

Regulating the weapons trade

A killer deal

A vote at the UN this week for the Arms Trade Treaty could save many lives

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IT WOULD be a good question for the quiz game Trivial Pursuit. What has the National Rifle Association (NRA), America's powerful pro-gun lobbying outfit, got in common with Syria, Iran and North Korea? The answer: all are opposed to the global Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) which was overwhelmingly approved by 154 countries on April 2nd by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

The next stage is for those countries which voted for the treaty to begin formally signing up to it in early June. Each signatory country will then have to ratify it at home. The treaty will come into legal force 90 days after the 50th country has ratified it—perhaps as soon as the end of this year. For some, ratification will be a simple process; for others it could prove harder.

The Obama administration is a strong supporter and likely to sign up soon. But getting the two-thirds majority in the Senate needed for ratification will be a struggle, even though the American Bar Association has confirmed the treaty does not infringe any constitutional right to bear arms (as the NRA claims). America's defence industry also supports it, hoping to bring other countries' arms exporters closer to the high standards it operates under.

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Whatever difficulties may lie ahead, supporters of the treaty to regulate the \$70-billion-a-year trade in arms are jubilant. It

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is the climax of a campaign that began a decade ago. It had especially strong support from African and Caribbean countries where society has been torn apart by civil war or transnational crime, both stoked by the illicit trade in small arms. The deal

involved compromises: for example, a weaker section on munitions. But what a senior diplomat close to the negotiations describes as “the heart” of the treaty—the prohibitions section—is alive and beating.

The ATT requires states to establish regulations for arms imports and exports in eight main categories: battle tanks, armoured combat vehicles, large-calibre artillery, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, missiles and missile launchers, and small arms and light weapons. They must assess whether their transfer could lead to serious violations of international humanitarian law, terrorism or organised crime. They must take into account the risk of serious acts of violence against civilians, particularly women and children. An overriding risk of any of these consequences means states must block the deal.

States must also report annually on all their arms transfers to a UN-run “implementation support unit”. The aim is to shine a light on a previously murky business and make governments accountable under the terms of the treaty. The main sanction is embarrassment. That may seem feeble, but previous treaties on landmines and cluster bombs have set a new global norm which makes it shameful to use such weapons indiscriminately.

The abstainers include big arms exporters (China and Russia) and importers (India, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Indonesia). But they may sign up later. Russia says it needs more time, while China (surprising some) played a constructive role, apparently influenced by the African countries with which it has forged close commercial ties. Both may find they pay an economic price if their arms industries are increasingly excluded from global supply chains. It will take time for new standards of behaviour to establish themselves, but the push has begun and the treaty can be further strengthened over time. For the moment, says a diplomat involved with the

treaty over many years, what has been achieved is “pretty damn good”.

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