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# Enhancing International Cooperation to Combat Illicit Firearms Trafficking

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## Introduction

Public safety, state stability, and the rule of law continue to be threatened by the transnational problem of illicit firearms trafficking. Firearms that are produced illegally or diverted from legal markets often cross several borders before reaching their final destinations. These weapons supply criminal networks, terrorist organizations, and armed groups. Because this trafficking rarely stays within one country, no state can address the problem effectively on its own. The ongoing spread of illicit firearms reveals serious weaknesses in international coordination, information sharing, and enforcement, making stronger international cooperation a key priority.

Illicit firearms trafficking has serious and wide-ranging consequences. Easy access to illegal weapons increases homicide rates and fuels organized crime, armed violence, and prolonged conflicts. In post-conflict and fragile states, trafficked firearms can restart violence and weaken already vulnerable institutions. Even in stable countries, illegal weapons contribute to gang activity and threaten community safety, placing additional pressure on law enforcement and judicial systems. Beyond the human cost, gun violence also creates a heavy economic burden through healthcare costs, lost productivity, and increased spending on security, which limits sustainable development.

Although international and regional instruments exist to regulate small arms and light weapons, their implementation remains uneven. Differences in national laws, limited technical capacity, and low levels of trust between states often prevent effective cooperation. Criminal networks, however, adapt quickly and exploit weak border controls and legal gaps to move weapons across borders. This imbalance between a transnational threat and fragmented state responses allows illicit firearms markets to continue and expand.

For these reasons, enhancing international cooperation is essential. Stronger collaboration in intelligence sharing, legal harmonization, joint investigations, and capacity-building can disrupt trafficking routes and reduce the availability of illicit firearms. Addressing this issue collectively is not only necessary for security, but also for protecting lives, supporting development, and maintaining international peace and stability.

## Definition of key terms

### **Arms trafficking**

The illegal production, transfer, or sale of weapons and ammunition in violation of national or international laws.

### **Border control**

The measures and procedures used by states to monitor and regulate the movement of people and goods across national borders.

### **Illicit firearms**

Firearms that are manufactured, transferred, possessed, or used without authorization or in breach of applicable laws.

### **International cooperation**

The process by which states work together through formal or informal mechanisms to address issues of shared concern.

### **Small arms and light weapons**

Man-portable weapons, such as pistols, rifles, and light machine guns, as well as associated light weapons designed for use by individuals or small groups.

## General overview

Trafficking in illegal firearms is a cross-border activity that seriously jeopardizes state stability, national security, and public safety. It involves the illicit production, distribution, and ownership of firearms, ammunition, and their components. International cooperation is crucial to solving the issue because these activities frequently involve several nations.

Illegal trafficking undermines the rule of law, encourages armed conflict, and provides support to terrorist organizations and organized crime. Coordinated global and regional responses are crucial because unilateral action is insufficient due to differences in national laws, enforcement capabilities, and political priorities.

Illegal firearm trafficking can take many different forms, ranging from small but frequent cross-border transfers to large-scale diversion of military stockpiles. Individuals who engage in "ant trafficking" transport small amounts of firearms, which together supply illicit markets.

Weapons frequently come from conflict zones, illicit manufacturing, legal civilian markets with lax oversight, and state arsenals with inadequate security. Trafficking routes may use air, sea, or land transportation, depending on local conditions. The increasing inclusion of weapon components in the trade makes detection more challenging.

### *Motivators and Facilitators*

*Traffickers can take advantage of variations in national firearms laws thanks to regulatory divergence. Weapons are frequently transported to regions with greater demand from nations with laxer regulations.*

*Weak Border Controls* enable illicit flows where monitoring capacity is limited or borders are porous. High trade volumes further strain inspection systems.

*Corruption and Institutional Weakness* facilitate diversion from legal stockpiles and reduce enforcement effectiveness. In fragile states, oversight mechanisms are often limited.

*Conflict and Instability* generate both supply and demand for illicit firearms. Weapons from conflict zones frequently remain in circulation long after fighting ends.

