

# TRANSPARENCY IN ARMAMENTS IN SOUTH EAST ASIA: LEARNING FROM THREE DECADES OF THE UNITED NATIONS REGISTER OF CONVENTIONAL ARMS

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## I. Introduction

Transparency in armaments—that is, transparency about government inventories of arms, acquisitions of arms and state-to-state transfers of arms—has been recognized for over a century as an important means to mitigate interstate tensions and prevent armed conflict. The concept came to fruition in 1991 with the establishment, by a near-unanimous vote of the United Nations General Assembly, of the UN Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA).<sup>1</sup> Later General Assembly resolutions, also adopted with vast majorities, have underlined both the value of transparency in armaments and of UNROCA as an effective concept for a transparency mechanism. In recent years the 2013 Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and several key UN documents—such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of 2015 and the 2018 Agenda for Disarmament—have added their weight to the need for transparency.<sup>2</sup>

However, while the value of UNROCA has been highlighted by many states since 1991, planned further development of the register has largely stagnated and actual participation has never been universal. Indeed, in the past decade or so participation has been disappointingly low for reasons that are not well understood. In an effort to encourage an increase in the rate of reporting, this SIPRI Research Policy Paper focuses on the case of South East Asia. It looks at past reporting patterns of the 11 states of the region—which have demonstrated both exceptional transparency and, in recent years, low reporting—and examines the challenges that they have faced in reporting. Findings based on the experience of these states are then used to formulate recommendations on how to improve the future rate and quality of reporting.

<sup>1</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 46/36 L, 'Transparency in armaments', 9 Dec. 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), opened for signature 3 June 2013, entered into force 24 Dec. 2014; UN General Assembly Resolution 70/1, 'Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', 25 Sep. 2015; and UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), *Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament* (United Nations: New York, 2018).

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## SUMMARY

● The United Nations Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA) was established in 1991 as a transparency mechanism with the main goal of preventing potentially destabilizing build-ups of armaments. UNROCA reporting is particularly relevant to South East Asian states, and they are willing to participate. However, after high reporting rates in UNROCA's first two decades, these states' reporting rates have been low in recent years. When they report, they give all the required information on their arms imports and much additional, and useful, detail. Moreover, they do not consider UNROCA's discriminatory focus on importing states to be detrimental to its wider goal.

However, the states' officials must overcome some impediments to increased participation, such as the short time between the request to report and the deadline, staff turnover, and the need for more training. Many of the lessons learned from the South East Asian experience are applicable to other regions.



The next section of this paper describes the history of transparency in armaments, how UNROCA was established and how it works. Section III describes the participation of South East Asian states in UNROCA. Section IV notes why these states should consider once again playing a larger role in UNROCA: South East Asia, despite being a region with limited interstate tensions and few interstate conflicts and with a functioning regional organization—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—to foster confidence and peace, faces serious tensions with states outside the region.<sup>3</sup>

South East Asia can be seen as representative of the Global South, which as a whole shows similar trends in reporting, similar challenges to finding resources to deal with many international obligations, and strong dependency on arms imports, while at the same time facing challenges of interstate tensions and conflicts. Thus, despite the narrow regional focus of this paper, the findings and recommendations given in the final section are valid for a much wider group of states.

This SIPRI Research Policy Paper is the result of a research project to promote UNROCA in South East Asia that was carried out in 2023 by the SIPRI Arms Transfers Programme and funded by the UN Trust Facility Supporting Cooperation on Arms Regulation (UNSCAR). The project focused on the UNROCA experience of the 11 South East Asian states. Its primary goals were to increase awareness of the purpose and functioning of UNROCA among the officials in these states who are tasked with preparing and submitting reports to UNROCA; to learn about those states' views on the functioning of UNROCA; to promote renewed reporting to UNROCA; and to stimulate discussions in South East Asian states on the further development of UNROCA. For the project SIPRI sought views from South East Asian states, receiving responses from Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore.<sup>4</sup> These helped the authors to understand the challenges that states often face in relation to UNROCA reporting and provided ideas to move UNROCA forwards. This input was a crucial contribution to this paper.

## II. The establishment and working of UNROCA

### Transparency in armaments and the establishment of UNROCA

As early as the 1920s, the concept of a mechanism by which all states would regularly submit—and discuss—data on those items of military equipment deemed most related to and responsible for interstate tensions and armed conflict was debated in the framework of the League of Nations.<sup>5</sup> After the demise of the League, the usefulness of transparency in armaments and the concept of a reporting mechanism remained valid but any discussion or action on either was largely frozen until the late 1980s and the 1990–91 Gulf War. The latter created an unprecedented international consensus that the accumulation of advanced conventional weapon systems can be a

<sup>3</sup> Ten of the 11 South East Asian States are members of ASEAN. The 11th, Timor-Leste, was admitted 'in principle' in 2022. 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits, 'ASEAN leaders' statement on the application of Timor-Leste for ASEAN membership', 11 Nov. 2022.

<sup>4</sup> These responses were received in Oct. and Nov. 2023 on the condition that SIPRI use the information without attributing specific information and views to individual states or interviewees.

<sup>5</sup> Laurance, E. J., Wezeman, S. T. and Wulf, H., *Arms Watch: SIPRI Report on the First Year of the UN Register of Conventional Arms*, SIPRI Research Report no. 6 (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1993).



major factor in the outbreak, conduct and termination of armed conflict.<sup>6</sup> Among the steps taken to prevent another destabilizing accumulation of conventional weapons was the establishment in December 1991 of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms—exactly the mechanism thought of so many years earlier.<sup>7</sup>

When establishing the register, the UN General Assembly recognized that ‘excessive and destabilizing arms build-ups pose a threat to national, regional and international peace and security, particularly by aggravating tensions and conflict situations’ and the need to establish a mechanism for effective transparency in arms acquisitions to prevent such build-ups.<sup>8</sup> The resolution on UNROCA was adopted almost unanimously: of the 166 UN member states at that time, 150 voted in favour, 2 abstained, 14 did not vote (including Myanmar, Laos and Viet Nam) and none voted against.<sup>9</sup>

UNROCA became active in 1993 when the UN secretary-general requested that UN member states submit data on arms transfers for 1992 to the UN Secretariat’s Centre for Disarmament Affairs (known since 2007 as the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, UNODA), which was tasked with managing the register. Since then, the secretary-general has repeated the request every year; the 31st request to report to UNROCA was made in February 2023.<sup>10</sup> Over these decades, the UN General Assembly has regularly adopted resolutions reaffirming the continued importance of UNROCA and encouraging states to report data to it and to engage in its further development.

These resolutions have been supported by a great majority of UN member states. Nine of the 11 South East Asian states voted in favour of the 2022 version of this resolution.<sup>11</sup> Although Viet Nam did not vote for the resolution, it subsequently reported to UNROCA on transfers in 2022, signalling its continued support.

#### Key facts about UNROCA

- A global, United Nations, mechanism for transparency in armaments
- Operational since 1993 with data from 1992
- Data is official
- Low rate of response
- Participation in UNROCA is included in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Agenda for Disarmament
- The 2013 Arms Trade Treaty includes reporting on arms transfers based on the UNROCA format

### The goals and scope of UNROCA

UNROCA’s main aims are stated in the original 1991 resolution as being to ‘enhance confidence’, ‘promote stability’, ‘prevent the excessive and destabilizing accumulation of arms’, ‘exercise restraint’ in the transfer and

<sup>6</sup> For more on the concepts of transparency in armaments and a reporting mechanism see Laurance et al. (note 5); Wezeman, S. T., *The Future of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 4 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Aug. 2003); and Gill, B. and Mak, J. N. (eds), *Arms Transparency and Security in South-East Asia*, SIPRI Research Report no. 13 (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 46/36 L (note 1).

<sup>8</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 46/36 L (note 1).

<sup>9</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, 46th session, Provisional verbatim record of the 66th meeting, A/46/PV.66, 20 Dec. 1991, pp. 46–47.

