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# United Nations Register on Conventional Arms

By

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*This article discusses one of the new multinational efforts to address the implications of international arms exports.*

On 12 November 1992, the General Assembly of the United Nations voted to establish the Register of Conventional Arms. The vote set into motion procedures which request every Member State of the U.N. to voluntarily report its arms exports and imports for the calendar year 1992. The term "Register" invokes a number of images for defense industries, including the increased attention to the arms trade that will accompany such an effort. This article will attempt to outline what has been agreed to, how and why it was agreed to, the nature of data to be reported, the likelihood and rationales for compliance, and some implications for U.S. defense industries.

As mandated in the U.N. resolution, Member States are requested to submit data on the number of items annually exported or imported, by country, for seven major types of armaments: battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, large caliber artillery, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships with a displacement of 750 tons or above (and any size ship with missiles or torpedoes with a range of 25 kilometers or more), and missiles and their launchers with a range of at least 25 kilometers. (The missile category does not include surface-to-air missiles [SAMs on ships are to be counted].) All categories contain a description of what is covered, including types of accompanying armaments, ranges, tonnage, etc.

A standard form has been developed to guide reporting by States. It includes the category of equipment (e.g., battle tank), final importer or exporter state, number and description of items, and comments on the transfer. The report recognizes that information regarding the description of the item might be affected by security and other relevant concerns, and it is therefore discretionary. No specific patterns are prescribed. To aid the understanding of the international transfers reported, Member States may wish to enter designation, type, or model of equipment.

Data submitted will reflect deliveries only and include retransfers. The Register also requests States to submit background information on their military holdings, procurement through national production, and relevant policies. Data submitted will be available to Member States and made public.

Another panel is to meet in 1994. Specifically mentioned for expansion at the 1994 panel are the categories of conventional armaments. These will include aerial refueling, reconnaissance, airborne early warning and AWACS aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, ammunition, precision guided munitions, cluster bombs, and fuel-air explosives.

One of the unique aspects of the process is that it is not designed solely as an arms trade register. Arms exports and imports are only a first step in a process which is designed to expand. The 1994 panel will also consider expanding the Register to include weapons of mass

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destruction, high technology with military applications, procurement through national production, and military holdings. These provisions for the expansion of the Register were added because without them many states would not have agreed to the Register, since it would have been discriminatory. For example, Pakistan was a reluctant supporter due to the fact that if only exports and imports are reported, they would report most of their acquisitions while India, with its extensive national production of armaments, would report very few.

The Register is voluntary and is not intended to be either an intelligence exercise or an arms control agreement. There are no verification provisions, save the obvious one of exporters and importers reporting (or not reporting) the identical transfer. The Register is a confidence building measure designed as an early warning device, to reduce the occurrence of dangerous misperceptions and "prevent excessive and destabilizing accumulations of arms."

Unlike the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), the Register does not presume the inherent negative consequences of armaments. Rather, it is born of the Iraqi experience and designed to make transparent those accumulations of armaments which could lead to a similar situation in the future. There is nothing in the Register which calls on states to act when a certain level of armaments is reached. In fact, the resolution makes it clear that trade in these categories of weapons systems is a legal and an accepted component of a nation's national security, assuming that national export and import laws are complied with.

Due to the considerable momentum of the process, it is probable that a significant number of States will report the requested arms export and import data. The original resolution was approved by a vote of 150-0 (Cuba and Iraq abstained; and China and Syria did not vote), after the objections of many States were reflected in a modified resolution. The seventeen-country panel, which included original non-supporters such as China, India, and Egypt, produced a consensus report, which contained the agreed-upon report form and weapons category definitions. The Register was specifically supported in the final declaration of the first-ever Security Council summit meeting of 31 January 1992. The Secretary General singled out the Register during the First Committee this fall as the new approach to security in the post-cold war era.

There are some legal implications involved in submitting data to the United Nations. Many States do not reveal such data to their own publics, and to do so national laws will have to be modified. Also, contracts often contain clauses requiring confidentiality. Supplier States, for example, may have to obtain permission from recipients in order to make certain data public and transparent.

From the perspective of arms industries, the Register will no doubt attract attention, some of it negative. Analysts will quickly compare the first year's data submissions with what is publicly known. The public will make its own conclusions regarding what is "excessive" or "destabilizing." However, this Register exercise will in fact legitimize the arms trade as an instrument of foreign policy. In essence, reporting States will be declaring that their arms exports and imports are not excessive or destabilizing.

One of the many lessons of the Iraq case is that arms trade control regimes (e.g., MCTR) are difficult to use to prevent excessive and destabilizing buildups of armaments. The Register approach is a new approach which does not attempt to reduce the arms trade in absolute terms, but rather make it more transparent so that the post-cold war international community can effectively deal with its negative consequences.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Edward J. Laurance is Professor of International Policy Studies and Associate Director of the Program for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute for International Studies. He served in the Arms Transfer Division of ACDA in 1978-79, where his duties included the processing and evaluation of export licenses for items on the USML. Dr. Laurance has served as a consultant to the United Nation Office for Disarmament Affairs and the Register on Conventional Arms process since January 1992.