

# Violent Exchanges: THE USE OF SMALL ARMS IN CONFLICT

What factors affect people’s choice of weaponry and targets? This chapter examines two sets of factors that are crucial to understanding how groups of armed actors use weapons, and how policy-making may limit the most destructive forms of small arms use. The factors are:

- the types of weapon available to armed groups (state and non-state); and
- the kinds of goals espoused by each group.

The first category considers potentially strong *material* controls on where weapons can be used and for what purpose. Essential here are availability factors, such as the size, weight, and firepower of weapons, the climatic, topographical, and infrastructural issues that condition their movement, and procurement costs.

The second category takes account of social constraints or shared understanding of acceptable limits to the scale of armed violence. These are *organizational* factors.

The chapter finds that understanding these two sets of factors provides strong ‘choke points’ that can curb the worst types of weapons use. These are efforts to:

- target the most destructive weapons first, particularly in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programmes.
- control more effectively the production and transfer of cheap light weapons to conflict-prone regions.
- enhance stockpile controls to prevent rapid access to the most destructive varieties of weapons.
- increase efforts to reduce general local and regional proliferation, as the weapons most readily available are those that are most likely to be used.
- analyse group goals, command and control, and access to resources thoroughly before introducing restrictive measures.



A child stands against a wall riddled with bullet holes, the legacy of Angola’s 26-year civil war. Kuito, Angola, March 2000.

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## Controls on availability

Strong material controls condition how, where, and what weapons are used for. Instances such as the 2003 use of mortars to bombard the Liberian capital Monrovia, or conflicts such as those in Georgia (1991–93) and the Solomon Islands (1997–2000), illustrate that availability has a strong effect on weapon use. Put simply, the weapons that are easily available—whether because they are affordable, small and light enough to transport, or simply proliferate in the immediate locality—are those that are most likely to be used.

Box 7.2 Weapons availability and effects: Abkhazia and South Ossetia, 1989–93				
Phase	Dates	Weapons	Operations	Effects
1	1989–91	Largely reliant on hunting rifles as well as pistols and rifles stolen from police stations	Small-scale hit-and-run retaliatory operations conducted by small groups of men	Kidnappings, isolated killings, and forced displacement, resulting in some 100–200 deaths. Additional small-scale displacement due to the destruction of a few villages
↓		↓	↓	↓
2	1991–93	Large quantities of small arms and light weapons, including assault rifles, anti-tank weapons, and mortars, plus some heavier weapons	Sieges (of towns) and large-scale military action involving significant numbers of organized and equipped troops. Action aimed at acquiring territory	Massive amount of damage to infrastructure, and the destruction of hundreds of villages and towns. At least 9,000 people killed and more than 300,000 displaced
Source: Demetriou (2002, pp. 25–29)				

If explosive weapons such as rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPGs) and mortars are readily available, their use often causes death and destruction beyond the control of the user.

The ramifications of firepower can be managed by controlling the production of certain weapons and the transfer and stockpiling of these items. Concerns about general small arms proliferation often overshadow the need to target the most destructive weapons first. Supply-side initiatives, including weapons collection and destruction, should concentrate initially on weapons with the highest potential to cause massive and rapid loss of life and infrastructural devastation, such as mortars, RPGs, and grenade launchers.

Violence is never random but purposive.

### Social controls

Violence is never random but purposive. The type of weapon available to combatants influences how, and to what effect, it is used by individuals and groups, who are themselves responsible for using those weapons to direct violence at selected targets.

What differentiates the use of small arms and light weapons by groups from individual acts of sporadic violence is that clear patterns can be identified in how the former utilize weapons. Armed individuals share commonalities not shared with unarmed individuals because weapons redefine perceptions of 'self' and the 'other'. A core motivation of group members, therefore, is to stay 'in the club': individuals in groups ensure that their behaviour stays within certain parameters and is acceptable to other group members.

Many armed groups—both state and non-state—have the potential to control the use of weapons by group members. Nonetheless, capacity varies according to the aims and objectives of groups, their recruiting base, their requirements for popular support, and the degree of oversight and control commanders are willing or able to exercise. Groups that seek long-term political projects and are able to exercise oversight over their members are better able to control the use of weapons. Groups that seek short-term goals, such as pillaging, often have little structure and minimal command and control; they pay little attention to monitoring the activities of their members (see Table 7.3).

**Table 7.3 Strong and weak monitoring**

	High internal monitoring	Low internal monitoring
High external monitoring	Highly organized armed groups frequently with strong international connections, such as the British Armed Forces, Hezbollah, or the LTTE	Organized armed groups within which oversight is intentionally opaque, such as right-wing militias in Colombia and perhaps some private security outfits in Afghanistan
Low external monitoring	Organized armed groups with few linkages to the external environment, such as rebel entities in northern Mali or drug factions in Rio de Janeiro	Armed groups with little in the way of a formal system of organization and few external connections, such as armed elements in Sierra Leone or the Solomon Islands

Note: Table derived from the work of Policzer (2002).

In order to create incentives for fighters to relinquish small arms and light weapons, it is essential to understand the rewards of peace in the context of the rewards of conflict. In groups comprising long-term gain-seeking individuals, combatants may be more likely to avoid small arms and light weapons use that could alienate the local population; they may also be willing to relinquish arms to secure the benefits of peace. Often groups with weak or fragmented command and control structures are unable to commit to agreements and pledge with any surety that their members will adhere to their provisions. Before investigating more complex phenomena, researchers need to ask some basic questions about an armed conflict. For example: will reducing proliferation in the immediate vicinity curb the use of weapons by a group or will it be able to acquire them from elsewhere? Would the supply of some types of weapons alter the conflict dramatically, and, if so, who might provide them? Will a short-term gain-seeking group respond positively to a DDR programme? Would an embargo be the most appropriate or efficient means of ending violent conflict in a country already saturated with arms? Would stopping all weapons flows to a country make police forces reliant on existing stocks of unsuitable military armaments?

The chapter concludes that, by assessing various combinations of availability and organizational factors, one can acquire a better appreciation of an organized group's capacity to engage in armed violence, and of its potential targets. An improved understanding may then reveal a number of avenues for limiting the most destructive consequences of armed conflict.