<sup>10</sup> UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), ‘Submission of national reports to the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA)’, Note verbale ODA/2023-00031/TIA, 23 Feb. 2023.

<sup>11</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 77/69, ‘Transparency in armaments’, 7 Dec. 2022; and United Nations, General Assembly, 77th session, 46th meeting, Official record, A/77/PV.46, 7 Dec. 2022, p. 42.



**Table 1.** The categories of major conventional weapons of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms

The table lists the seven categories of ‘major conventional weapons’ for which UNROCA requests data and a short version of their main characteristics.

Category	Characteristics
<b>Category I: Battle tanks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Armoured fighting vehicles</li> <li>• Unladen weight at least 16.5 tons</li> <li>• With a high-velocity direct-fire gun with calibre of at least 75 millimetres</li> </ul>
<b>Category II: Armoured combat vehicles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Armoured vehicles either for transport of a squad of four or more infantrymen or armed with weapons with calibre of at least 12.5 mm or a missile launcher</li> </ul>
<b>Category III: Large-calibre artillery systems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guns, howitzers, pieces combining characteristics of both, mortars and multiple rocket launchers</li> <li>• Against surface targets primarily through indirect fire</li> <li>• Calibre at least 75 mm</li> </ul>
<b>Category IV: Combat aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles</b>	
<i>Sub-category a</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crewed aircraft with fixed wing or variable geometry wing</li> <li>• Designed, equipped or modified to use weapons (including fitted with a fire-control system)</li> <li>• Including versions for reconnaissance, suppression of air defence or electronic warfare</li> </ul>
<i>Sub-category b</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncrewed aircraft with fixed wing or variable-geometry wing</li> <li>• Designed, equipped or modified to use weapons</li> </ul>
<b>Category V: Attack helicopters</b>	
<i>Sub-category a</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crewed rotary-wing aircraft</li> <li>• Designed, equipped or modified to use weapons (including fitted with a fire-control system)</li> <li>• Including versions for reconnaissance or electronic warfare</li> </ul>
<i>Sub-category b</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncrewed rotary-wing aircraft</li> <li>• Designed, equipped or modified to use weapons</li> </ul>
<b>Category VI: Warships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surface ships and submarines armed and equipped for military use</li> <li>• Standard displacement of at least 500 tons</li> <li>• If below 500 tons, equipped for missiles or torpedoes with a range of at least 25 kilometres</li> </ul>
<b>Category VII: Missiles and missile launchers</b>	
<i>Sub-category a</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guided or unguided rockets and ballistic and cruise missiles with a warhead</li> <li>• Range of at least 25 km</li> <li>• Means designed or modified to launch such missiles or rockets</li> <li>• Excluding ground-to-air missiles</li> </ul>
<i>Sub-category b</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Man-portable air-defence systems—launchers</li> </ul>

Sources: Adapted from UNROCA database, ‘Categories of major conventional arms’, [n.d.]; and UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), *The Global Reported Arms Trade: Transparency in Armaments through the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms*, UNODA Occasional Paper no. 39 (United Nations: New York, Apr. 2023), p. 5.



production of arms, ‘ease tensions’, and ‘strengthen regional and international peace’.<sup>12</sup> While UNROCA’s objectives relate to armament developments in general—including holdings and domestic procurement—its main focus in terms of reporting has so far been limited to arms transfers between states.

Geographically, UNROCA covers the whole world. However, only UN member states are requested to provide data, and only for transfers to or from another UN member state.

In terms of content, UNROCA covers weapons deemed to be ‘indispensable to offensive operations’.<sup>13</sup> These have been defined since 1991 as seven categories of major conventional weapons: (I) battle tanks; (II) armoured combat vehicles; (III) large-calibre artillery systems; (IV) combat aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles; (V) attack helicopters; (VI) warships; and (VII) missiles and missile launchers. All categories and subcategories are defined through a brief description of the main parameters of items (see table 1). These definitions and descriptions have remained largely unchanged since 1991.<sup>14</sup>

The definitions of all seven categories remain, to a greater or lesser extent, open for interpretation by the officials who prepare the submissions in the states that choose to participate in UNROCA. This may lead to confusion as to what to report and is likely to explain some of the differences between what is reported by the exporter on the one hand and by the importer on the other hand.

To clarify the definitions and to respond to some frequent confusions, UNODA has since 1991 published guides, the most recent and most extensive dating from April 2023.<sup>15</sup> However, the lack of water-

tight definitions is not a serious problem since UNROCA is not a mechanism that sets legal standards for reporting. Where a state is uncertain, it can never go wrong by reporting more, rather than less, and UNODA encourages states to do so.

The request for data also covers procurement of arms from national production and arms in national holdings—in both cases for the seven UNROCA categories. This request is on a more voluntary basis: ‘States in a position to do so’ are invited to provide this information.<sup>16</sup> Since 2006, data on exports and imports of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has also been

#### The goals of UNROCA

- Confidence-building
- Preventing destabilizing build-ups of arms
- Regional and international peace

#### The scope of UNROCA

- All UN member states
- Major conventional weapons in seven categories
- Optional reporting on other procurement, on holdings and on transfers of small arms and light weapons

<sup>12</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 46/36 L (note 1); and UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), ‘UN Register of Conventional Arms’, [n.d.].

<sup>13</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, Report on the continuing operation of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms and its further development, A/71/259, 29 July 2016, para. 61(g).

<sup>14</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 46/36 L (note 1), annex. On the development of UNROCA see United Nations, General Assembly, Report on the continuing operation of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms and its further development, A/77/126, 30 June 2022, paras 5–9.

<sup>15</sup> UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), *The Global Reported Arms Trade: Transparency in Armaments through the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms*, UNODA Occasional Paper no. 39 (United Nations: New York, Apr. 2023).

<sup>16</sup> E.g. UN General Assembly Resolution 77/69 (note 11), para. 5.



**Imports<sup>a</sup>**

Report of international conventional arms transfers  
(according to General Assembly resolutions 46/36 L and 58/54)

Reporting country: \_\_\_\_\_

National point of contact: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Organization, Division/Section, telephone, fax, email) (FOR GOVERNMENTAL USE ONLY)

Calendar year: \_\_\_\_\_

A	B	C	D <sup>b</sup>	E <sup>b</sup>	Remarks <sup>c</sup>	
Category (I–VII)	Exporter State(s)	Number of items	State of origin (if not exporter)	Intermediate location (if any)	Description of item	Comments on the transfer
I. Battle tanks						
II. Armoured combat vehicles						
III. Large-calibre artillery systems						
IV. Combat aircraft and unmanned combat aerial vehicles (a) Combat aircraft (b) Unmanned combat aerial vehicles						
V. Attack helicopters (a) Attack helicopters (b) Rotary-wing unmanned combat aerial vehicles						
VI. Warships						
VII. Missiles and missile launchers <sup>d</sup> (a) Missiles and missile launchers (b) Man-portable air-defence system						

**Figure 1.** Extract from the imports section of the standardized form for reporting international transfers of conventional arms to the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms

Source: UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), *The Global Reported Arms Trade: Transparency in Armaments through the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms*, UNODA Occasional Paper no. 39 (United Nations: New York, Apr. 2023), p. 77.

requested. In 2016 a ‘7+1’ formula was adopted, upgrading the status of SALW to almost a full category—reporting on SALW is now requested and strongly encouraged.<sup>17</sup> However, the request for data on SALW remains separate, and SALW are covered by a separate section of the submission form. In recent years, most states that report data on the seven main categories have also provided data on their SALW transfers.

**The reporting requirements of UNROCA**

Reporting data to UNROCA is not mandatory, but each year states are requested to voluntarily provide data.<sup>18</sup> However, as noted above, almost all UN member states actively voted in favour of the resolution that established UNROCA and again for the many resolutions that have reaffirmed UNROCA and called for annual reporting and for universal participation in the register.

