

Profusion of Light Weapons: A Case Study of South Asia

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"...small arms... are probably responsible for most of the deaths in current conflicts. The world is awash with them and traffic in them is very difficult to monitor, let alone intercept... It will take a long time to find effective solutions. I believe strongly that the search should begin now". (Supplement to An Agenda for Peace: Position Paper of the Secretary-General on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations, 3 January 1995, A/50/60/, S.1995/1, para 63).

The concept of 'micro-disarmament', defined as "practical disarmament in the context of the current conflicts and of the weapons, most of them light weapons, that are actually killing people in the hundreds of thousands", is complex yet necessitates careful study. Several queries need to be answered before a proper study of this kind is begun. How to define 'light weapons'? What are the parameters of a 'trouble spot?' How to monitor the flow of light weapons? And so on. It is necessary because the uneven global diffusion of light weapons has already reached a point, where not only the national and international security is seriously threatened but the very peace and stability of civil society is being severely undermined.

In order to understand the universe of the problem, it is necessary to study and compare the exact nature of the diffusion of light weapons at various levels. Region-specific analyses are necessary in this regard. This paper analyses the role of light weapons in armed conflicts in South Asia. It examines all major aspects of the problem at a regional level and tries to find out possible solutions. Some clarifications are needed here. The region 'South Asia' includes seven states – Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka. The term 'light weapons' includes small arms (consisting of automatic weapons upto 20mm, including submachine guns, rifles, carbines and handguns), rocket propelled grenades, light anti-tank missiles, shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles, land mines and explosives. The major ongoing conflicts as case studies include Afghanistan, North Western Frontier Province (NWFP), Sindh, Kashmir, Punjab, North Eastern-States of India, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Northern Sri Lanka.

Changed Nature of Armed Conflicts

South Asia seems to be the most fertile ground for all kinds of conflicts. Against four regular military-to-military wars in the region since 1947, there have been over 20 wars of irregular type, besides a much larger number of armed conflicts at a lower scale in the form of terrorist acts. The region last witnessed a regular war nearly a quarter century ago in 1971. The prospects for another regular war, although feared by many, seem somewhat distant due to various reasons. The so-called arms race between India and Pakistan is still on, but all nations of the region are instead under tremendous pressure to contain the growing internal and intra-state conflicts, seen in many

parts of the region. Role of light weapons in these conflicts is what makes these conflicts almost unmanageable for the states as a whole. These conflicts, according to many in India and Pakistan, seem to reduce the prospects of even a limited conventional war. The present conflict in Kashmir is no less short of such a war. In whichever way it is argued, it is these internecine battles between the state and non-state actors that have proved too costly, both in human as well as material terms, for the poor states of the region.

Flow of Light Weapons

South Asia experienced the profusion of light weapons during the early 1980s. Though some experts argue that most of the trouble spots have an entrenched gun culture, a fact which is not to be overlooked. Yet, there are areas like northern Sri Lanka where this as well as the theory of martial race have been disproved. Suffice to say profusion was a direct consequence of the intervention by the Soviets in Afghanistan in 1978. Consequent covert warfare between the super powers in this so-called buffer state witnessed massive weapons-flow from various sources. The infamous CIA sponsored and ISI managed arms pipeline supplied a huge quantum of arms and ammunition, sufficient for a rebel force of 1,00,000 to prolong a war for more than a decade. During the early 80s, only Soviet made/designed weapons flowed through the pipeline. Involvement of many external actors, both direct and indirect, like the US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, China and other Islamic countries are worth noting here. While Pakistan became a training ground and weapons depot, states like China, Egypt supplied weapons and requisite finance was taken care of by wealthy Islamic states like Saudi Arabia.

While the CIA coordinated the supply of weapons, ISI managed the receipt and distribution. This contributed to extremely poor records of how many weapons were transferred, to where and to whom. Weapons were also siphoned off at every connection. Studies show that less than half of weapons in fact reached the frontline field. Weapons coming from outside Pakistan were either flown to Islamabad or shipped to Karachi; from there, these were transported to staging posts around Quetta and Peshawar before being passed to the Afghan leaders and consequently, across the border to the commanders in the field. Some weapons were also supplied from government owned factories and private traders in Pakistan.

Decision to supply the Mujahideen (the most prominent rebel group) with the *Stinger* surface-to-air 'fire and forget' missile changed the course of the battle decisively in favour of the rebels. The Mujahideen arsenal, apart from old model weaponry, included automatic assault rifles like Ak-47, -56, -74; machine guns like 12.7 mm DshK, RPD M-53, PKM and other varieties; indirect fire weapons like 50-, 60-, 82-mm mortars, ASG-17 grenade launchers, D-30 122 mm Howitzers, 107-122mm rocket launchers, BM-13 132mm MRLs; anti-tank weapons like RPG-7, SPG-9, D-85 recoilless rifles, 82mm B-10 recoilless Atguns, rifle mounted AT grenades; anti-aircraft weapons like ZPU-1, ZPU-2, 23mm Chinese AA guns, Oerlikon 20 mm AA canons, Sa-7, Blowpipe, Stinger; combat vehicles like T-55 tanks, BTR series APC, BMD, BMP-1, BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, BRDM light reconnaissance vehicles; miscellaneous equipments like hand grenades, pistols, binoculars, night vision devices, radios, AP and AT mines of assorted make; and transport vehicles like Toyota trucks, vans, jeeps, various model cargo trucks of Soviet and East European make. 13 million AP mines were laid for the purpose. At their zenith, the rebel force had nearly 1,50,000 armed fighters while the Soviets and the regime had a

force of 1,15,000. The US-led covert operation is worth more than \$6 billion while the Soviet misadventure cost them nearly \$20 billion.

