

Final Update: United Nations 2021 First Committee Small Arms and Light Weapons

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Throughout this year's First Committee, member states reiterated their concerns about the threats posed by small arms and light weapons (SALW) to international security and sustainable development. During the course of the general and thematic debates, many states recognised how vital the United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (UNPoA) and its International Tracing Instrument (ITI) are, and reiterated the importance of international cooperation and multilateralism to implement these instruments.

As the First Committee draws to an end, several states remained divided over what constitutes legitimate arms control treaties. Some states (Syria, Cuba, and Nicaragua) even disassociated themselves from any references to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) in resolutions on conventional weapons. Several of these member states pointed out that the ATT is not universally adhered to or supported, and was not adopted by consensus. The position taken by these member states impacted the votes on resolutions related to SALW, as states held separate votes on paragraphs containing references to the ATT.

Action on cluster 4 resolutions: conventional weapons

L.43, "[The illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects](#)," is the omnibus resolution on SALW tabled annually by Colombia, South Africa, and Japan. L.43 was adopted without a vote. However, states voted on one of its paragraphs, preambular paragraph (PP) 22, which welcomes the inclusion of SALW in the scope of ATT. 152 states [voted](#) in favour of PP22, and 17 abstained. Colombia thanked South Africa for introducing the resolution and reiterated its support for it. Colombia underlined that SALW and its ammunition are a threat to peace, security, and sustainable development because of its impact on human lives and the economy and the nexus of violence and crimes it induces. Colombia also stated the need to strengthen the UNPoA, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as the role of civil society organisations and the effective participation of women.

Before the vote on resolution L.43 took place, the [United States \(US\)](#), [Iran](#), and Syria explained their vote. The US declared it joined on L.43 but still remains concerned with its substance, explaining that for the last 20 years, the US has been reiterating that ammunition is outside the scope of the UNPoA. The US opposed the inclusion of language on ammunition in the outcome document of the Third Review Conference of the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat, and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons In All Its Aspects (RevCon3) and the last three resolutions on SALW. The US expressed its belief that the Group of Governmental Experts on Problems Arising from the Accumulation of Conventional Ammunition Stockpiles in Surplus (GGE on ammunition) is the appropriate forum to discuss ammunition. The US stated its disappointment that programme budget

implications have been requested, emphasising that they would have expected information on expenditures to be provided in a more timely manner.

Iran stated that the goals pursued by the UNPoA cannot be achieved without strong political will and inherent means of implementation. Iran also underlined its disagreement with operative paragraph (OP) 8, recalling that earlier in the debates Iran suggested using language more conducive to consensus. Iran stressed that existing controversial elements remain in the resolution, including an endorsement of the outcome of BMS7.

Syria joined the consensus on resolution L.43 because of the need to fight SALW illicit trafficking. However, Syria dissociated itself from OP13, which encourages states to consider recent developments in SALW manufacturing, technology, and design, in particular polymer and modular weapons, in the implementation of the UNPoA. Syria abstained from voting on PP22 stating that its position on the ATT is well-known.

After the vote on L.43, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cuba, and Nicaragua shared their explanation of votes with the Committee. Cuba dissociated itself from OP13, stating that there is a lack of consensus on the issue of polymer and modular weapons and that the creation of an annex in the BMS7 outcome document hindered the work of member states at the time. Cuba emphasised the need to reflect on such developments since it creates a more significant financial burden for countries, especially regarding marking and tracing activities. Cuba abstained from voting on PP22 as such, reaffirming their position on the ATT. Cuba declared its support to the BMS7 outcome document but regretted the omission of a reference to the right of states to self-defense.

Nicaragua joined consensus on the resolution as a whole, while it regretted that concerns and comments of many states had not been taken into account, including their own, during consultations. Nicaragua disassociated with consensus on OP13. Nicaragua stated that the UNPoA is still valid as an “international reference point”. Nicaragua abstained from voting on PP22 and concluded by saying that to tackle the deeply rooted causes of the trade of SALW, genuine cooperation is needed at the international level, as well as solidarity between states with a commitment to assistance.

L.47, “[Problems arising from the accumulation of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus](#),” was adopted by [vote](#) with 167 member states voting in favour, zero voting against, and nine abstaining. Iran abstained from voting as it felt that the suggestion to establish an Open-Ended Working Group without the appropriate consideration of earlier Group of Governmental Experts’ recommendations on the matter is hasty. Equatorial Guinea also abstained from voting on L.47 and underlined that Africa is the continent that suffers the most from stockpiles of SALW, pondering why small countries like Equatorial Guinea are considered to have excessive stockpiles while other states do not recognise their excessive nuclear stockpiles as such.

L.15, “[Assistance to States for curbing the illicit traffic in small arms and light weapons and collecting them](#),” was adopted without a vote. Member states [voted](#) on one of its paragraphs, PP16, which welcomes the inclusion of SALW in the scope of the ATT, and the inclusion of international assistance in its provisions. 150 states voted in favour, while 19 abstained. Mali introduced L.15 on behalf of the 15 member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Mali underlined the technical updates that were made in this year’s resolution and emphasised that in its substance L.15 builds on the stability in the West African region by strengthening regional initiatives and efforts to reduce illicit trafficking in SALW. The draft resolution also called on the international community to

provide financial and technical support to build the capacity of civil society organisations in the fight against the illicit trafficking of small arms.

Action on cluster 6 resolutions: regional disarmament and security

L.31, "[Conventional arms control at the regional and subregional levels](#)," which recognises the crucial role of conventional arms control in promoting regional and international peace and security, was [adopted](#) as a whole with 179 states in favour, one against (India) and 19 abstaining. Voting on PP7, which posits that "militarily significant states and states with larger military capabilities have a special responsibility in promoting such agreements for regional security", and OP2, which "requests the Conference on Disarmament to consider the formulation of principles that can serve as a framework for regional agreements on conventional arms control, and looks forward to a report of the Conference on this subject" also occurred. 167 states [voted](#) in favour of PP7, two (India and the Russian Federation) voted against it, and four states abstained. Regarding OP2, 116 [voted](#) in its favour, India voted against, and 55 abstained.

L.30, "[Regional Disarmament](#)," and L.32, "[Confidence-building measures in the regional and subregional context](#)," were both adopted without a vote. L.30 stresses that sustained efforts are needed to make progress on the entire range of disarmament issues, and L.32 emphasises that the objective of confidence-building measures should be to help strengthen international peace and security. The resolution also encourages the promotion of bilateral and regional confidence-building measures to avoid conflict.

Regional centres

All the resolutions on the regional disarmament centres were adopted without a vote: L.18, "[United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific](#);" L.21, "[United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa](#);" L.38, "[United Nations Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean](#);" and L.28, "[United Nations regional centres for peace and disarmament](#)".

Throughout this year's First Committee, states reiterated the importance of multilateralism and cooperation and underlined the fact that excessive military expenditures are not the way to create international security. Disagreements between states on the legitimacy of arms control treaties remained, as shown by the dissenting votes on specific paragraphs of resolutions on SALW that mentioned the ATT. Moreover, the inclusion of ammunition also continues to be problematic. With the eighth Biennial Meeting of States on the UNPoA (BMS8) scheduled to start on 27 June 2022, considerations on these issues will undoubtedly prevail. Similar to what happened during BMS7, civil society organisations were barred from accessing UN Headquarters throughout First Committee, due to COVID-19 safety restrictions. Full cooperation and true engagement must also mean including all voices in upcoming meetings, at all levels of participation.