The minimum data requested is the total number of items in each category sent to each final importer state or received from each exporter state. Thus, if state X imports 10 battle tanks (Category I) of type A from state Y and 15 battle tanks of type B also from the same state Y, it is enough for state X to report the

<sup>17</sup> UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (note 15), p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> The request takes the form of a note verbale from the UN Secretariat, e.g. UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (note 10). See also UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (note 15), p. 16.



import of 25 Category I items from state Y. State X may also decide to make two separate listings for, respectively, 10 and 15 Category I items from state Y. However, it is not uncommon for states to leave out certain transfers or to omit part of the minimum requested data.<sup>19</sup>

States that have no exports and no imports to report in a particular year should submit a report specifically noting so: a ‘nil’ report in the form of an empty reporting form. For example, Viet Nam provided such a nil report for 16 of the 23 years it reported, including 2022 (see table 2 below).<sup>20</sup> However, many states seem not to submit a nil report when they have nothing to report.

In addition to the minimum data requested, the UNROCA reporting format gives states the option to provide more information on the individual exports and imports. This includes data on the state of origin and any intermediate location. These options are seldom used by any state. In addition, a description of items and comments on the transfer can be provided under ‘remarks’. Comments on the transfer could include any other relevant information, such as the use or user in the importer state (e.g. if the items are for the police or for peacekeeping forces) or if the transferred items are second-hand. It is common for many states to provide data under these latter two options. To take the example above on the transfer of tanks from state Y to state X, more detail could be given under ‘description of items’, for example that it is a transfer of 10 type-A tanks and 15 type-B tanks.

Reports are to be submitted in a standardized format (see figure 1), either electronically in the UNROCA database or on paper to UNODA. Since 2022 there has been a third option: an ATT state party can ask UNODA to make a submission to UNROCA from the information in the state’s annual ATT report (see below).

While the deadline for reporting is set as 31 May, every year many reports are submitted later. All reports are added to the publicly available online UNROCA database.<sup>21</sup>

Officials of South East Asian states, in interviews with SIPRI, stated that the deadline itself was problematic for them because of the short time between the annual request (typically in February) and the May deadline. While these officials noted that a structured, well-established process was in place in their respective states, they highlighted that the process is cumbersome as it requires the coordination of different government agencies and the release of information according to a timetable that does not necessarily align with the UNROCA deadline.

An important aspect of UNROCA is that any data is official. SIPRI has shown for decades that, for most states, data on transfers of major arms (including most weapons in the UNROCA categories) is publicly available

#### UNROCA reporting requirements

- UNROCA participation is requested but voluntary
- Reporting is annual
- The minimum data to report is the total number of items in each category to each importer state or from each exporter state
- Additional data is optional, encouraged and useful
- A state with no exports and no imports should submit a ‘nil’ report

<sup>19</sup> See the sections on international transparency in recent editions of the SIPRI Yearbook; and Wezeman, S. T., ‘Reporting to the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms for 2017’, SIPRI Background Paper, June 2019.

<sup>20</sup> UNROCA database, Report from Viet Nam for 2022, 28 Apr. 2023.

<sup>21</sup> UNROCA database, <<https://www.unroca.org/>>.



from official and non-official open sources.<sup>22</sup> Such open-source information highlights that there is little that remains secret for long when it comes to numbers and types of major arms imported or exported. However, such open-source information is not infallible, and nor is it always a good basis for national decision making or for interstate consultations on defence and security. While not always complete or correct, the official nature of the UNROCA data is a more solid basis for interstate discussions on arms and their potential negative impacts.

### Improving and expanding UNROCA

While UNROCA started with data on exports and imports of a limited number of types of conventional arms, the idea in 1991 was that the register would be developed further to become more relevant. This included covering more types of arms and military equipment as well as information on holdings of arms and on arms acquired other than through international trade. Such development continues to be the goal.<sup>23</sup>

To this end, UNROCA has been periodically reviewed by groups of governmental experts (GGEs), which have suggested improvements and expansion. The GGEs are temporary advisory groups of mainly expert delegates from interested governments. The GGEs are appointed by the

UN secretary-general and their composition changes every time. The first GGE convened in 1994, and since then new GGEs have reviewed UNROCA every three years or so, most recently in 2022.<sup>24</sup> The 2022 GGE recommended that the regular review of UNROCA be

continued by a new GGE in 2025.<sup>25</sup> In addition, transparency in armaments is on the agenda of the Conference on Disarmament, a permanent Geneva-based body whose 65 member states discuss and negotiate arms control and disarmament. Its work feeds into the discussions of the GGEs.<sup>26</sup>

While the GGEs have discussed numerous improvements and additions, few of these have been adopted by the General Assembly. Aside from the inclusion of data on exports and imports of SALW in 2003, only a few minor changes have been adopted. UNROCA remains a mechanism that focuses on international transfers of the same seven categories that were agreed in 1991. Due to its continued focus on exports and imports of arms, UNROCA is inherently discriminatory: it requires states that are largely dependent on imports to be open about their acquisitions, while not requiring the same openness from states that procure many or most of their major arms from national production.<sup>27</sup>

#### Reviewing UNROCA

- From the start, further development of UNROCA was planned
- Improvement and expansion have stagnated
- Focus on imports leaves UNROCA discriminatory against states with no national arms industry

<sup>22</sup> SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Mar. 2023, <<https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>>.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. the regular resolutions on 'transparency in armaments' adopted by the UN General Assembly, the most recent being UN General Assembly Resolution 77/69 (note 11).

<sup>24</sup> The GGE reports are available from UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (note 12).

<sup>25</sup> United Nations, A/77/126 (note 14), para. 119.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations, A/77/126 (note 14), para. 20.

<sup>27</sup> This has also been noted in the discussions of the GGEs, including United Nations, A/77/126 (note 14), para. 73.





SIPRI actively gauged the perception of officials from South East Asian states on the discriminatory nature of UNROCA's data requirements and their views on expanding the data requested under UNROCA. However, while interviewed officials acknowledged this unbalanced aspect of the data requirements, they did not consider it detrimental to the wider goal of UNROCA, nor did it influence the background discussions on whether a submission should or should not be made.

The GGEs have also noted that a particular problem for sustained UNROCA reporting is the movement of staff between government departments. This leads to loss of the institutional knowledge, established practices and efficiencies that can arise from repeated completion of reports. South East Asian interviewees confirmed this. Some highlighted the individual efforts taken by some staff to promote reporting, while others also highlighted that past decisions, knowledge and ideas were not always available due to the movement of staff.

### The relationship of UNROCA with other instruments

Transparency in armaments is also included in key UN documents, especially those related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda. While transparency in armaments does not appear explicitly in the 2030 Agenda, there are many examples of disarmament, transparency and accountability being aligned with several SDGs and their indicators to help the world towards sustainable development.<sup>28</sup> For instance, one UNODA document highlights disarmament as being part of SDG 16 (on peace, justice and strong institutions). It describes 'Participation in military transparency and confidence-building measures, such as reporting on military spending and on arms imports and exports' as being an element of Target 16.6 (on effective, accountable and transparent institutions).<sup>29</sup>

The UN secretary-general's 2018 Agenda for Disarmament refers to the need to address the excessive accumulation of conventional arms and, as Action 23.4, underlines the promotion of transparency in arms transfers.<sup>30</sup> It reminds the world that 'The exchange of information on how States translate their stated national security requirements into military postures can also create mutual understanding and trust, reduce misperceptions and miscalculations and thereby help both to prevent military confrontation and to foster regional and global stability.'<sup>31</sup> It concludes that 'Effectively responding to contemporary security challenges requires a shift in approach.' However, it finds that, 'In regions of conflict and tension, transparency and confidence-

<sup>28</sup> E.g. UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (note 2), p. 44; and Nakamitsu, I., UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, 'Advancing disarmament within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', *UN Chronicle*, vol. 55, no. 2 (Aug. 2018).

