

VI. International transparency in arms procurement and military expenditure as confidence-building measures

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In order to support arms control and build confidence between states, global and regional multilateral organizations have established transparency instruments on arms procurement and military spending. Two of the three most significant instruments are global: the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA) and the United Nations Report on Military Expenditures (UNMILEX). The third is regional: the transparency instruments of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).¹

This section provides a brief assessment of developments in 2023 in these three instruments. It focuses on reports on arms transfers, arms holdings and military spending submitted by states by 31 December 2023, which mainly provide data on 2022.

The United Nations Register of Conventional Arms

UNROCA was established in 1991 by the UN General Assembly. Its main aims are to enhance confidence between states, ‘prevent the excessive and destabilizing accumulation of arms’, ‘encourage restraint in the transfer and production of armaments’, and ‘contribute to preventive diplomacy’.²

UN member states are requested to report annually, on a voluntary basis, information on their exports and imports in the previous year of seven categories of major arms: battle tanks, armoured combat vehicles, large-calibre artillery systems, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, and missiles and missile launchers.³ Since 2003, states have also been able to provide information on transfers of an eighth category: small arms and light weapons (SALW). The inclusion of SALW was largely related to efforts to prevent the illicit trade in these weapons, and not to UNROCA’s function as a confidence-building measure (CBM) between states.⁴ In addition, ‘states in a position to do so’ are invited—indicating a lower level of commitment—to

¹ Other transparency mechanisms that may also help to build confidence between states include multilateral reporting on arms exports under the Arms Trade Treaty, the European Union report on arms exports and national reports on arms exports. On these see, respectively, chapter 12, sections I and IV, in this volume; and SIPRI, ‘National reports on arms exports’, [n.d.].

² UN General Assembly Resolution 46/36L, ‘Transparency in armaments’, 6 Dec. 1991, para. 2; and UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), ‘UN Register of Conventional Arms’, [n.d.].

³ 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).

⁴ See e.g. United Nations, General Assembly, Report on the continuing operation of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms and its further development, A/58/274, 13 July 2003, paras 94, 107.

provide information on their holdings of major arms and procurement of such arms through national production.⁵

The number of states submitting reports to UNROCA increased in 2023 to 70, up markedly from 56 in 2022 and the all-time low of 41 in 2021. In the early 2000s, however, over 110 states participated each year.⁶ Of the 70 states that reported in 2023, 37 are in Europe, 15 in the Americas, 9 in Asia and Oceania, 7 in Africa, and 2 in the Middle East.

Most of the states identified by SIPRI as large exporters of major arms have been regular participants in UNROCA.⁷ Of the 10 largest exporters in 2018–22, only one did not report in 2023 for 2022: Russia, the world's second largest exporter of major arms. This was only the second time that Russia did not report to UNROCA—the first was for 2011. After the United States did not report in 2022 due to staffing problems, in 2023 it submitted reports for both 2021 and 2022.⁸

Four of the 10 largest arms importers in the period 2018–22 did not report to UNROCA for 2022: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt and Pakistan.⁹ Saudi Arabia has never reported, Egypt has reported only once (for 1992) and Qatar only three times. Pakistan has reported 22 times, but not since its report for 2015.

Based on information from other sources, there were significant gaps in some of the reports, as has been the case throughout the existence of UNROCA. For example, the USA's report for 2022 includes deliveries of a total of 44 combat aircraft to seven countries, whereas other publicly available reports show that in 2022 the USA delivered at least 12 additional combat aircraft to Qatar, 4 to South Korea and 1 to India.¹⁰

The level of reporting on military holdings and on arms procurement through national production remained low. Of the 70 reports for 2022, only 12 report on military holdings and only 4 include information on procurement from national production.

The United Nations Report on Military Expenditures

In 1980 the UN General Assembly agreed to establish the annual UN Report on Military Expenditures through which all UN member states could voluntarily

⁵ UN General Assembly Resolution 77/69, 'Transparency in armaments', 7 Dec. 2022, para. 5.

⁶ UNROCA submissions are made public in annual reports, the latest (covering most submissions on 2022 made in 2023) being United Nations, General Assembly, 'United Nations Register of Conventional Arms', Report of the secretary-general, A/78/165, 12 July 2023. Most of those submissions as well as submissions received after compilation of the annual report can also be found in the online UNROCA database. As neither source is complete, all numbers given here are based on an aggregation of reports in both sources and on communications with the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs. Figures are according to the public records available on 31 Dec. 2023.

⁷ On the largest exporters of major arms in 2019–23 see chapter 6, section II, in this volume.

⁸ Official, US Department of State, Communication with author, 10 Jan. 2023.

⁹ On the largest importers of major arms in 2019–23 see chapter 6, section III, in this volume.

