



NTS Alert March 2011 (Issue 1)

Click here for the PDF version.



AN AGENDA FOR PEACE: CURBING THE PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

By Pau Khan Khup Hangzo and Manpavan Kaur

Although weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) are considered to pose the gravest threat to international peace and security, in practice, small arms and light weapons (SALWs) kill more people than WMDs. However, SALWs have been largely ignored in arms control discussions. This issue of the NTS Alert argues that SALWs are the real 'WMDs' and regulating their proliferation will contribute towards the peaceful resolution of internal armed conflicts in Southeast Asia.



The first-ever model of the AK-47 assault rifle, designed by Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov, on display at its 60th anniversary celebration in Moscow on 6 July 2007. The AK-47 is arguably the deadliest weapon ever made.

Credit: ambrett, flickr.com.

Contents:

- Introduction
- Global and Regional Estimates of Small Arms and Light Weapons
- The Misuse of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Southeast Asia and Its Socioeconomic Impacts
- Conclusion

■ Consortium of NTS Studies in Asia Website

Introduction

Weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) are considered to pose the gravest threat to international security and are defined as 'chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons capable of a high order of destruction or causing mass casualties' (US Department of Defense, 2010). The threat of WMD use and their proliferation resulted in the establishment of a number of legally binding multilateral treaties such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), as well as bilateral treaties such as the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT). Although the threat of WMD use declined with the end of the Cold War, there are renewed concerns over the possibility of rogue states and non-state actors acquiring WMD capabilities. The possibility of terrorists obtaining WMD capabilities, for example, is considered to be 'one of the most serious contemporary threats' (US Army TRADOC, 2007).

The preoccupation with WMDs has led the international community to pay less attention to the one weapons category that kills more people than WMDs: small arms and light weapons

■ **RSIS Centre for NTS Studies Website**

Recommended Citation: Hangzo, Pau Khan Khup and Manpavan Joth Kaur, 2011, 'An Agenda for Peace: Curbing the Proliferation of Small Arms', *NTS Alert*, March (Issue 1), Singapore: RSIS Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies for NTS-Asia.

MacArthur Asia Security Initiative Blog
Click here for updates!

(SALWs). The United Nations (UN) defines small arms as weapons manufactured to military specifications for use by one person as lethal instruments of war and these include revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns. Light weapons, on the other hand, are designed for use by several persons working in a crew and these 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 of less than 100 millimetres (mm) (UNGA, 1997).

SALWs kill people in a variety of situations such as wars, civil conflicts, gang fights or government-condoned violence. Small arms, in particular, are also the weapons of choice for suicide, homicide or random violence. On the whole, SALWs cause more conflict-related deaths than any other type of conventional weapons. For example, an estimated 200,000 to 400,000

people are killed annually by SALWs, accounting for between 60 to 90 per cent of 500,000 conflict-related deaths each year (Small Arms Survey, 2001, 2005; Killicoat, 2007). SALWs, therefore, are the real 'WMDs'.

[^ To the top](#)

Global and Regional Estimates of Small Arms and Light Weapons

As of 2009, there are at least 875 million SALWs in the world. Of these, an estimated 350,000 belong to non-state armed groups – insurgents and militias – that were actively fighting in 2009 (Small Arms Survey, 2010). An unspecified number of these arms were in circulation in Southeast Asia due to the following reasons (IANSA, n.d.):

- The ongoing internal armed conflicts in Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand draw demand for SALWs from both state and non-state actors alike. Although information on the total number of SALWs in circulation in Southeast Asia is limited, a large proportion of them are either imported arms or arms manufactured under licence.
- Southeast Asia has several post-conflict states such as Cambodia and Vietnam where vast numbers of military SALWs can be easily obtained.
- The region also has long maritime and continental frontiers that are difficult to monitor, thereby providing opportunities for traffickers.
- Most countries in the region have poor storage facilities, making theft, loss and smuggling of SALWs possible.
- Most countries in the region also lack adequate enforcement of domestic gun control legislation.