<sup>29</sup> UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, 'Disarmament and arms regulation in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', [n.d.]. See also UN General Assembly Resolution 70/1 (note 2); and United Nations, Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators, 'Global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', annex to UN General Assembly Resolution 71/313, 6 July 2017.

<sup>30</sup> E.g. UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (note 2), p. 44. On Action 23.4 see UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, 'Rethinking unconstrained military spending—Action 23: Facilitate regional dialogue to build confidence', 3 Oct. 2018.

<sup>31</sup> UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (note 2), p. 44.

**Box 1. Reporting under the Arms Trade Treaty**

The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in April 2013 and entered into force in December 2014.<sup>a</sup> It includes provisions on mandatory annual reporting on exports and imports of arms using a format derived from that of the UN Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA): it uses the same seven categories of major weapons and includes the same data fields. In addition, the ATT includes mandatory reporting on transfers of small arms and light weapons (SALW) as an eighth category.<sup>b</sup> The reporting requirement applies only to the 113 ATT states parties. However, reports must include all exports to and imports from any state, not only other ATT parties.

The form of a nil report under the ATT differs slightly from that of UNROCA. For the ATT, the reporting form has ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ boxes that need to be ticked according to whether or not the state has data to report on exports, and equivalent tick boxes for imports.<sup>c</sup>

Reporting for the ATT started for 2015 but, despite being mandatory, reporting levels have never been 100 per cent. Between 69 and 74 states submitted reports to the ATT for 2019–22, well below the total number of ATT states parties in each of those years.<sup>d</sup> Nonetheless, this was still significantly better than the total numbers of reports and the rate of reporting for UNROCA.

Unlike UNROCA reports, which are always made public, the ATT has the option to limit access only to other states parties.<sup>e</sup> Of the 69 states that have reported to the ATT for 2022, this option was used by 19.<sup>f</sup> These include several states that also reported publicly to UNROCA.

Only one South East Asian state is party to the ATT: the Philippines ratified the treaty in March 2022, but its first mandatory report to the ATT is due only in May 2024 (for transfers in 2023). Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand signed the ATT in 2013–14 but have not yet ratified it and thus do not yet have an obligation to report to the ATT. In addition, Brunei Darussalam and Timor-Leste voted in favour of adoption of the treaty in April 2013 but have not yet acceded to it.<sup>g</sup> Indonesia, Laos and Myanmar abstained and Viet Nam did not vote. Four of the five South East Asian states that have signed or ratified the ATT have reported to UNROCA since they signed the treaty: Cambodia (for 2 years), Malaysia (for 1 year), Singapore (for 8 years) and Thailand (for 1 year).<sup>h</sup>

<sup>a</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 67/234 B, ‘The Arms Trade Treaty’, 2 Apr. 2013; and Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), opened for signature 3 June 2013, entered into force 24 Dec. 2014.

<sup>b</sup> Arms Trade Treaty (note a), articles 13(3) and 2(1); and ATT, Working Group on Transparency and Reporting, ‘Reporting authorized or actual exports and imports of conventional arms under the ATT: Questions & answers’, ATT/CSP8.WGTR/2022/CHAIR/734/Conf.Rep, 22 July 2022, pp. 4, 19–20.

<sup>c</sup> See e.g. Iceland, ATT annual report for 2021, 17 June 2022. See also figure 2.

<sup>d</sup> ATT Secretariat, ‘Annual reports’, 13 Nov. 2023.

<sup>e</sup> ATT, ATT/CSP8.WGTR/2022/CHAIR/734/Conf.Rep (note b), p. 23.

<sup>f</sup> ATT Secretariat (note d).

<sup>g</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 67/234 B (note a); and United Nations, General Assembly, 67th session, 71st plenary meeting, Official record, 2 Apr. 2013.

<sup>h</sup> See table 2 below.

building mechanisms designed to prevent arms competition remain under-utilized and underdeveloped’.<sup>32</sup>

There are other mechanisms that include transparency in armaments and that may thus also help to build confidence between states. These include reporting on arms exports and imports within the framework of arms trade regulations such as the Arms Trade Treaty (see box 1). While building confidence between states is not the primary function of the ATT, it does play a role.<sup>33</sup> Since UNROCA and the ATT have similar reporting requirements on arms transfers, the voluntary UNROCA reporting can help the mandatory ATT reporting and vice versa. Starting with the reporting for 2021, the ATT reporting form has included a simple tick-box option to allow the data from the ATT report to be used by UNODA as the basis of the state’s UNROCA report (see figure 2). It permits UNODA to use the data to fill in the state’s

<sup>32</sup> UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (note 2), p. 46.

<sup>33</sup> Arms Trade Treaty (note 2), preamble and Article 1.



<b>Date of Report :</b>			
The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) may use the relevant information in this Annual Report as a basis for the reporting State’s report to the United Register on Conventional Arms (UNROCA)			<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Contents of report</b> (check as appropriate)		Yes	No
i)	Nil report on exports of conventional arms	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ii)	Nil report on imports of conventional arms	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
iii)	Annual report on exports of conventional arms	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
iv)	Annual report on imports of conventional arms	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
v)	National definitions of categories of conventional arms reported	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Figure 2.** Extract from the Arms Trade Treaty reporting template

*Note:* The extract shows the option to use the data in the ATT report to report to the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms.

*Source:* ATT Secretariat, ‘The Arms Trade Treaty reporting template’, 16 July 2021.

UNROCA report for that year, without the state having to file a report directly to the register.

In interviews with state officials, SIPRI asked about the option to submit to UNROCA via the ATT submission; the responses included that this was ‘an interesting aspect of ATT reporting’ and that ‘it would definitely help save time’. However, the interviewees did not seem fully aware of the option, possibly since none had yet used the ATT reporting system. They were, however, clear that the mechanisms are separate efforts with separate goals and with potentially separate reporting should the mechanism be developed further.

### III. Reporting to UNROCA by South East Asian states, 1992–2022

Between the first reporting year, 1992, and the current reporting year, 2022, UNROCA has been active for 31 years. A state that reported every year would by now have provided 31 submissions.

No South East Asian state has done so. With 29 submissions, Singapore has come closest (see table 2). It is followed by Viet Nam and Malaysia, each with more than 20; Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, with 14–16 submissions; and Cambodia with 10, Brunei Darussalam with 6, Laos with 2, and Timor-Leste with 1. Myanmar is the only South East Asian state that has never submitted data to UNROCA.

South East Asian states have provided a total of 137 reports for the 31 years between 1992 and 2022. However, the reports are not evenly distributed; in

**Table 2.** Participation in the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms by South East Asian states, 1992–2022

