
“We Are Not the Bad Guys”

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It is pleasing to note that the *Brown Journal of World Affairs (Journal)* has launched its discussion on the small arms and light weapons (SALW) question with the caution that its articles are “by no means the final answers.”¹ It is a matter of considerable concern, however, for the world’s many legitimate firearm owners that the discussion so far has had serious deficiencies.

Given that I am neither an academic nor a government official involved in international relations, I should introduce myself. I am Robert Glock, and I am employed by Glock GmbH in Austria. Glock manufactures pistols for the military, police, and civilian markets. I am also a member of the Manufacturers’ Advisory Group of the World Forum on the Future of Sport Shooting Activities, a recently formed international trade association for firearms manufacturers.

I participated in both preparatory meetings and the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, held in New York in July 2001. Having been involved in those efforts and having read the recent articles in the *Journal*, I want to address the question of definition and how it affects initiatives to control illicit trafficking in arms. The *Journal* introduction says, “perhaps no area of the world has been more drastically affected by the small arms trade than Africa,” and that reviewing the “national attempts to control the illegal SALW trade” there “is central to any effective solution.”² The intention continues to be preventing the loss of human life. If that is the case, we need to focus the arguments on areas that will further this

goal. These aims are laudable, but the legitimate firearms trade—whose life and times have most decidedly not yet been explored by the international community—are the *de facto* recipients of unwarranted regulatory attention.

The question of definition is fundamental: at what should the efforts of the UN and others really be aimed? Should all firearms be included under the UN's definition of "small arms," or should the definition be limited to those weapons that are most likely to be used in a harmful manner after being traded illicitly across international borders?

Prior to the UN Conference, the Manufacturers' Advisory Group held a workshop in London.³ The workshop's report lists at least five definitions found in the two UN reports that were the foundation of the eventual UN Conference. Fundamentally, these definitions were very broad and could be interpreted to include most of the civilian firearms in the world. The London workshop considered this and proposed that the most useful definition of firearms, the one which should be the subject of UN and other international efforts, be: "Lethal weapons of war which are capable of full automatic fire."

The London report discusses why this is the most workable approach, and *Journal* readers are urged to read it in full. The definition needs to meet certain criteria. We believe it should be:

- Simple;
- Time neutral, i.e., covering firearms already produced and which will be produced in the future;
- Objective, so that nature of the firearm can be determined from the physical or mechanical characteristics of the firearm itself. The definition should also be user friendly in that it can be used by an ordinary customs officer or law enforcement official and not just an expert;
- Not so broad as to include firearms which are legitimately possessed by civilians;
- Not so narrow that it does not include those firearms that the international community has been concerned about, such as AK-47s.

The UN Conference did not resolve the definition issue. In fact, one could say that the definition issue was deliberately avoided. But there is no question that there will eventually have to be a definition of what types of firearms will be the focus of UN efforts. Failure to make that definition relevant and workable allows wishful thinking from pressure groups to take further hold in the international discourse, the cost of which will be delay and the unnecessary loss of human life.

This issue of definition, unfortunately, also has a very political aspect to it. Hard-liners want either no definition or a very broad definition, so that any

future regime covers literally every gun in the world. Both states and NGOs have taken these positions. Hard-liners are also looking for comprehensive solutions and new binding instruments. On the other side are the soft-liners. They want a limited definition and specifically directed proposals. I am obviously among the latter, as are some of the major states.

Here is an example of the broad, hard-line approach: Aaron Karp's article on the UN Conference in the *Journal* was entitled "Small Arms: Back to the Future." Karp wants all firearms included in any future effort, and I quote the relevant portions:

Of the total of 638,000,000 firearms known to exist as of 2001, at least 59 percent are in public hands (he is quoting the 2002 Small Arms Survey) ... The actual total—and the portion in public hands—almost certainly is far higher. In the United States, one country where data is reasonably reliable, the total in public hands is closer to 98 percent ... If one is serious about small arms violence, it is not sufficient to pursue goals dealing exclusively with the state. This is not where the guns are ... A better normative principle to guide international action controlling the dangers of small arms must embrace all firearms.⁴

If we are to believe Karp's and the other figures cited, the problem is with the very small portion of firearms owned by criminals and other illegal users, not with legal firearm owners. This is a truly hard-line approach. In fact, Karp concludes by saying that the international small arms regulation effort should be combined with domestic gun control efforts. The latest *Small Arms Survey*, however, tells us that insurgent groups hold only 0.2 percent of the world's total firearms, yet we know their impact is disproportionately high. Does it not follow that our efforts should be as equally disproportionate against this element of gun use, rather than against the legal end of it?

This hard-line approach would be a prescription for disaster for the legitimate efforts to control illicit trafficking in small arms. It is typical of the belief that passing increasing numbers of regulations about guns somehow acts on a large scale to control misuse. Yet countries that have tried this—not only recently, but at various times over many decades, always at massive cost to the public—have never been able to demonstrate any positive benefits to murder or suicide rates. The forgoing reason is the standard purported *raison d'être* for this genre of legislation. And the world's academic literature is at last now coming around to an actual examination of the figures, which leads to the inescapable conclusion that blanket legislation has not brought, and will not bring, the desired social results in any country. The argument within countries ought to be fought on the basis of realities. As governments further comprehend the difference between the licit and illicit manufacture, sale, use, and ownership of guns, so will the academic world devote more time to impartial examination of the issues.

There is thus baggage in the politics of gun legislation that the international community could run afoul of if people such as health-advocacy activists are allowed to define the argument. On the other hand, if the international community decides to adopt a workable definition, it will help to depoliticize the issue. The definition we have proposed would essentially separate out all of those legally held civilian firearms. Some proposed international measures, such as those on marking (ensuring legally manufactured guns carry marks of identification), should include all firearms, but for any extensive effort, limiting definition to weapons of war is almost a necessity.

It is troubling that in its introduction, the *Journal* accepts as given that the “gray” market connects the ground between the legal and illegal trader, with the same merchants serving both markets. The introduction says that the *Journal* section “provides a general overview of the SALW trade.”⁵ This is quite incorrect. If the working definition is adopted as the hard-liners want, incorporating all sporting arms, then it is quite clear the *Journal* articles are not an overview at all, because there has been no exploration of the civilian use of firearms. There has been no examination or acknowledgement of the positive elements of centuries-old safe and responsible gun ownership in many societies. For example, the value of revenue from organized, seasonal, legal hunting is so great that if gun ownership by hunters were banned, much of conservation as we know it today would collapse, with massive effects on whole ecologies and non-quarry species.

We in the firearms manufacturing industry consider this definitional issue to be of paramount importance. This, in fact, is the foundation upon which any successful policy will have to be built. It is our fervent desire to be part of the solution process. What could be an invaluable resource to the international community on this issue, however, is constantly in danger of being rejected by the hard-liners trying to advance a political agenda.

At one of the preparatory meetings before the UN Conference, I made a statement on behalf of the industry and the Manufacturers’ Advisory Group. I said, “Mr. Chairman, we are not the bad guys.” I said that we want to be positive and work together. We are still not the bad guys, and we still have that same desire to work together with the international community. 

Notes

1. *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Volume IX, Issue 1 (Spring 2002): 161.

2. Ibid: 160.

3. Manufacturers’ Advisory Group of the World Forum on the Future of Sport Shooting Activities, Report: “Defining ‘Small Arms’ as they Pertain to ‘Firearms’ for the 2001 UN Conference on Small Arms,” (London 2001). Available on the internet: <http://www.wfsa.net/Leg%20Docs/LondonDefinitionReportV3.pdf>