Issue Brief

CLAWS

# Small Arms Proliferation in South Asia: A Major Challenge for National Security

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*Small arms proliferation is not merely a security issue; it is also an issue of human rights and of development.*
– Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General

South Asia has been perpetually plagued by numerous intractable threats and challenges, particularly those emanating from unresolved territorial and boundary disputes. It is arguably the second most dangerous region in the world after West Asia; and radical extremism in the Af-Pak region is nudging it rapidly towards acquiring the pole position. One of the major reasons for this dubious distinction is the large-scale proliferation and easy availability of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW).

## South Asia: An Arc of Instability

Since the end of the Cold War, the threat of major inter-state wars, normally classified as conventional conflict, has been gradually receding. Its place is being taken by intra-state sub-conventional conflict, in which the intensity of conflict and the levels of violence are low, but the violence is sustained over much longer time periods. In the South Asian context, the burgeoning trade in SALW, mostly illicit, has spawned more than 250 militant and insurgency movements. Small arms constitute the core weapons in the arsenals of these extremist elements.

The impact of burgeoning personal and man-portable weapons became the primary reason for the expansion of the definition of "small arms" by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) nearly three decades ago. NATO re-classified small arms and light weapons as "all crew-portable direct fire weapons of a calibre less than 50mm… (including those with) a secondary capability to defeat light armour and helicopters." According to Colonel R Hariharan, a former Military Intelligence officer, "… there are around 640 million small arms floating around in the world, out of which only about 226 million pieces are in the hands of armed forces and law enforcing agencies… India, with a small arms arsenal estimated at 6.3 million, is sixth in the global ranking." ("Militancy and Small Arms Proliferation," *The Hindu,* 20 April 2007). It is worth noting that about one percent of the global SALW holdings, i.e., 6.4 million weapons are believed to be in the hands of militants, insurgents, terrorist groups and networks, and other non-state actors. Significantly, at least 22 UN peacekeeping and rescue missions have been launched in situations where the foremost weapons used by the antagonistic forces were SALW.

As the epicentre of diverse armed conflicts, ranging from asymmetric warfare, ethnic conflicts to separatist movements, South Asia has witnessed an exponential rise in the proliferation of SALW in recent decades. The Indian subcontinent's susceptibility to small arms proliferation

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can be attributed to the fact that these are the most readily available weapons for non-state actors engaged in intra-state conflicts and state-sponsored proxy wars. Additionally, technological sophistication has made SALW increasingly lethal, lighter and more compact. The rapid-fire Soviet Kalashnikov and the US M-16 variety of automatic assault rifles have constituted the standard inventory of soldiers for several decades. When these weapons came into the hands of non-state actors, their ability to reduce their asymmetry with the security forces increased manifold. In fact, these weapons have made it easier for extremists to carry out hit-and-run guerrilla attacks.

While India itself is far from being an island of calm, it is ringed by an arc of instability. Festering insurgencies in the countries around India have added to its woes. Ethnic insurgent groups from India's northeastern states have established sanctuaries in both Myanmar and Bangladesh. In fact, Myanmar plays unwilling host to as many as 33 armed ethnic insurgent groups. Its Army has been fighting these groups for many decades and has cooperated with the Indian Army in launching joint operations to destroy sanctuaries and bases across India's border.

India and Bangladesh, among other South Asian states, find themselves hemmed in between the Golden Triangle (the drug-producing sub-region in the highlands of Southeast Asia overlapping Myanmar, Thailand and Laos) and the Golden Crescent (the narcotics-producing sub-region constituting Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran). Both these sub-regions are also large-scale consumers as well as transit points for SALW. Bangladesh and Nepal, which were once transit routes, have become end-users. Since the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, many of the firearms used in the conflict were never fully accounted for and remained in circulation. According to Major General Syed Muhammad Ibrahim (Retd), as of 2006, as many as 128 crime syndicates in Bangladesh were using 400,000 illegal SALW. In fact, gun-related violence has facilitated the spread of organised crime, undermined fragile democratic politics and fuelled sectarian violence in Bangladesh. Insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts over the past few decades has further added to the demand for small arms. The easy opportunity for money-laundering has resulted in the emergence of Bangladesh as the main transit point for at least five major militant groups that are active in northeastern India, especially the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). Emerging as a convenient transit route for the flow of illegal weapons from Southeast Asia, the Sylhet and Cox's Bazaar areas are being used to hoard and transfer arms procured by the ULFA from Thailand and Myanmar. Moreover, the munificence of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has enabled ULFA to buy arms in Cambodia and pay for them in hard currency routed through Nepal.

Nepal, which was a conduit for small arms proliferation in South Asia, has now become an end user itself, as the Maoists' People's Liberation Army (PLA) is a big buyer of SALW. The PLA guerrillas supplemented their modest arsenal with hundreds of weapons seized in raids on police outposts. The number of weapons in the Terai region along the border with India also gradually increased and some of these found their way across the open, porous border into Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar.