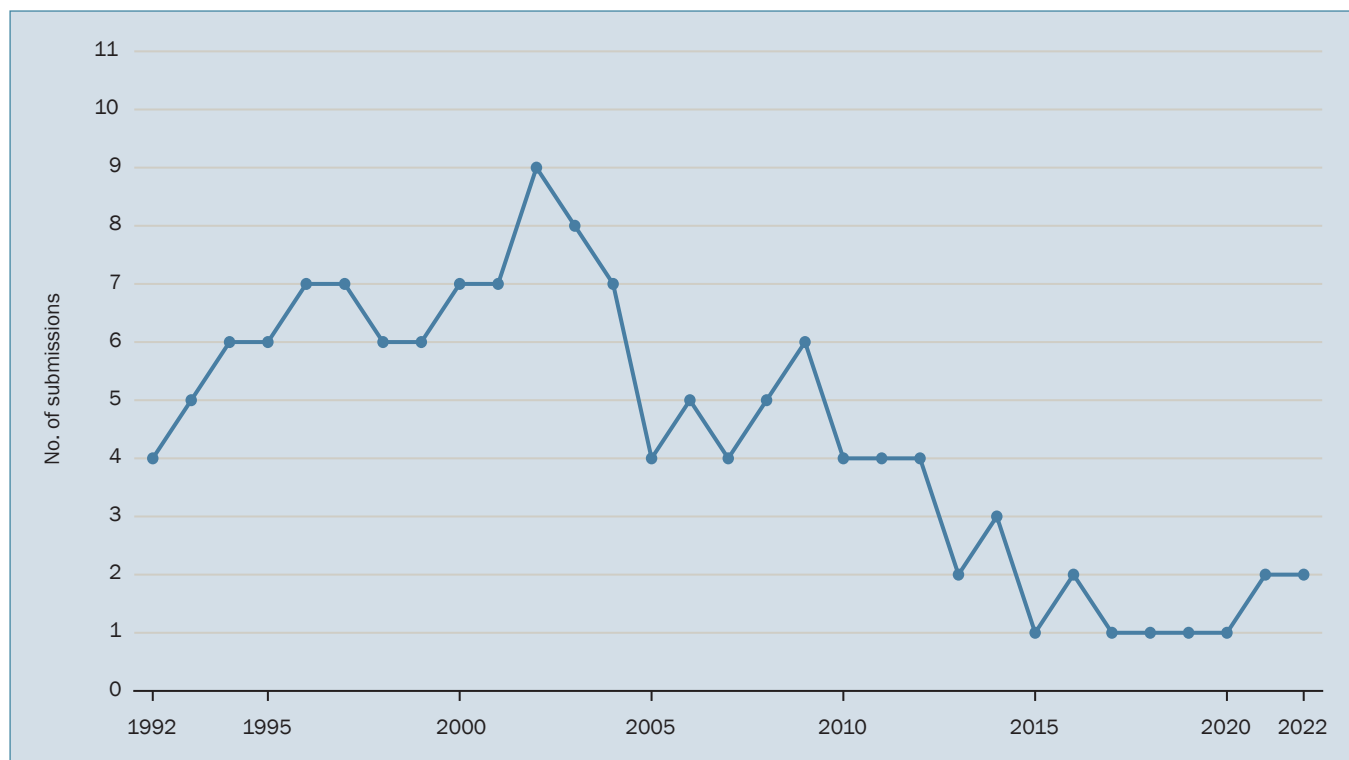
‘Year’ refers to the year reported on (not the year the report was submitted). ‘X’ indicates years for which data has been submitted. ‘\*’ indicates years for which a nil report was submitted (for transfers of arms in the seven main categories). ‘†’ indicates years (from 2007) for which data was submitted on small arms and light weapons.

Year	Brunei	Cambodia	Indonesia	Laos	Malaysia	Myanmar	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand	Timor-Leste <sup>a</sup>	Viet Nam
1992	–	–	X*	–	X*	–	X	X	–	..	–
1993	–	–	X	–	X	–	X	X	X	..	–
1994	–	–	X	–	X	–	X	X	X	..	X*
1995	–	–	X	–	X	–	X	X	X	..	X
1996	X	–	X	–	X	–	X	X	X	..	X*
1997	X*	–	X	–	X	–	X	X	X	..	X
1998	–	–	X	–	X*	–	X	X	X	..	X*
1999	–	X*	X	–	X	–	–	X	X	..	X*
2000	–	X*	X	–	X	–	X*	X	X	..	X*
2001	–	X*	X*	–	X	–	X*	X	X	..	X*
2002	X*	–	X*	X*	X	–	X*	X	X	X*	X*
2003	X*	X*	X	–	X	–	X	X	X	–	X*
2004	–	X*	X*	–	X*	–	X	X	X	–	X*
2005	–	–	X*	–	X	–	–	X	–	–	X
2006	X*	–	–	–	X*	–	X	X	–	–	X*
2007	X*†	–	X†	–	–	–	–	X	–	–	X*
2008	–	–	X†	–	X	–	X*†	X	–	–	X*
2009	–	X*	–	X*	X	–	–	X	X†	–	X*
2010	–	X*	–	–	X*	–	–	X	–	–	X*
2011	–	–	–	–	X*	–	–	X	X*	–	X*
2012	–	X*	–	–	X*	–	–	X	–	–	X
2013	–	X*	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X
2014	–	X*	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	–	X
2015	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	–	–
2016	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	–	X
2017	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	–	–
2018	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X†	–	–	–
2019	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X†	–	–	–
2020	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X*†	–	–	–
2021	–	–	–	–	X†	–	–	X†	–	–	–
2022 <sup>b</sup>	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	X	–	X*
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>–</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>23</b>

<sup>a</sup> Timor-Leste became a member of the UN in 2002 and was only asked to provide data from that year.

<sup>b</sup> Additional late reports for 2022 may yet be submitted.

Source: UNROCA database, <<https://www.unroca.org/>>, accessed 20 Nov. 2023.



**Figure 3.** Annual participation in the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms by South East Asian states, 1992–2022

*Note:* The graph shows for each year the number of South East Asian states that submitted data on exports and imports of major conventional arms to UNROCA. The years are those for which data was submitted (not the years when the data was submitted).

The figure for 2022 may change as additional late reports may yet be submitted.

*Source:* UNROCA database, <<https://www.unroca.org/>>, accessed 20 Nov. 2023.

particular, from 2013 the annual number of reports has been substantially lower than in the preceding years (see figure 3).

Averaged over the decades 1992–2001, 2002–2011 and 2012–2021, the response rates of states in South East Asia have been below those for the rest of Asia and Oceania (see figure 4). The gap was particularly wide in 2012–21, when the response rate in South East Asia was less than two-thirds of that of the rest of Asia and Oceania. However, in at least seven years the response rate in South East Asia was above the highest ever recorded global rate (i.e. 1996, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004). For those years, the rates of response by South East Asian states came close to those for Europe, the region which consistently has the best rates, and were significantly higher than those for Africa, the Americas and the Middle East.<sup>34</sup>

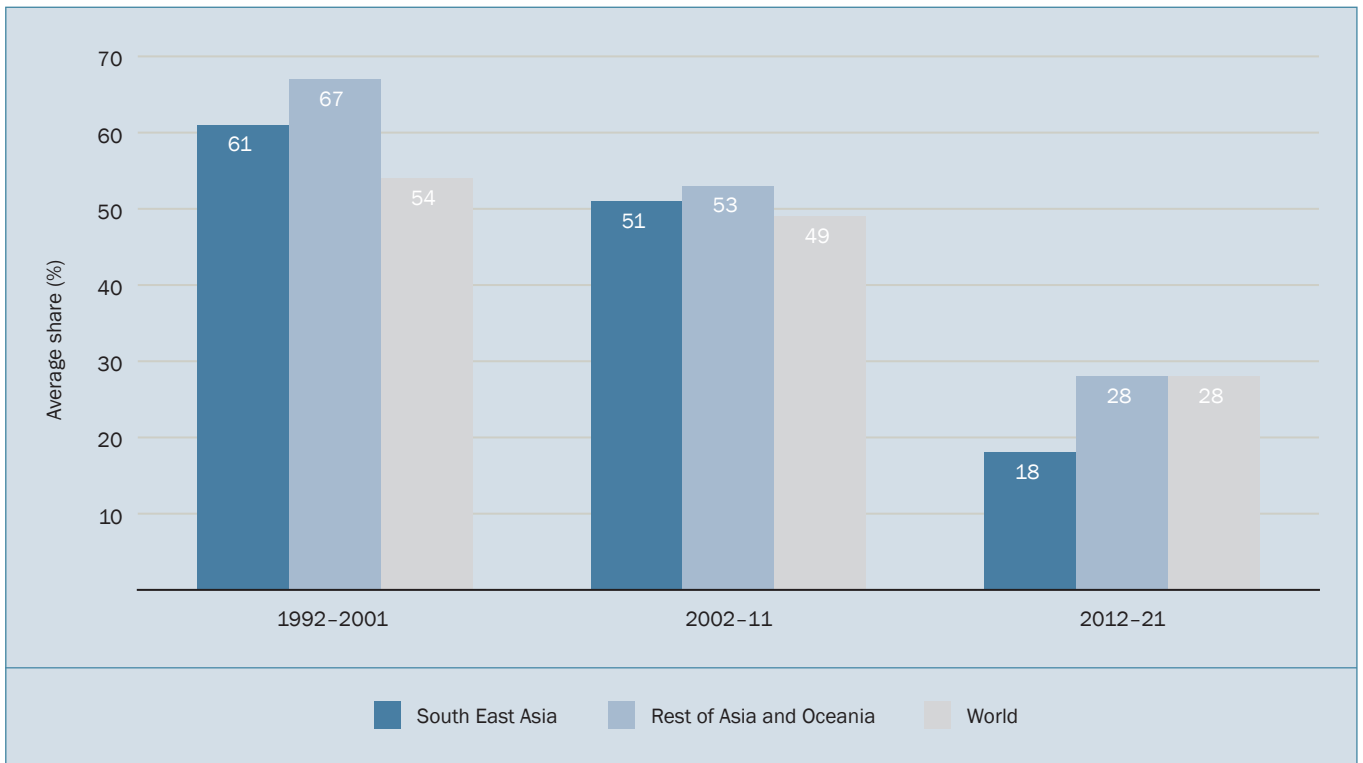
Consistency of reporting varies for South East Asian states (see table 2). Some have (almost) consistently reported each year for long periods. Others have several gaps in their reporting, sometimes of several years.