Table 1: Gun ownership in Southeast Asia.

Country	Civilian guns		Government guns	
	Number of privately owned firearms (2007)	Rate of civilian firearm possession (No. of firearms per 100 people) (2007)	Military firearms (2006)	Law enforcement firearms (2006)
Thailand	10,000,000	15.6	1,957,500	175,000
Philippines	3,900,000	4.7	449,350	164,326
Cambodia	273,000–600,000	4.3	187,912–190,000	93,800
Myanmar	2,000,000	4.0	503,500	100,800
Vietnam	1,100,000	1.7	9,849,600	229,476
Malaysia	370,000	1.5	440,250	70,000

Brunei	5,400	1.4	9,690	2,450
Lao PDR	71,000	1.2	104,690	16,089
Singapore	22,000	0.5	563,750	46,200
Indonesia	–	0.5	2,057,700	392,000
Timor-Leste	3,000	0.3	–	–

Source: Compiled from *Gunpolicy.org*

[^ To the top](#)

The Misuse of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Southeast Asia and Its Socioeconomic Impacts

The acquisition of SALWs does not by itself incite the conflicts in which SALWs are used (UNGA, 1997). The degree of SALW proliferation and their misuse depend upon the underlying nature of the conflicts. Stewart (2003, 2004) identifies the existence of severe 'horizontal inequalities' as the primary source of internal armed conflict. Horizontal inequalities refer to inequalities between culturally defined (ethnic) groups with regard to access to economic, social and political resources. Such inequalities cause certain groups to suffer deprivation, and they fuel resentment and violent conflicts. SALWs are often the weapons of choice in such conflicts because they are 'widely available, low in cost, extremely lethal, simple to use, durable, highly portable, easily concealed, and possess legitimate military, police, and civilian uses'. As a result, 'they are present in virtually every society' (Boutwell and Klare, cited in Killicoat, 2007:2). The presence of horizontal inequalities in Southeast Asia, coupled with easily accessible arms, exacerbates violent conflicts in the region. For example, the resurgence of violence in southern Thailand is attributed to the theft of more than 300 guns – including AK-47s and M-16 assault rifles – from a military camp in Narathiwat province on 4 January 2004 (ICG, 2009:2; Gun Culture Booming, 2009).

Celebrating the 60th anniversary of the AK-47



Credit: ambrett, flickr.com.

Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov (pictured above), designer of the AK-47 assault rifle, was feted at the weapon's 60th anniversary celebration in Moscow on 6 July 2007. 'AK' stands for *Avtomat Kalashnikova* or Automatic Kalashnikov and the suffix '47' refers to the year – 1947 – when the weapon was accepted by the Soviet armed forces. The AK-47 is now in the arsenal of more than 80 countries and it saw action in practically every theatre of war. The weapon was not subject to patent and was therefore freely copied and distributed. The lack of export controls combined with the gun's characteristics such as its extreme ruggedness, simplicity of operation and maintenance, and its unsurpassed reliability even in the worst possible conditions, make the AK-47 the most widely produced and proliferated assault rifle in the world. Of the estimated 500 million SALWs in 2004, an astounding 100 million belonged to the AK-47 and its variants.

The uncontrolled proliferation of SALWs has exacted a huge toll on Southeast Asia. The following section analyses both the human and economic costs of SALW proliferation and its misuse.

Human Cost

SALWs cause conflict-related deaths in two ways: *direct* and *indirect*. Direct deaths are the result of fatal wounds and injuries caused by bullets or other projectiles. As mentioned earlier, 60 to 90 per cent of an estimated 500,000 conflict-related deaths each year are directly attributed to SALWs (Small Arms Survey, 2001, 2005). Indirect deaths are caused by, for example, disease, starvation and the destruction of health infrastructure. Table 2 provides estimates of armed conflict-related deaths in countries with ongoing armed conflicts in Southeast Asia.

