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Editorial: UN arms treaty a small step to global sanity

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Editorial

The international community?s decision to finally pass a treaty that will begin to regulate cross-border sales of conventional weapons is a small step in the direction of global sanity. We?re heartened that the decision included, in a major reversal of the U.S. stance in the past, an affirmative vote by the United States.

Overwhelmingly approved by the United Nations General Assembly April 2, the Arms Trade Treaty, while not banning a single gun or bullet, does set standards for all transfers of conventional weapons across national borders. It also creates binding requirements for states to review all cross-border arms contracts to ensure that arms will not be used in human rights abuses, terrorism or violations of humanitarian law.

The U.N. assembly voted 154 in favor of the treaty, three against and 23 abstentions (U.N. officials said the actual vote should have been 155-3-22; Angola was recorded as having abstained, though it had attempted to vote yes.) Iran, Syria and North Korea cast the sole votes against the treaty.

Major arms producers China and Russia joined Bolivia, Nicaragua and India -- the world?s largest importer of arms -- in abstaining. Significantly, the United States reversed its decades-long policy of opposition to such measures and voted in favor of the treaty.

Though the U.S. is the world?s largest arms supplier, providing some 30 percent of the global arsenal, it has relatively robust requirements for the weapons it exports, which is one reason why it could support this treaty. ?In its simplest of terms, what [the treaty] does is it institutionalizes, on a global level, the existing system of export and custom control that presently exist within the United States,? Raymond Offenheiser, president of Oxfam America, said on the public radio program ?The World? April 2 after the U.N. had approved the treaty. ?We [the U.S.] license all imports and all exports of weapons, and we monitor where they?re coming from and who they?re going to when we?re in the business of exporting them externally.?

In a sense, the treaty attempts to bring the rest of the world up to this ?gold standard? of trade control.

The treaty covers battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, large-caliber artillery systems, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, missiles and missile launchers, small arms and light weapons.

Beginning June 3, the treaty will be open for signatures from U.N. member states. It will enter into force 90 days after the 50th state ratifies it. It normally takes two to three years for a treaty to come into force.

If the treaty tips the world toward sanity, there are opposing forces, none fiercer than the U.S.?s own National Rifle Association. The NRA, in fact, has already swung into action, focusing pressure on the U.S. Senate, which must ratify or reject the treaty after President Barack Obama signs it. Never mind that the Senate is being asked to ratify a treaty for which we already set the gold standard. No one is accusing the NRA of excessive logic.

As part of its fiscal year 2014 budget resolution, the Senate approved an NRA-supported amendment submitted by Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., that establishes a fund for ?the purpose of preventing the United States from entering into the United Nations Arms Trade Treaty.? The NRA is also pushing measures by Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., and Rep. Mike Kelly, R-Pa., to pass concurrent resolutions opposing the treaty. If successful, this small group of extremists would place the United States in league with Iran, Syria and North Korea.

The Arms Trade Treaty has wide support from organizations like Oxfam and Amnesty International, because it has the potential to save thousands of lives in conflict areas. The Vatican said the treaty ?will have a real and lasting impact on all people longing to live in a more secure and safe world.?

In the last 20 years, the world has learned -- painfully learned in the Balkans, Central Africa and now in Syria -- that the greatest threat to global security comes from destabilized states. This treaty will help disarm failed states, militias and terrorist groups. That has to be in everyone?s humanitarian interests. It certainly would align with U.S. strategic security interests.

It would be incredibly sad if the NRA and a small group of elected officials stop the ratification of a treaty that would not only symbolize, but actually do, much good around the world. The Arms Trade Treaty has wide, global support. It?s time for the United States to join that coalition.

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