



Executive Summary

Over the past year, Americans have become acutely aware of the grave national security threat posed by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SA/LW). Near daily reports of US soldiers killed by Iraqi guerrillas remind us of the threat these weapons pose to our troops, and regular shoulder-fired missile scares remind us of our own vulnerability. Each new incident increases pressure on policymakers to take action. Yet government responses are often limited and myopic, focused on countering the threat posed by particular weapon systems while ignoring the broader problem of illicit small arms trafficking. Effectively addressing the problem of small arms and light weapons proliferation requires a multi-faceted, multilateral approach.

The Organization of American States' (OAS) Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacture of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives and Related Items is an important tool for developing such an approach in the Western Hemisphere. The Firearms Convention helps to prevent arms from entering the black market by requiring the establishment of basic controls over the manufacture, import, transit and export of firearms in each member state. By encouraging parties to the Convention to share information and resources, the Convention also strengthens regional efforts to dismantle existing arms trafficking networks. It enjoys broad support in the Western Hemisphere. Since the Convention was opened for signature in November 1997, 33 OAS member states have signed the Convention and 22 have ratified it. Its wide appeal is explained in part by its limited focus; the sole purpose of the Convention is to prevent the illicit trade in, and manufacturing of, firearms, ammunition and explosives. The lawful production and transfer of firearms and domestic gun ownership fall outside of the Convention's purview.

The need for universal ratification and full implementation of the Convention is urgent. Weapons from across the hemisphere flow into Colombia in a steady stream where they fuel a brutal internal war that threatens not only Colombians but also US lives and interests. The dangers of SA/LW proliferation in Latin America are not confined to Colombia; large weapons stockpiles in countries with inadequate export controls attract the attention of arms traffickers from around the world, including individuals with ties to terrorist groups hostile to the United States.

If fully implemented, the OAS Firearms Convention would help to stem the flow of weapons to the Colombian illegal groups and prevent the diversion of arms to international terrorists. For example, Colombian officials interviewed for this report identified a lack of cooperation from certain countries and inadequate training for law enforcement officials as impediments to reducing black market arms trafficking to the illegal groups. Better implementation of the Firearms Convention would help to address these concerns. Similarly, full implementation of the Convention's requirement to establish an effective licensing system for firearms transfers would reduce the likelihood of diversions to international criminal and terrorist groups.

The United States was an early supporter of the Convention, and was instrumental in preparing its text. The US signed the Convention in November 1997 and it was transmitted to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in June 1998. Nearly six years have passed and the US still has not ratified the Convention. Ratification would boost the credibility of the Convention and would make US exhortations to comply with its provisions more persuasive. Ratification would also help to allay concerns about US unilateralism, and quell international outrage over US rejection of several international treaties and protocols. Many of the changes to US laws and regulations that were required by the Convention have already been made, and any financial costs associated with ratification would be minimal.