Table 2: Armed conflict-related deaths in Southeast Asia.

Countries	Parties to conflict	Fatalities
Myanmar	● State parties: Government of Myanmar ● Non-state parties: ○ All Burma Students Democratic Front ○ United Wa State Army (UWSA) ○ Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) ○ Mong Thai Army (MTA) ○ Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) ○ Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA) ○ Kachin Independence Army (KIA) ○ Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) ○ Karenni National Progressive Party Army ○ Shan State Army-South (SSA-South) ○ Chin National Army (CNA) ○ Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)	More than 14,970 killed since 1985
Philippines	● State parties: Government of the Philippines ● Non-state parties: ○ New People's Army (NPA) ○ Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)/ Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) ○ Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)	Involving NPA: More than 41,070 killed since 1969 Involving MILF/MNLF: At least 100,000 killed since 1971 Involving ASG: Less than 1,680 killed since 1991
Thailand	● State parties: Government of Thailand ● Non-state parties: ○ Bersatu – United Front for the Independence of Pattani ○ Barasi Revolusi Nasional (BRN) ○ Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani (GMIP) ○ Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) ○ Runda Kumpulan Kecil (RKK)	More than 3,000 people killed since 2004

Source: Compiled from IISS (n.d.) and Project Ploughshares (2010).

Note: The table includes only countries with active internal armed conflicts.

[^ To the top](#)

Economic Cost

Internal armed conflicts, exacerbated by the proliferation of SALWs, impose a significant economic burden on both states and societies. Armed conflicts such as civil wars are therefore characterised as 'development in reverse' (Collier et al., 2003). According to Collier (1999), civil wars affect the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country through five main channels:

- *Destruction* – Labour force is reduced through death and injury, and physical capital such as infrastructure is destroyed.
- *Disruption* – Productive activities are disrupted and social order breaks down thereby increasing the risk and cost of doing business.
- *Diversion within country* – Government resources are diverted away from productive investment to destructive expenditures.
- *Diversion abroad* – Economic assets as well as human capital move abroad as a result of war.
- *Dissaving* – People out of desperation are forced to use their financial savings or sell their assets at very low returns.

Drawing on data for 92 countries worldwide, 19 of which are facing civil war, Collier concludes that, on average, a civil war reduces the growth of real GDP per capita by 2.2 per cent for every conflict year. Despite the difficulty in estimating the economic costs of internal armed conflicts in Southeast Asia, we can nonetheless conclude that armed conflicts do impose significant economic costs. According to the few existing estimates, the Philippines loses at least 1 per cent of GDP per year as a result of the ongoing armed conflict in Mindanao through the destruction of assets, lost production, lost investments and loss in tourism (Oquist, 2009). Economic losses from the conflict in southern Thailand on the other hand are estimated to have amounted to more than USD3.1 billion since 2004 (Jitpiromsri, 2009).

[^ To the top](#)

Conclusion

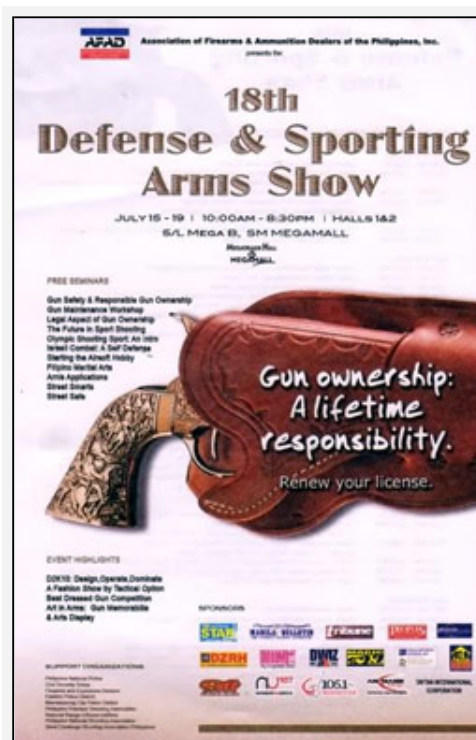
Despite the carnage caused by the uncontrolled proliferation of SALWs, countries in Southeast Asia have been slow in taking effective action. ASEAN's approach, for example, has so far been limited as it addresses arms proliferation in the region only in the context of transnational crime (ASEAN, 1997). This however has the following implications:

- SALW proliferation or illegal arms trafficking is often overshadowed by other transnational crime issues such as human trafficking, human smuggling and drug trafficking.
- The criminalisation of SALWs leads to the sidelining of the destabilising effects of SALWs outside the context of transnational crime, such as increased societal violence.
- It also contributes to the avoidance of economic, political and diplomatic solutions to the numerous armed insurgencies within the region.

It is therefore essential that ASEAN addresses the proliferation of SALWs not only within the context of transnational crime but also within the context of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This would require the adoption of a comprehensive approach with efforts made at all levels – global, regional and national.

At the global level, negotiations are now underway to establish a comprehensive, legally binding Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). An agreement is expected to be reached in 2012. Under the ATT, each state will remain in control of its arms export control arrangements but will be legally obliged to assess arms exports on a case-by-case basis against the criteria agreed under the treaty. These criteria would be based on existing obligations and commitments to prevent human rights abuses, uphold international humanitarian law, and promote stability, prosperity and security.

In line with the global momentum, ASEAN, at the regional level, is well-placed to establish regional standards on the import and export of conventional weapons including SALWs. Such standards will help ASEAN monitor the import and export of arms by member states, and promote transparency and greater responsibility in the transfer of conventional arms.



Credit: The 18th Defense & Sporting Arms Show, filairsoft.com.

A flyer advertising a firearms show in the Philippines. The arms show was touted as an event where leading Filipino gun dealers and manufacturers showcase their 'latest and most modern array of firearms, including new models that are not only considered *affordable* but also *practical*' (emphasis added). The International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) ranked the Philippines 10th in the list of countries across the globe with the highest number of gun-related killings: 9.64 deaths per 100,000 people annually (Philippines Needs, 2009).

Finally, at the national level, Southeast Asian countries need to improve their implementation of gun control laws. There is no dearth of gun control legislation in Southeast Asia. The Philippines, for example, has 21 individual executive orders, laws, acts, memorandums, presidential decrees, directives and amendments. Likewise, Thailand has the 1947 and 1967 Acts on Controlling Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, Fireworks and Imitation of Firearms. However, due to weak implementation, SALWs continue to proliferate in both countries. Effective implementation of existing legislation thus constitutes an important first step towards the control of the proliferation and use of SALWs which fuel conflict.

[^ To the top](#)

References

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), 1997, *ASEAN Declaration on Transnational Crime*, 20 December.
<http://www.aseansec.org/5640.htm>

Collier, Paul, 1999, 'On the Economic Consequences of Civil War', *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp. 168–83.
<http://oep.oxfordjournals.org/content/51/1/168.abstract>

Collier, Paul, Lani Elliott, Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler et al., 2003, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, Washington, DC: The World Bank and Oxford University Press. <http://homepage.mac.com/stazon/apartheid/files/BreakingConflict.pdf>

'Gun Culture Booming in the Troubled South', 2009, *Bangkok Post*, 6 September.
<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/investigation/23379/gun-culture-booming-in-the-troubled-south>

Homans, Charles, 2010, 'From Russia with Blood', *Foreign Policy*, 15 October.
http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/10/15/from_russia_with_blood

International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), n.d., 'South East Asia & the Pacific'.