#### UNROCA and South East Asian states

- Seven of the then 10 South East Asian states voted in favour of establishing UNROCA in 1991
- Ten of the 11 South East Asian states have reported at least once
- Reporting by South East Asian states declined significantly after 2003
- South East Asian states have generally given more details in their report than many other states

<sup>34</sup> UNROCA database, ‘Participation statistics’, accessed 20 Nov. 2023.





**Figure 4.** Average rates of reporting to the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms by states in South East Asia, in the rest of Asia and Oceania, and globally, by decade, 1992–2021

*Note:* The bars show the average share (%) over each decade of states in South East Asia, states in the rest of Asia and Oceania and all UN member states that submitted data on exports or imports of major conventional arms to UNROCA. The years are those for which data was submitted (not the years when the data was submitted).

Data for 2022 has been excluded since additional late reports for this year may yet be submitted.

*Sources:* UNROCA database, <<https://www.unroca.org/>>, accessed 20 Nov. 2023; and UNROCA database, ‘Participation statistics’, accessed 20 Nov. 2023. For a list of states in Asia and Oceania see SIPRI, ‘Regional coverage’, [n.d.].

This inconsistency is common also for many states in other regions. The significant drop between 2002 and 2015 is also similar to reporting patterns of other states.

The gaps and the drop in reporting remain difficult to explain as many states have not publicly stated their reasons for non-reporting. Several of the GGEs and other experts have considered possible reasons. These include a lack of staff, turnover of staff, too many other commitments for the government agency dealing with UNROCA, lack of knowledge in that agency and lack of inter-agency coordination.<sup>35</sup> There may also be fatigue or a lack of political will to continue reporting to an instrument that does not ‘address the most pressing security needs of many [s]tates’ and is not developing towards what many states need or expect.<sup>36</sup>

To improve state capacity, UNODA has over the years organized several workshops on UNROCA, often supported by state donors. For example, a workshop organized by UNODA in May 2023 was much appreciated by interviewed officials from South East Asian states.<sup>37</sup> While large workshops

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. United Nations, A/77/126 (note 14), paras 33–37.

<sup>36</sup> United Nations, A/77/126 (note 14), para. 34.

<sup>37</sup> On the workshop see UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), ‘Dozens of states join training workshops to promote transparency in armaments’, May 2023.



<b>Imports</b>						
<i>Category</i>	<i>Exporter State</i>	<i>Number of items</i>	<i>State of origin (if not exporter)</i>	<i>Intermediate location(s)</i>	<i>Description of items</i>	<i>Comments on the transfer</i>
V. Attack helicopters	United States	6	None		MD 530G attack scout helicopter	
VII. (a) Missiles and missile launchers	Norway	48	None		Surface-to-surface missile	

**Figure 5.** Extract from Malaysia's submission to the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms for 2021

*Note:* The extract shows the use of the 'description of items' field to provide extra information on transfers.

*Source:* United Nations, General Assembly, 'United Nations Register of Conventional Arms', Report of the Secretary-General, A/77/165, 14 July 2022, p. 61.

are useful, interviewed officials of South East Asian states mentioned a preference for access to training and information provided for much smaller groups (down to one-on-one).

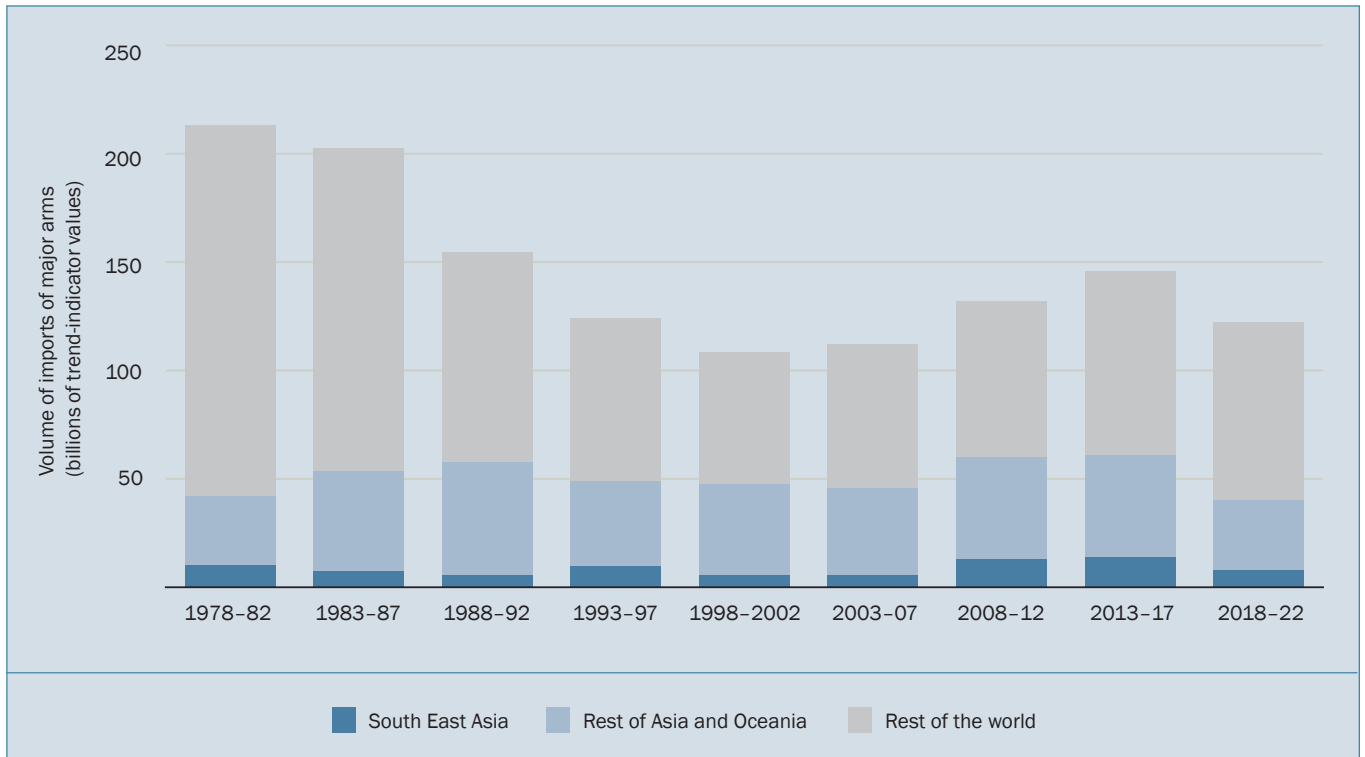
### Extra information for the seven categories

The UNROCA reporting format gives states the option to provide more information on the individual exports and imports than the bare minimum requested (i.e. the total number of items in each category to each final importer state or from each exporter state). A substantial number of states have used the options to give more details on the items and on each transfer.