*Technological Developments* such as online marketplaces, encrypted communications, and new manufacturing methods have expanded trafficking opportunities.

### *Effects on Development and Security*

Illegal firearms make crimes more deadly and fuel organized crime, terrorism, and gang violence. Because of their availability, criminal organizations are able to continue controlling populations and territory.

Development is also hampered by armed violence. It deters investment, puts pressure on the legal and healthcare systems, and takes funds away from social and economic goals.

#### *Current Regional and International Frameworks*

Global and regional instruments that support marking, tracing, record-keeping, and information exchange serve as the foundation for international cooperation. The shared accountability of exporting, importing, and transit states is emphasized by these frameworks.

Regional agreements frequently target particular trafficking trends and promote cooperative legal and investigative efforts. Networks for law enforcement facilitate intelligence sharing and operational coordination.

However, implementation is still inconsistent. Many states don't have the resources or technical know-how to fully adhere to these frameworks.

#### *Obstacles to Successful International Collaboration*

*States may be reluctant to divulge sensitive information due to concerns about sovereignty.*

*Effective cooperation and data exchange are hampered by capacity gaps between nations.*

*Legal Differences* complicate extradition, prosecution, and mutual legal assistance.

*Lack of Trust* between states can reduce cooperation, particularly where political tensions exist.

#### *Emerging Trends and Cooperative Approaches*

Recent efforts focus on *capacity-building*, legal harmonization, and improved information-sharing. Technology is increasingly used for tracing and forensic analysis.

Public–private partnerships and cooperation with civil society are also gaining importance. These approaches complement enforcement measures and support prevention efforts.

#### *Balancing Security, Rights, and Legitimate Trade*

Measures to combat illicit firearms trafficking must balance security needs with respect for lawful ownership and legitimate trade. Excessive restrictions may face resistance or push activities underground, while weak controls risk continued violence.

Effective international cooperation requires flexible, evidence-based policies that reflect national contexts while addressing shared risks.

## Major Parties Involved

### United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime is the main UN body dealing with illicit firearms trafficking. It oversees the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Firearms Protocol. UNODC helps states improve laws on firearms marking, tracing, and record-keeping, and supports cooperation between law enforcement agencies.

UNODC focuses on reducing the links between firearms trafficking and other crimes such as drug trafficking, corruption, and terrorism. It mainly works through technical assistance and training, especially in developing and post-conflict states. Its effectiveness is sometimes limited by lack of funding and the fact that not all countries have joined the Firearms Protocol.

### United States of America

The United States is an important actor because it has one of the largest legal firearms markets in the world. Some trafficked firearms originate from this market and are moved illegally to other regions. The U.S. supports international cooperation through tracing assistance, information-sharing, and participation in UN frameworks.

Domestic politics strongly influence the U.S. position. Constitutional protections for gun ownership and internal debates over gun control make the United States cautious about binding international regulations. As a result, it often prefers voluntary or non-binding agreements.

### European Union

The European Union plays a key role as a regional organization. Open borders between member states increase the risk of cross-border firearms trafficking, making cooperation essential. The EU supports strict rules on firearms licensing, marking, and tracing, as well as strong information-sharing systems.

The EU generally favors comprehensive international agreements and supports capacity-building in neighboring regions. However, differences in national laws and enforcement levels among member states can make implementation uneven.

### Russian Federation

The Russian Federation views illicit firearms trafficking mainly as a security and counterterrorism issue. Its focus is on controlling weapons in conflict and post-conflict areas and preventing their use by extremist or criminal groups.

Russia supports international cooperation through UN frameworks but places strong emphasis on national sovereignty. It is cautious about measures that could interfere with domestic arms control policies or internal security matters.

### **International Non-Governmental Organizations (Civil Society)**

International NGOs and civil society organizations focus on the humanitarian and social impacts of illicit firearms trafficking. They highlight how firearms contribute to violence, human rights abuses, and long-term instability.