In the case of Sri Lanka, the civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan armed forces propelled the small arms predicament of the island nation. The proliferation began in 1987 and soon, the LTTE managed to weave an international network to procure SALW through its sympathisers in the diaspora. The LTTE also added

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to its arsenal by seizing stockpiles from the Sri Lankan Army. It has been estimated that as much as 80 percent of the LTTE's arsenal was captured from the Sri Lankan forces. The LTTE initially used to smuggle SALW from the Thai-Cambodian border and other sources in Southeast Asia. By the mid-1980s, it had diversified its arms acquisition so as to exploit all possible sources and routes. Its agents began networking with arms dealers in Southeast Asia. They used many small ports and jetties in Myanmar for the trans-shipment of weapons. Chinese Type-56s, US M-16s, Light Machine Guns (LMGs), Medium Machine Guns (MMGs), Singapore-made assault rifles and 2.5-inch mortars dominated the LTTE's munition stores. It soon established linkages with groups inimical to Indian security and became a leading contributor to small arms proliferation in India. Also, LTTE operations in Myanmar received increased attention, once their support network in Tamil Nadu dried up. The LTTE was reported to have established a permanent naval base in Twante, an island off Myanmar, while Phuket in Thailand became a crucial exit point and a source for Chinese small arms. It was widely reported in 1993 that the LTTE managed to get a consignment of arms and ammunition from Pakistan's ISI, but the ship on which they were loaded at Karachi was tracked by the Indian Navy and sunk (with the consignment) in the Bay of Bengal. The LTTE established well-connected traffic routes that were used to transport armaments to Sri Lanka. Weapons from China, North Korea and Hong Kong were trafficked across the South China Sea, through the Malacca and Singapore Straits to the Bay of Bengal and into Sri Lanka.

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the consequent cross-border flow of weapons, an estimated 30 percent of the SALW provided by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Pakistan's ISI to the Afghan resistance movement were diverted for other purposes, making Afghanistan a major source of SALW proliferation in South and Central Asia.

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During the Afghan war between 1979 and 1989, the erstwhile Soviet Union and the countries supporting the Afghan *mujahideen* pumped in millions of small arms into the region. As Pakistan siphoned off a portion of the arms in transit, it soon became a key source of small arms supplies in South Asia, covering both the black market arms and arms supplied covertly to insurgent groups operating in the region. In fact, the large numbers of SALW in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) have come from the ISI, through the terrorist organisations that it sponsors and supports, such as the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Hizbul Mujahideen (HM).

During 1980-84, Chinese-made rifles began to replace Kalashnikovs in Afghanistan. With more than 50-70 trucks passing through the area every day, around 65,000 tonnes of weapons would have moved through the Northern Areas in that period. Meanwhile, the circulation of Kalashnikov rifles increased manifold in Pakistan, as it sponsored, armed, equipped and trained the Taliban to take over Afghanistan. The 'gun culture' had long existed in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the adjacent tribal areas, with most weapons coming in from Darra Adam Khel – an area that boasts of having 2,600 arms shops and five gun factories. Approximately seven million small arms stoked the embers of the Afghan conflict.

## China as a Key Supplier

The Chinese angle to SALW proliferation in South Asia cannot be ignored. Chinese weapons gained immense popularity among the insurgent groups in the region as they were competitively priced and offered with counter-trade agreements. The Chinese weapons supply helped to perpetuate the Afghan conflict and soon permeated into Myanmar's underground markets along the Thai border. Beginning with the Type-56 rifle, China produced and offered for sale five different varieties of rifles (Types 56, 68, 79, 81 and CQ 5.56), allied LMGs and sub-machine guns. China also became the primary official supplier of arms to Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Pakistan (including anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons). Significantly, large numbers of weapons of Chinese origin have been seized in Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh, of which, Chinese pistols have particularly become a hot favourite in the illegal small arms bazaar as these are easily available and relatively cheaper.

The Chinese supplied small arms to Indian insurgent groups in Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura for many years, up to the late 1970s. It has been conjectured that they stopped doing so only after India's "Peaceful Nuclear Explosion" at Pokhran in May 1974. Thereafter, while Chinese SALW continued to be recovered by the Indian security forces in J&K and in the northeastern states, their origin could not be traced directly to official Chinese sources as these came in mostly through the Southeast Asian route. Whether this was a deliberate attempt by the Chinese government or the PLA to destabilise India, or simply a result of corruption at lower levels of the government, cannot be fully ascertained.

In a statement on 09 November 2009, Home Secretary G K Pillai said, "The Chinese are large suppliers of small arms and I am sure the Maoists get it from them." Earlier, in October 2009, Union Home Minister P Chidambaram had commented that the Maoists were acquiring weapons through Bangladesh, Myanmar and possibly Nepal, since the Indo-Nepal border is porous. The easy availability of SALW further fuels their demand as India continues to counter long drawn-out insurgencies and a 'proxy war' waged through state-sponsored terrorism by a perfidious neighbour.

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## Short Fuse for India's Security?