¹⁰ SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Mar. 2024.

provide data on their military expenditure in the previous year.¹¹ The aims of the report are ‘enhancement of transparency on military matters, increasing the predictability of military activities, reducing the risk of military conflict and raising public awareness of disarmament matters’.¹²

By 31 December 2023, 62 of the 193 UN member states had submitted information on their military spending in 2022.¹³ This compared well with reporting for the previous five years, when the number of participating states ranged from 30 to 46 (including late reports). However, it remained below the highest rate of participation in UNMILEX, when 81 states reported for 2001.¹⁴

Of the 62 states that reported for 2022, 36 are in Europe, 12 in the Americas, 10 in Asia and Oceania, 3 in the Middle East and 1 in Africa. Four of the five states that SIPRI identified as having the highest military spending levels in 2022 did not report to UNMILEX for 2022: the USA (no report since that for 2015), China (none since 2021), Russia (none since 2020) and Saudi Arabia (never reported).¹⁵

The OSCE transparency mechanisms

One of the aims of the OSCE is to ‘contribute to reducing the dangers of armed conflict and of misunderstanding or miscalculation of military activities which could give rise to apprehension’.¹⁶ One of the ways it does this is by facilitating information exchanges between its 57 participating states.

The Vienna Document 2011 on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures requires the OSCE states to participate in an annual exchange of information on their military forces and major weapons.¹⁷ This information is not made public. In 2023, 51 participating states submitted such information.¹⁸

In addition, OSCE participating states have agreed to share information on imports and exports of major arms based on the categories and format of

¹¹ UN General Assembly Resolution 35/142 B, ‘Reduction of military budgets’, 12 Dec. 1980; and United Nations, General Assembly, Report of the group of governmental experts to review the operation and further development of the United Nations Report on Military Expenditures, A/72/293, 4 Aug. 2017, paras 2–5.

¹² United Nations, A/72/293 (note 11), para. 3.

¹³ UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), ‘Military expenditures’. Figures are according to the public records available on 31 Dec. 2023.

¹⁴ United Nations, General Assembly, Report of the group of governmental experts on the operation and further development of the United Nations Standardized Instrument for Reporting Military Expenditures’, A/66/89, 14 June 2011, table 1, p. 26.

¹⁵ The states are arranged in descending order of spending. On military expenditure see chapter 5, sections I and II, in this volume.

¹⁶ Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, ‘Document on confidence-building measures and certain aspects of security and disarmament’, Final act, Helsinki, 1 Aug. 1975, p. 10. For a brief description and list of states participating in the OSCE see annex B, section II, in this volume.

¹⁷ Vienna Document 2011, paras 9–12 and annex III. For a summary and other details of the Vienna Document 2011 see annex A, section II, in this volume. See also OSCE, ‘Ensuring military transparency—The Vienna Document’, [n.d.].

¹⁸ Official, OSCE, Communication with author, 5 Mar. 2024.

UNROCA.¹⁹ Since 2017 these submissions have been publicly available on the OSCE website.²⁰ In 2023, 36 of the 57 states reported to the OSCE on their arms transfers in 2022, compared to the 40 states that reported for 2021. The most notable omission in 2023 was Russia, whereas the USA reported again after not having done so in 2022. Seven OSCE participating states submitted a report for 2022 to UNROCA but not to the OSCE, and three OSCE participating states submitted a report to the OSCE but not to UNROCA.

Concerning military expenditure, the OSCE CBMs include a requirement for participating states to annually exchange information on military budgets. This information is not made publicly available.²¹ Of the 57 OSCE participating states, 46 reported for 2022, 47 reported for 2021 and 47 reported for 2020.²²

Conclusions

While global levels of arms transfers and military spending were on the increase in 2023, as described elsewhere in this volume, there also appeared to be a growing awareness of the importance of international transparency in military matters. Participation in the UN transparency instruments on conventional arms and military expenditure increased substantially in 2023. Notably, the USA returned to reporting on time to UNROCA.

Regional patterns in the increase in participation in the instruments were diverse. The increase in participation in UNROCA from 57 states to 70 was mainly due to 10 more states in the Americas reporting to UNROCA. In contrast, the increase in reporting to UNMILEX was distributed globally, with particular strong increases in Europe, Asia and Oceania, and the Americas. The increases followed special efforts by the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) to encourage participation in UNROCA and UNMILEX.²³ At the same time, information-sharing within the OSCE saw a clear decline.

The most notable gaps in transparency in military matters in 2023 were Russia not reporting to UNROCA, UNMILEX and the OSCE; China not reporting to UNMILEX; the USA continuing not to report to UNMILEX; and the fact that around three-fifths of all states did not participate in any of the transparency instruments.

¹⁹ OSCE, Forum for Security Co-operation, Decision no. 13/97, 16 July 1997; OSCE, Forum for Security Co-operation, Decision no. 8/98, 4 Nov 1998; and OSCE, Forum for Security Co-operation, 'Updating the reporting categories of weapon and equipment systems subject to the information exchange on conventional arms transfers', Decision no. 8/08, 16 July 2008.

²⁰ OSCE, Forum for Security Co-operation, 'Information Exchange on Conventional Arms Transfer'.

²¹ Vienna Document 2011 (note 17), paras 15.3–15.4.

²² Official, OSCE, Communication with author, 5 Feb. 2024.

²³ United Nations, General Assembly, 'Objective information on military matters, including transparency of military expenditures', Report of the secretary-general, A/78/158, 11 July 2023, paras 5–6; and United Nations, A/78/165 (note 6), paras 7–11.