These organizations provide research, raise awareness, and advocate for stronger international standards. While they do not enforce laws, they influence policy discussions and support transparency. Some governments remain cautious about NGO involvement in security-related issues.

## Timeline of Events

**1945 June 26th** The United Nations Charter is adopted, establishing principles of collective security and international cooperation that later support multilateral approaches to arms control and transnational crime.

**1991 December 6th** The UN General Assembly adopts Resolution 46/36 L, formally recognizing the destabilizing accumulation and spread of small arms and light weapons as a global concern.

**Early 1990s** Post–Cold War conflicts and state collapse lead to the diversion of surplus military firearms into illicit civilian and criminal markets across regions.

**1992 December 21st** The UN establishes the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, creating an institutional platform to address transnational organized crime, including firearms trafficking.

**2000 November 15th** The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime is adopted, providing the first comprehensive global framework to combat organized crime linked to illicit firearms trafficking.

**2001 July 20th** States adopt the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, committing politically to prevent, combat, and eradicate illicit firearms trafficking in all its aspects.

**2001 May 31st** The Firearms Protocol to UNTOC is adopted, establishing legally binding standards for marking, tracing, and international cooperation on firearms.

**2014 December 24th** The Arms Trade Treaty enters into force, strengthening regulation of the international arms trade to prevent diversion of firearms into illicit markets.

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

**United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC):** Core international legal framework to combat organized crime, including trafficking in firearms when conducted by organized criminal groups, 15 November 2000.

**Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition (Firearms Protocol):** Supplementary protocol to UNTOC establishing international standards for marking, tracing, record-keeping, and cooperation related to firearms, 31 May 2001.

**Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (PoA):** Politically binding framework encouraging states to strengthen national controls and international cooperation on small arms and firearms trafficking, 20 July 2001.

**International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons (ITI):** Instrument supporting the implementation of the PoA through standardized tracing and information-sharing mechanisms, 8 December 2005.

**Arms Trade Treaty (ATT):** Legally binding treaty regulating the international trade in conventional arms, including small arms and light weapons, with the aim of preventing diversion to illicit markets, 2 April 2013.

**A/RES/70/234; Illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects:** General Assembly resolution reaffirming the central role of international cooperation and assistance in addressing illicit arms trafficking, 23 December 2015.

**A/RES/73/55; Assistance to States for curbing the illicit traffic in small arms and light weapons and collecting them:** Resolution emphasizing capacity-building and international support for affected states, 5 December 2018.

**Fourth United Nations Conference to Review Progress Made in the Implementation of the Programme of Action (PoA Review Conference):** High-level meeting assessing global progress and challenges in combating illicit small arms and firearms trafficking, 18–28 June 2024.

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

### *United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons (UN PoA)*

The UN Programme of Action encourages states to reduce illicit firearms trafficking through national laws, stockpile control, and international cooperation. It has improved global coordination and awareness. However, it is not legally binding, which limits enforcement.

### *UNODC Support for Firearms Control*

UNODC helps states improve firearms laws and tracing systems through training and technical assistance. These efforts have strengthened national capacities, especially in developing countries. Progress remains uneven due to limited funding and participation.

### *European Union Firearms Directive*

The European Union has introduced common rules to regulate firearms across its member states. The directive aims to reduce legal loopholes and improve tracing. Differences in national enforcement reduce its overall effectiveness.

## Possible Solutions

### *Strengthen International Cooperation*

States can improve information-sharing, joint investigations, and capacity-building programs to tackle illicit firearms trafficking. Enhanced cooperation through UN bodies, regional organizations, and law enforcement networks can help trace weapons, prevent illegal transfers, and support weaker states. This approach encourages dialogue and coordination among nations.

### *Improve National Legislation and Enforcement*

Countries can update and harmonize their firearms laws, including licensing, marking, and tracing systems. Stronger enforcement, combined with training for police and customs officials, can reduce the supply of illicit firearms and close legal loopholes. This solution focuses on domestic action that complements international efforts.