in the considerably more favourable position of supplier.

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The predominant school of thinking in preventing further proliferation of conventional weapons is not to stem the production of such items, but rather to inhibit their exportability. There has been a succession of international organisations aimed at reducing the export of both conventional and WMDs, however the major focus is usually on the technologies related to WMDs, and those that can be converted from conventional capabilities to be used with other types of weaponry.[31] Thus far, these organisations, including CoCom and the Wassenaar Arrangement have suffered significant limitations, particularly those pertaining to States that supply the weapons.[32] The restrictions placed on the transfer of conventional weapons relies on the supplier States to follow the guidelines implemented by these organisations, and whilst the supply of weaponry is such an attractive economic stimulus, many supplier States are unwilling to fully co-operate.[33] One such example of this is China's refusal to adhere to the policies of the NSG (Nuclear Supplier's Group), with it continuing to sell nuclear reactors to Iran for civilian use, despite its apparent intentions to become a full member of several non-proliferation organisations.[34] Whilst this example does not pertain to the proliferation of conventional weapons, it does demonstrate the difficulties encountered by groups devoted to halting the spread of weapons technologies should the supplier States have their own agendas.

## In Conclusion:

The proliferation of conventional weapons is becoming an increasingly deadly problem in the modern international system. The development of these technologies makes modern weapons entirely devastating, with huge killing and destructive powers, effective over increasingly large distances. This makes them more liable to be used when attacking civilian targets, and also makes these weapons attractive options for non-State actors such as insurgencies or terrorist organisations. The trade of conventional arms is a great economical boost, and as such many countries with weapons capabilities often engage in proliferation. Those States without weapons capabilities are drawn to procure them, as weapons provide a country with a degree of hard power, making them a more formidable international influence. Despite the myriad attractions of weapons proliferation, there have been several attempts over the previous few decades to limit the devastation of these tools. One such example of this is the work done to outlaw the use of landmines in the Ottawa Treaty, which can be viewed as a positive attempt to reduce the devastation wrought by conventional weapons.

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