It is a noteworthy and positive aspect of the reporting by South East Asian states that all nine states that have at one point reported actual exports or imports to UNROCA have used the 'description of item' field to provide more exact information.<sup>38</sup> While that field was not used in a few reports for 1992–94, starting with reporting for 1995 all reports on imports have used the description of items option. However, the officials of South East Asian states interviewed by SIPRI were not aware of the reasons behind the consistent use of the description field after 1995, nor are there any official statements on UNROCA from South East Asian states that would explain it.

Malaysia's submission for 2021 provides examples of how a South East Asian state has used the extra information option to report additional information on its imports (see figure 5). In this case, it clarified the exact type of 6 attack helicopters (Category V(a)) and gave more insight on the type of 48 missiles (Category VII(a)). This information is highly useful for the purpose of UNROCA as it helps other states to get a better picture of what capabilities Malaysia is importing. In this case, the six Category V(a) items imported from the United States are shown to be a type of attack helicopter that has known, and limited, capabilities (and not, e.g., any of the more capable designs that are also available from the USA). The description of the 48 Category VII(a) items from Norway is less detailed and leaves it unclear if the missiles are short range and less advanced versions with a limited potential impact or advanced long-range missiles that are more likely to

<sup>38</sup> Myanmar has never reported to UNROCA. Timor-Leste has reported once, with a nil report.



**Figure 6.** Imports of major arms by states in South East Asia, in the rest of Asia and Oceania, and globally, by five-year period, 1978–2022

*Note:* The bars show the volume of imports of major arms (as defined by SIPRI) for each consecutive 5-year period for states in South East Asia, states in the rest of Asia and Oceania, and all other states.

*Source:* SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Mar. 2023, <<https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>>. For a list of states in Asia and Oceania see SIPRI, ‘Regional coverage’, [n.d.].

have an impact on the regional military balance. However, the description ‘surface-to-surface missile’ still gives strong clues as to the type. With other public sources it can be surmised that they are likely to be the Naval Strike Missile (NSM), an advanced long-range anti-ship missile with a land-attack capability.<sup>39</sup>

### The completeness of reports

It is significant that South East Asian states have not omitted any of the minimum data: in all reported imports and exports, the number of items transferred has been provided (in column C of the standardized reporting form; see figure 1 above). This contrasts positively with several states in other regions that are normally transparent but which have not always reported the number of items. For example, for many years Sweden has provided descriptions and importers of missiles and missile launchers (Category VII) but not the numbers of exported items, noting those details as ‘classified’.<sup>40</sup> Based on a comparison with information on arms transfers in open sources (including other UNROCA submissions, government information from other states, and reporting by industry and media), there are also no cases in which

<sup>39</sup> E.g. Kongsberg, ‘Contract worth Euro 124m for NSM missiles for the Royal Malaysian Navy’, 18 Apr. 2018; and Sulaiman, H., ‘Adding sting to RMN flotilla’, Malaysia Flying Herald, 30 Jan. 2021.

<sup>40</sup> E.g. UNROCA database, Report from Sweden for 2022, 20 June 2023.



the report from any South East Asian state seems to have systematically left out all exports to or all imports from any specific state. This also contrasts positively with reporting by several other states. For example, Russia has never reported exports to Algeria or Egypt, while other public sources, including other official Russian sources, clearly identify such exports.

It is also noteworthy that six of the nine South East Asian states that submitted data since 2006 have included exports and imports of SALW in some of their submissions (see table 2). While this SIPRI Research Policy Paper concentrates on the seven main categories, the fact that most South East Asian states have reported on SALW when such data is requested underlines the positive past and potential future attitude of South East Asian participation in UNROCA.

However, unlike many other states, South East Asian states have never provided data on holdings or procurement from national production. While national procurement has not been significant for most South East Asian states, some do produce major arms and many plan to produce more in the future.<sup>41</sup>

#### IV. The benefits of reporting to UNROCA for South East Asian states

Why does reporting by South East Asian states matter? Is their participation in the international arms trade so great that their input, as exporters or as importers, is relevant for any potentially destabilizing build-up of armaments? Does UNROCA improve confidence between states that are part of a functioning regional organization whose members are committed to finding peaceful solutions for any tensions and have a record of doing so?

To answer one of these questions: the 11 South East Asian states have been significant importers of major arms, including for the whole period in which UNROCA has been operational. Based on SIPRI data, the combined imports of major arms by South East Asian states as a share of the global total have ranged from 3.7 per cent (in 1983–87) to 10 per cent (in 2008–12; see figure 6). In the 15 years 2008–22 their imports were higher in both absolute terms and as a share of the global total than in most earlier periods. More importantly, compared to other states in Asia and Oceania—the region that would be more affected by a military build-up in South East Asia—imports of major arms by South East Asian states are substantial: they ranged from 10 per cent of the regional total (in 1988–92) to 25 per cent (in 1978–82). The substantial level of deliveries is also shown by data on the number and types of UNROCA items imported (see table 3). The specific weapons acquired include large, long-range combat aircraft in Category IV and warships in Category VI, which both play a major role in the significant maritime tensions in East Asia.

The substantial level of imports partly provides a second, more important reason for reporting to UNROCA: neighbouring states—both within and outside the region—may see imports by South East Asian states as a factor that affects their security. Perceptions of growing insecurity have led South East

<sup>41</sup> Béraud-Sudreau, L. et al., *Arms-production Capabilities in the Indo-Pacific Region: Measuring Self-reliance* (SIPRI: Stockholm, Oct. 2022); and Wezeman, S. T., *Arms Flows to South East Asia* (SIPRI: Stockholm, Dec. 2019).

**Table 3.** Numbers of items in the seven categories of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms imported by South East Asian states, 2019–23

Figures are numbers of items imported that fit in each UNROCA major arms category.

Importing state	I Tanks	II Armoured Vehicles	III Artillery	IV Combat aircraft	V Attack helicopters	VI Warships	VII Missiles and launchers
Brunei	–	–	–	–	–	2	–
Cambodia	–	22	12	–	2	–	288
Indonesia	5	32	73	9	15	3	199
Laos	20	26	–	2	–	–	–
Malaysia	–	81	18	–	6	4	48
Myanmar	3	30	–	26	42	3	67
Philippines	36	58	49	–	9	5	60
Singapore	2	125	3	–	–	2	203
Thailand	13	263	81	8	5	2	223
Timor-Leste	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Viet Nam	32	–	–	12	–	2	50

Sources: 2019–22: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Mar. 2023, <<https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>>. 2023: open sources. Data has been compiled by SIPRI from open sources, using SIPRI’s interpretations of the UNROCA category definitions (table 1).

Asian states to increase their military spending and arms acquisitions, the latter largely through imports.<sup>42</sup> China and its territorial claims in the South China Sea have been recognized as playing a large role in these decisions.<sup>43</sup> States neighbouring South East Asia are also expanding their military inventories and capabilities. Thus, in the context of the growing tensions in the South China Sea, transparency in armaments through UNROCA should be used as a confidence-building tool.<sup>44</sup>

Continued and systematic reporting has other benefits. It helps to create a cadre of officials with experience in UNROCA reporting, which makes it easier to develop and preserve institutional knowledge. Moreover, reporting shows consistent and effective support for the mechanism, and thereby also its goals. In this way, states may earn more trust from other states while at the same time adding weight and trust to the reporting mechanism itself.

## V. Conclusions

The findings that arise from the above, and the related recommendations on how to increase the participation in and relevance of UNROCA, can be directed to different audiences. The first three are most relevant to South East Asian states. A further five are more general and can be addressed to UNODA and the wider international community. The findings and recommendations for South East Asian states are equally valid for many states in other regions,

<sup>42</sup> Wezeman (note 41).