Soviet withdrawal did not mean the end of battle. It still goes on, albeit in a different direction. Weapons possessed by the rebels as well as leakage from the arms pipeline have been scattered not only in the adjoining areas like NWFP and other part of Pakistan but also have been found in far off places like Sri Lanka, Azerbaizan and Bosnia. Afghan warlords turned druglords, elements in Pakistan including druglords have thus become very powerful and virtually run their own affairs. Apart from incalculable material loss, Afghanistan has lost more than one million lives and produced nearly eight millions of refugees. Peace is still a distant dream here.

Decisive impact of this weapons flow can be felt in NWFP and other adjoining areas like Baluchistan and even Sindh, that have become virtually ungovernable. Darra Adam Khel, Landi Kotal, Jamrud and Bara Bazaar are flourishing as arms markets. Hundreds of local arms manufacturers have been operating their business as well. They also procure weapons from Middle Eastern, Eastern European and East Asian sources.

The state of Punjab witnessed an increase in the level of violence during the mid 1980s. Weapons, notably coming from Pakistan, substantially increased the power of the extremists. One notable feature of this conflict is that the extremists have already graduated to the use of radio controlled improvised explosive devices (RCIEDs). Increasing use of explosives have reduced the flow of weapons like assault rifles in this area but have caused maximum damage in the intended targets while suffering minimum casualties. Recent evidence shows that the badly mauled militant outfits seem to regroup again. This conflict has already cost more than 50,000 lives.

Sustenance of militancy in Kashmir is solely attributable to the profusion of light weapons. Majority of the weapons in the possession of Kashmiri militants point to the Afghan pipeline, either from the arms market of the NWFP or the stocks controlled by the ISI. Barring weapons like the *Stingers*, almost all varieties of sophisticated weapons have been possessed by both Kashmiri and Punjab militants. ISI has provided extensive training facilities for both. Weapons entering Kashmir from Pakistan take the routes through the Hazi Pir Pass and Tosha Pass. For Punjab, routes are varied, those that run from posts from Punjab to Rajasthan borders. Prevalence of Chinese weaponry in the region points to another notable area, Aksai Chin, in the south western part of Kashmir. Influx of weapons along the 778 km long Line of Actual Control (LAC) is a normal business. All major outfits have their separate arms dumps, mostly in the built-up areas and forests. The holy war has also witnessed involvement of trained fighters from Afghanistan, Sudan and other Islamic countries.

Insurgency in the north eastern states, surrounded by countries like China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, has already made the region a major trouble spot. Weapons for the 40-odd insurgent groups (6-7 of them are prominent) come from these countries. Training camp for insurgents, arms collection points in Bangladesh, sanctuaries in Bhutan and Bangladesh, arms also from Myanmar and China through porous borders, all have contributed to an escalation of violence in this area. Guwahati, Cox Bazaar, Myemensingh and other locations have become notorious for illegal arms trafficking. Arms also come from Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia.

The decade long ethnic-separatist conflict in northern Sri Lanka seems to cripple the state forces in near future. The prominent guerrilla groups LTTE, is in no mood to give up its demands for a separate state. Allegedly funded, trained and armed during the initial years by some elements in India, this outfit is now independently operating for its cause. Apart from land based fighters, it has a naval arm (known as 'Sea Tigers') as well as trained suicide squads. Information regarding the source, amount and transaction of weapons acquired by the LTTE is very difficult to gather. Financial support comes from all over the world where there is any significant concentration of sympathisers, notably the UK, USA, and major West European states. Arms sources point to Afghanistan, Middle East, East Europe and East Asia. They have established a well-connected international network and flow of weapons now mainly comes from the lucrative East Asian markets. The LTTE arsenal includes all major systems including weapons like radar-guided anti-aircraft missiles and shoulder-held heat seeking missiles.

Problems and Prospects

The problem is not an isolated phenomenon. It accompanies factors like changing nature of democratic movements, break up of states, ineffectiveness of the international systems, globalisation and uneven economic development. It also linked to more immediate factors like the erosion of the state authority, ethnic identity (accompanied either by demands for separation or regional autonomy), geo-politics and various socio-economic causes. The problem has to be examined from two angles. At a national or regional level, taking internal and intra-state conflicts as case studies, a model ought to be developed with an eye on empirical evidence. Taking up similar studies, a conceptual framework for a global study can be undertaken. Here, I have tried to look into the immediate factors that have accompanied the problem at a national or regional level. My empirical analysis tries not to touch upon the long-term solutions as I try to develop a model that is intended for 'containment'. It is hoped that a successful containment model can be a first step toward a universal disarmament process.