International Crisis Group (ICG), 2009, *Southern Thailand: Moving towards Political Solutions?*, Crisis Group Asia Report No. 181, 8 December. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/thailand/181%20Southern%20Thailand%20Moving%20towards%20Political%20Solutions.ashx>

International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), n.d., *IISS Armed Conflict Database*.
http://acd.iiss.org/armedconflict/MainPages/dsp_WorldMap.asp

Jitpiromsri, Srisompob, 2009, 'Updated Statistics: Thailand's Southern Violence from January 2004 through March 2009', *Deep South Watch*, blog, 20 April. <http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/node/287>

Killicoat, Phillip, 2007, *Weaponomics: The Global Market for Assault Rifles*, Policy Research Working Paper 4202, Washington, DC: The World Bank. http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/IW3P/IB/2007/04/13/000016406_20070413145045/Rendered/PDF/wps4202.pdf

Kohn, Marek, 2010, 'The Gun: The AK-47 and the Evolution of War, by CJ Chivers', *The Independent*, 5 November.
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-gun-the-ak47-and-the-evolution-of-war-by-cj-chivers-2125184.html#>

Oquist, Paul, 2009, *Peacebuilding and Human Security: A Compilation of Policy Assessment Papers on Peace and Development in Southern Philippines*, Philippines: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).
http://www.undp.org.ph/Downloads/knowledge_products/Peace%20Building%20and%20Human%20Security%20UNDP-policy_book.pdf

'Philippines Needs Tougher Gun Laws, Police Say', 2009, *Reuters*, 18 May. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/05/18/idUSMAN480485>

Project Ploughshares, 2010, *Armed Conflicts Report 2010*, Ontario, Canada. <http://www.ploughshares.ca/libraries/ACRText/ACR-TitlePage.html>

Small Arms Survey, 2001, *Small Arms Survey 2001: Profiling the Problem*, Geneva: Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/publications/by-type/yearbook/small-arms-survey-2001.html>

Small Arms Survey, 2005, *Small Arms Survey 2005: Weapons at War*, Geneva: Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/publications/by-type/yearbook/small-arms-survey-2005.html>

Small Arms Survey, 2010, *Small Arms Survey 2010: Gangs, Groups, and Guns*, Geneva: Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/publications/by-type/yearbook/small-arms-survey-2010.html>

Stewart, Frances, 2003, *Horizontal Inequalities: A Neglected Dimension of Development*, CRISE Working Paper No. 1, Oxford: Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE), University of Oxford. <http://www.crise.ox.ac.uk/pubs/workingpaper1.pdf>

Stewart, Frances, 2004, *Development and Security*, CRISE Working Paper No. 3, Oxford: Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE), University of Oxford. <http://www.crise.ox.ac.uk/pubs/workingpaper3.pdf>

United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), 1997, *Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms*, New York. <http://www.un.org/Depts/ddar/Firstcom/SGreport52/a52298.html>

US Army Training and Doctrine Command (US Army TRADOC), 2007, *Terrorism and WMD in the Contemporary Operational Environment*, TRADOC G2 Handbook No. 1.04, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. <http://www.fas.org/irp/threat/terrorism/sup4.pdf>

US Department of Defense, 2010, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1–02, Washington, DC. http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf

[^ To the top](#)

Terms of Use:

You are free to publish this material in its entirety or only in part in your newspapers, wire services, internet-based information networks and newsletters and you are also free to use the information in your radio-TV discussions or as a basis for discussion in different fora. We would, however, appreciate it if you could let us know when and where the publication was used.

About the Centre:

The Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies was inaugurated by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretary-General Dr Surin Pitsuwan in May 2008. The Centre maintains research in the fields of Food Security, Climate Change, Energy Security, Health Security as well as Internal and Cross-Border Conflict. It produces policy-relevant analyses aimed at furthering awareness and building capacity to address NTS issues and challenges in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. The Centre also provides a platform for scholars and policymakers within and outside Asia to discuss and analyse NTS issues in the region.

In 2009, the Centre was chosen by the MacArthur Foundation as a lead institution for the MacArthur Asia Security Initiative, to develop policy research capacity and recommend policies on the critical security challenges facing the Asia-Pacific.

The Centre is also a founding member and the Secretariat for the Consortium of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies in Asia (NTS-Asia). More information on the Centre can be found at www.rsis.edu.sg/nts