<sup>43</sup> Wezeman (note 41); and Torrijos, G., ‘Arms and influence in Southeast Asia: The link between arms procurement and strategic relations’, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 22 Sep. 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Wezeman (note 41).





while those for the international community are also likely to resonate with many states outside South East Asia.

### **Findings and recommendations for South East Asian states**

#### *UNROCA reporting is particularly relevant in South East Asia and neighbouring states*

The volume of arms acquisitions by South East Asian states is significant. These acquisitions will shape the perceptions of regional military balances and of related threats, by both South East Asian states and other nearby states, especially China. As South East Asian states acquire most of their major arms through imports, UNROCA reporting on arms transfers is particularly relevant for assessing armament developments in states of the region and for UNROCA to function as the confidence-building measure it was designed to be.

*Recommendation.* With growing tensions in Asia, it is important to continue and expand transparency processes. South East Asian states should therefore consistently and promptly report their arms imports to UNROCA.

As several South East Asian states are developing their own arms industries, they should consider expanding reporting to UNROCA to include procurement from national production.

#### *South East Asian states are willing to participate in UNROCA*

In the first two decades of UNROCA, South East Asian states demonstrated a willingness to participate in the register. Indeed, they reached reporting rates higher than most other regions and subregions. From the start, they have also consistently shown a higher level of transparency by providing more data than the minimum required.

Moreover, all the UNROCA reports from South East Asian states have used the options to describe the imported items. The descriptions are of great importance to understanding the potential impact of the transferred weapons. In this aspect, South East Asian states have been significantly more transparent in their UNROCA submissions than many states, including some of the major powers.

*Recommendation.* South East Asian states should continue to use the description and comment options in their UNROCA submissions. They should also expand the details given on designations and other aspects of the weapons.

#### *South East Asian states do not consider UNROCA's discriminatory nature to be detrimental to its wider goal*

As South East Asian states largely depend on imports for their major arms, UNROCA's main focus on import and export data inherently discriminates against them compared with states that are less dependent on imports. From the start, this has been an important point considered for further development of the register. However, South East Asian states do not seem to have been vocal on this issue: while they acknowledge the discriminatory nature of the mechanism, they do not consider it to be detrimental to UNROCA's wider goal.

*Recommendation.* One way to further develop UNROCA is to encourage states to expand reporting on national holdings of armaments. South East Asian states should seek further development of UNROCA through national brainstorming on transparency in armaments and the functioning of UNROCA. They should participate more actively in efforts to improve UNROCA; the upcoming 2025 GGE offers a good opportunity for this.

South East Asian states could also promote regional transparency via ASEAN or use it to develop a common regional voice in discussions in the UNROCA framework.

### **Findings and recommendations for UNODA and the international community**

#### *The time between the annual request to report to UNROCA and the deadline is too short*

The agreed deadline for UNROCA submission is 31 May each year for data on the previous year. UNODA sends out the annual request (as a note verbale) for submissions in February of each year, followed by reminders. However, many states, including most South East Asian states that report, miss the deadline and submit data later in the year (or sometimes even in the next year). As concluded by GGEs and other experts and confirmed by officials of South East Asian states, this is mainly due to the difficulty of compiling data from several parts of the government bureaucracy, which takes time.

This ‘late’ reporting is not a major problem for transparency, as all submissions are eventually included in the UNROCA online database. However, submissions received after the deadline are not included in the UN secretary-general’s annual report on UNROCA—an important and highly visible annual marker of transparency. Nor are they issued as addenda to that report (as they were until 2017). Any ‘late’ data may also not be available for the UN General Assembly’s annual discussions on armaments and disarmament.

*Recommendation.* UNODA should increase the time between the request for submissions to UNROCA and the deadline for submissions. It should send the annual request earlier, possibly already during the UN’s Disarmament Week (in late October) in the previous year and continue the practice of sending reminders afterwards.

#### *Staff turnover affects reporting to UNROCA*

Staff in government departments and agencies are often rotated frequently or promoted to different functions. This has been noted by GGEs and other experts as possibly having a negative effect on reporting: new staff are unlikely to be fully aware of or trained to deal with preparing UNROCA submissions; and turnover of staff may reduce long-term institutional and historical knowledge. SIPRI’s interactions with South East Asian states have clearly shown that staff changes have these effects.

New staff can be unaware of the concept and purpose of UNROCA and of the original reasons that states voted in favour of the instrument. They can also be unaware of reasons for reporting or not reporting, and of reasons for reporting specific details, which have often not been efficiently documented.



New staff also struggle to deal with tasks if they have not been fully handed over by departing staff.

*Recommendation.* Individual states should preserve a national institutional memory—both long term and short term. By more considered rotation of staff, the knowledge base could be spread more broadly. States should also establish a specific knowledge depository for national documents related to UNROCA (including documents explaining national reporting practices).

#### *There is a desire for more training on UNROCA*

The large workshops conducted by UNODA are useful. However, there seems to be an appetite among state officials for more tailored training and a means to receive quick answers to specific questions on UNROCA. Such outreach and capacity-building would fit under the SDG Target 16.6 on promoting transparency and Action 23.4 of the Agenda for Disarmament on delivering outreach on transparency.

*Recommendation.* UNODA should provide regular (annual) training opportunities for government officials involved in preparing UNROCA submissions. This can be done at a national, regional or global level by a variety of experts.

UNODA should promote its assistance to state officials tasked with preparing reports to UNROCA.<sup>45</sup> It could also establish a helpdesk, to which state officials could direct specific questions on reporting for a quick answer. This could include support to determine if specific data could be relevant to UNROCA.

#### *There is limited knowledge of the possibility of submitting ATT data to UNROCA*

ATT states parties may not be fully aware of the option to allow UNODA to use the data from a state's (mandatory) ATT report to construct a similar UNROCA submission. This seems clear from the fact that many states reporting to the ATT do not submit the same information to UNROCA, even though they have taken the trouble to collect and submit data to the ATT. It was also visible to some extent in the information that SIPRI received from South East Asian states.

*Recommendation.* UNODA—preferably as an integral part of the annual request for UNROCA submissions—should highlight the possibility of using the ATT submission via the tick box in the ATT reporting template. UNODA should also coordinate with the ATT Secretariat to publicize this option.

#### *The ATT and UNROCA are seen as separate mechanisms*

ATT reporting may seem to be an alternative to UNROCA reporting, but the responses that SIPRI received from South East Asian states clearly indicate that the ATT and UNROCA are seen as two separate tracks. The two reports are done for different reasons. They have different levels of access: access to ATT reports can be restricted to only other ATT states parties, while UNROCA reports are always public. They apply to different sets of states:

<sup>45</sup> On the assistance that UNODA currently offers see UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (note 12).



while all 193 UN member states are asked to report to UNROCA, the ATT's reporting requirement applies only to its parties, currently 113 states, with several large exporters and importers of arms not being members.

*Recommendation.* While the ATT and UNROCA currently cover the same set of weapons in their reporting of trade data, they should remain two separate mechanisms, with their further development following separate tracks. If the reporting system for one of these mechanisms were to be modified, there may be an impact on further development of the ATT and UNROCA as transparency mechanisms. However, any such modification (e.g. of categories) in one mechanism should not be held hostage to what happens in the other mechanism.



## Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ATT	Arms Trade Treaty
GGE	Group of governmental experts
SALW	Small arms and light weapons
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNODA	United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs
UNROCA	United Nations Register of Conventional Arms



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SIPRI RESEARCH POLICY PAPER

# TRANSPARENCY IN ARMAMENTS IN SOUTH EAST ASIA: LEARNING FROM THREE DECADES OF THE UNITED NATIONS REGISTER OF CONVENTIONAL ARMS

SIEMON T. WEZEMAN, MATHEW GEORGE AND PIETER D. WEZEMAN

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