Weapons in the hands of non-state actors in South Asia primarily come from two sources – domestic and external. Domestic sources can be further divided into two state agencies producing light weapons as well as state actors like the security forces providing weapons to the rebels and private manufactures. While the motives of the former include achieving long term politico-strategic goals and to a lesser extent, profit motive, the latter operates solely for commercial purpose. Private manufactures, it is be noted, primarily produce general usable weapons. Bulk of the sophisticated weaponry comes from international markets.

Commonality among all the conflict spots establishes the importance of the topography factor. Almost all are near the international borders and barring a few most of them are surrounded by high mountains and dense forests that give some advantage to the fighters. Except Kashmir, all others are in fact internal armed rebellions. The prime motivational factor in these conflicts is political. Of course, socio-economic or in some cases ethno-religious causes precede the political factor. The complex nature of 'state building' process often creates space for elements that demand greater devolution of power. While, on the contrary, the states of the region, with nearly one and half a billion of population with diverse ways of life, uneven economic development, low level of literacy, rampant corruption and widespread poverty, tend to follow a centralised democratic

pattern of governance. These two parallel processes are bound to give rise to many conflicting demands.

External help rendered to these forces, makes the situation more complex. Two types of external actors operate – there are actors who support either intra-state or internal conflicts for political and strategic reasons and there are actors who supply weapons to the rebels for commercial reasons. The role of United States in Afghan battle falls in the former category, the role of China includes both. Another dimension of the problem is ‘arms-drugs nexus’. South Asia is sandwiched between two notorious international drugs network – Golden Crescent and Golden Triangle. The ongoing economic liberalisation process undertaken by the states has further complicated the issue. Conversion of black (primarily drugs) money into white and consequent channelisation of such money for buying arms baffles the state agencies. In fact, drugs trafficking is not to be seen in the traditional sense as a social issue any more; it has already become a threat to national and international security for its nexus with arms.

Containing the Flow

There is enough confusion concerning the flow of light weapons into South Asia. Though the region is not oversaturated with weapons, as feared by many, suffice to say, it has caused enough damage both in human as well as material terms. As stated earlier, the aim of this paper is not to ponder over some long term strategies but to devise some practical methods within the parameters of a democratic governance to contain the flow. Some steps and measures that need to be examined or pursued may include:

1. *Strengthening of national regulations*: It relates to possession of arms by the civilians. Effective implementation of national gun control acts as a necessary step. Accompanying laws like anti-terrorist acts have to be strictly followed. Creation of separate courts for this purpose will also help.
2. *Checking the cross border infiltration*: Notorious cross border transaction points needs to be sealed off. Partial success in sealing off Punjab border is a good example. Strong border security measures need to be undertaken.
3. *Both civil and military intelligence*: It can prevent selective bombing as well as help the state forces to take preventive measures.
4. *Better facilities for security forces*: It is a fact that poorly paid and ill-equipped security forces who patrol the borders and sensitive areas in the most difficult circumstances are often prone to bribery and corruption. Better facilities with additional incentives and rewards may help in reducing such lacuna.
5. *Strong police force*: Factors responsible for marginalisation of police forces need to be isolated. Effective measures to improve the standards of the police forces are to be seriously undertaken.
6. *Strict implementation of rules by law enforcing agencies*: It has to be monitored closely either by a judicial or quasi-judicial authority. This can bring some accountability as well as act as a check and balanced system. Periodical assessments have to be placed before the floor of the national legislature and consistent review of law and order situation in conflict spots need to be made public.

7. *Participation of human rights organisations, local leaders, concerned citizens:* Their participation in conflict negotiation processes is to be encouraged. Local civic bodies also need effective local representation.
8. *Public awareness campaigns:* These are to be spear-headed by government agencies, local and human rights organisations, against the dangers of the spread and impact of weapons need to be undertaken at the grassroot level.
9. *Urgent need for expanding the scope of academic and scientific research:* Such expansions need to include the issues related to this problem and then the researches should be made accessible to the public, which can help create awareness among the people as well as influence the policies related to such issues.
10. *Greater Role to Regional Bodies:* At a regional level, bodies like SAARC should be allowed to play greater roles. There is need for placing such problems before SAARC for further discussion. A commission to deal exclusively with this problem could be worked out. Amidst several deadlocks, a commencement for better trade relations among the states in South Asia will not only bring the nations together but also can help create grounds for discussion on other issues like security.

Conclusion

Micro-disarmament should start from below. It is the duty of the national governments to formulate practical ways to deal with such problems. The region has more internal conflicts than others. Hence effective steps by willing national governments have to be continually evolved to address the menace of terrorism born out of such conflicts. Public awareness and approval can strengthen such moves. A show of solidarity by the South Asian states at the regional level may go a long way in negating the current pessimism.