India has experienced around 152 militant movements since its independence, of which 65 are believed to be still active, in some form or the other. Pakistan is still the primary source of small arms that are bound for India. It uses SALW as political and military tools against New Delhi and facilitates the smuggling of the same, through both sea and land routes, to ISI-supported terrorist organisations and sleeper cells across India. Funding for SALW proliferation can be accredited to money laundering and safe havens abroad, organised through *hawala* channels from private sources and countries, including Saudi Arabia, via Bangladesh and Nepal, through crime and extortion, and from religious institutions for 'social purposes'. The transfer of small arms takes place through formal and clandestine routes, legal and black/grey markets.

According to a study by the British NGO Oxfam, in collaboration with Amnesty International and the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), the bulk of illegal arms supplies to India make their way into J&K, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, UP, Jharkhand, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. The Naxalites are the likely end users, with links with the Nepalese Maoists, thus

creating a major crisis for the states in the "red corridor" covering Bihar, UP, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Since 1989-90, Indian security forces have seized huge stocks of arms and ammunition along the Line of Control (LoC) in J&K alone. Between 1990 and 2005, as many as 28,000 assault rifles of the AK series; 1,300 machine guns; 2,000 rocket launchers; 365 sniper rifles; 10,000 assorted pistols; 63,000 hand grenades; seven million rounds of ammunition; 6,200 landmines and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and 37,000 kg of explosives were recovered from various hideouts in J&K during counter-proxy war operations. Large-scale recoveries are still being made. It is a well-known fact that there are no ordnance factories in J&K.

A sizeable amount of illegal arms also come into the country through the northeast and from the NWFP. In fact, India finds itself at the centre of two major international weapons warehouses—the NWFP and the Southeast Asian arms market comprising Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar, with approximately 13 identified gun-running routes close to the northeastern border areas and the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

India's northeastern states have experienced insurgencies for the past four decades, owing to a well-organised network for smuggling weapons. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN, IM and K groups) introduced the ULFA to the Kachins of Myanmar. It was widely reported in 1986 that Paresh Baruah, the military commander of ULFA, had travelled through northwest Myanmar and paid

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the Kachins a substantial sum of money to begin training and arrange for the supply of weapons from the arms bazaars in Thailand and smuggling networks operating on the Myanmar-China route. The problem gets compounded also due to the fact that there is a free movement regime between India and Myanmar that facilitates the cross-border smuggling of small arms. In fact, Ruili, a town in the Yunan Province on the Myanmar-China border, was a nerve centre for the illegal trade of small arms into India. The arms came into Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland via the land route and through the sea route via Chittagong. This trade became apparent following Bangladesh's biggest ever arms haul, on a jetty in the Karnaphuli river, Chittagong, in April 2004. The haul netted 1,790 rifles (including Uzi submachine guns and assault rifles of the AK series), 150 rocket launchers, 840 rockets, 2,700 grenades and more than a million rounds of ammunition.

As militant camps in the Chittagong area in Bangladesh became operational by 1989, they facilitated the entry of SALW into Assam through the Cachar and Barrack Valley corridors. By the mid-1990s, the Bangladesh connection revealed its real potential. Using Bangladesh as an exit point, the ULFA managed to establish contact with arms dealers in Thailand and as far as Romania. This was possibly the beginning of contacts with arms dealers in Cambodia, from whom ULFA started accessing huge numbers of weapons. At Cox's Bazaar, ULFA cadres coordinated their arms acquisition and operational strategies with the NSCN and other insurgent groups that were based in the area. In August 2000, *The Hindu* reported that the ULFA,

NSCN and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) were in direct contact with Pakistan's ISI and the Afghan *mujahideen*. They received weapons from Pakistan and Southeast Asia.

## Conclusion

With left wing extremism on the ascendant across central India and no end in sight to long-standing insurgencies in J&K and the northeastern states, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has become a major security challenge for India. In this 'dial-an-AK-47' age, those who have the money can acquire SALW quite easily from unscrupulous wheeler-dealers across the globe, particularly in South Asia. When indigenously produced country-made pistols and revolvers are added to the numbers of small arms acquired through clandestine means, India emerges as a leading light weapons destination. The possession of small arms inevitably creates a proclivity to use them and the exponential growth of the gun culture cannot but add to the growing levels of violence in Indian society. Undeniably, the growing menace of small arms proliferation has added a diabolical dimension to the emerging threats to India's national security.

India's intelligence agencies must pool their resources and work in tandem with each other to identify the sources, funding channels and routes of SALW proliferation, so as to systematically bring this growing menace to an end through political, diplomatic and even military means. In this respect, India has taken up the initiative of jointly drafting a proposal at the United Nations, seeking a global ban on sale of small arms, including military-style SALW as well as commercial firearms, to non-state actors. However, nations which are raking in huge profits by virtue of manufacturing and selling these arms are all likely to vote against any such initiative. On its part, India must work towards nudging the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries and those in its extended neighbourhood to endorse the Arms Trade Treaty at the UN, so as to confront this mounting challenge comprehensively.

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