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Conventional Ammunition Diversion¹

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Overview

Diversion is the unauthorized transfer of arms and ammunition from the stocks of legal users to the illicit market. Throughout the world, it sustains the activities of non-state armed groups, terrorist organizations, and armed criminality. It is one of the principal sources of illicit weaponry and represents a grave threat to the safety of civilian populations, as well as to the security of the state itself.

Diversion takes many forms, ranging from large international transfers organized by corrupt military officials to low-level, localized theft and resale of munitions by military and police forces. Diversion affects all countries, and it occurs at all points in the national stockpile chain.

This chapter systematizes types of diversion from national stockpiles. In each case, it highlights relevant stockpile management and physical security measures that can be taken to curtail diversion. It concludes that diversion is largely a self-inflicted problem that stems from poor stockpile management by national authorities. However, many of the factors that facilitate diversion can often be made less problematic by relatively simple, low-cost measures.

Diversion in context

Diversion poses a risk to any legally held quantity of arms and ammunition. It is a threat to operational ammunition stocks (used to support routine operations), reserve ammunition, training ammunition, experimental ammunition,² ammunition at the point of manufacture, and ammunition awaiting

disposal (Wilkinson, 2006, p. 232). Certain types of ammunition, however, pose a greater and more widespread risk than others. This is particularly so of small, portable munitions, such as small arms, light weapons, and their ammunition. These weapons are not only distributed throughout the national stockpile, but are often deployed outside of secured facilities and under little centralized control. That said, it would be wrong to focus only on the smallest of conventional munitions. As the following sections outline, when conditions are permissive, almost any munitions can be (and are) subject to diversion.

Table 15.1
Types of ammunition diversion from the national stockpile, impacts, and regulatory frameworks

Type of diversion	Dynamic	Description	Reach	Regulatory framework
Low-order	Intra-security force theft	Theft by members of the armed forces	Localized	Stockpile management
	Extra-security force theft	Theft through unauthorized access to stocks or attack	Regional to international	Stockpile management/security sector reform
High-order	High-level corruption	Defence sector officials orchestrate diversion	International	Institutional capacity building/combatting corruption/security sector reform
	Mass looting or dispersal	State or security sector collapse leading to the dissolution of stockpiles	Regional to international	Political (domestic governments prior to collapse; possibly occupying powers)

The following sections make a simple dichotomy between low-order diversion from the national stockpile, which involves the theft of relatively small volumes of arms and ammunition, and high-order diversion (see Table 15.1). The latter is both larger in scale and, arguably, a more challenging task from the perspective of controlling unchecked illicit arms proliferation. As Table 15.1 illustrates, diversions from different levels in the national stockpile have differing impacts and must be addressed within different regulatory frameworks.

Low-order diversion

Low-order diversion of the national stockpile is the theft of relatively minor quantities of munitions by individuals and small groups of individuals. It may occur at all levels of the national stockpile, but is generally characterized by its links to localized illicit trade rather than regional or international transfers. It takes two broad forms: intra- and extra-security force diversion.

Intra-security force diversion

Lower-order, intra-security force theft involves the diversion of munitions by military, police, or paramilitary personnel, and can take two forms—thrift from arms and ammunition storage facilities, and illicit transfers from the deployed stocks of members of the security forces. Small calibre ammunition (and, indeed, arms) is particularly susceptible, but theft can extend to larger weapons systems and their parts.

In the first instance, theft is often orchestrated by stockpile security personnel who are themselves charged with monitoring stocks and securing them from theft. Small facilities, such as police stations and military barracks, may be particularly susceptible if few personnel are responsible for record keeping and the physical inventorying of stocks. In virtually all cases where individuals or small groups of military personnel appear to have been able to divert munitions, their actions have been facilitated by a number of factors. First, they frequently perform duties that give them regular access to stocks and to stock accounting systems. Second, they often have access to stocks that are poorly inventoried. Both of these factors can be made critical if the personnel concerned are poorly monitored by peers or superiors—facilitating both theft and account tampering.

A second type of intra-security force theft occurs when members of a state's armed forces or other state agents divert *issued* stocks of munitions to the illicit market. Issued munitions are those that are required by personnel to perform their duties. They rarely include light weapons. In most countries, they consist of small calibre weapons and ammunition, such as pistols and assault rifles. These firearms comprise the personal weapons of police, military, paramilitary, and other government agents.

While many states only issue arms and ammunition in time of need, others allow personal weapons (and their ammunition) to remain in the hands

of security force personnel, whether on or off duty. Because these munitions are already in the charge of personnel, access to them is not subject to entry to an armoury or other weapons storage facility, they can pose a particular risk of diversion.

Accounting (CHAPTER 5) and oversight are two fundamental pillars of arms and ammunition management that can be employed to address low-order diversion. Effective accounting covers three basic processes:

1. *Stocks issued*: The numbers and types of munitions issued to security forces (at all levels) are recorded and this information is stored securely at progressively higher administrative levels.
2. *Stocks expended*: The numbers and types of munitions expended (whether in training or combat) are documented and the circumstances in which they are used specified.
3. *Stocks audited*: All stocks are thoroughly audited and the balance checked against reports detailing issuance and expenditure.³

These three procedures are contingent on functioning command and control systems within security force administrations. Where there is little oversight, it is unlikely that any such measures will operate effectively.

In these cases, however, where internal monitoring of personnel is weak, external monitoring can be employed to detect instances of diversion and trace (CHAPTER 4) thefts back to the security forces responsible. Lot marking of ammunition is one such measure, whereby munitions are assigned a code that specifies the particular unit within a state's security apparatus to which the ammunition has been issued (CHAPTER 16).

Extra-security force theft

Low-order, extra-security force theft involves diversion from national stockpiles by non-state actors. It is often contingent on lax stockpile management practices that allow unauthorized access to national stockpiles (CHAPTER 7). In other cases, stocks are left vulnerable to violent attack because of minimal investments in security and a lack of planning on the part of relevant authorities.

Stockpile facilities that are extremely poorly guarded allow the entry of unauthorized personnel and the theft of munitions. In many states, diversion

can be a relatively simple process, whereby local people simply walk into the stockpile and help themselves to arms and ammunition.

Although such pilferage may be localized, the easy availability of high-value weapons such as man-portable air defence systems, which are in great demand by some non-state groups, suggests the potential for these local dynamics to link in with the international trade in illicit weaponry (CHAPTER 12).

Diversion under these circumstances is easily preventable through the application of basic physical security components of stockpile management. The measures required to do this need not be expensive or sophisticated. Fences and locked doors slow intruders, regular patrolling detects incursion, and police or troops stationed within easy reach of a facility serve both as an effective deterrent and as a quick-response force should a diversion of stocks be attempted.

Diversion via capture from state security forces—whether on the field of battle or through direct assault on military facilities—is a major source of illicit arms and ammunition. Captured munitions are often pivotal in allowing insurgencies to gain momentum through a process described by Bevan (2005, pp. 186–87) as the ‘acquisition spiral’, whereby groups capture successively larger quantities of weapons and ammunition.

The same basic tenets of physical security that apply within stockpile facilities—*slow, detect, and counteract*—also apply to how they are situated and protected in a broader sense. These include: 1) adequate garrisons of well-equipped forces to slow potential attacks and lessen the likelihood that they will result in diversion; 2) communications channels to warn against potential attack or seek assistance in the event of assault; and 3) the proximity of forces that are able to repel attacks should they occur. Very often, the susceptibility of stocks to attack is commensurate with the insecurity facing members of the security forces in many countries, who are often deployed far from central control—sometimes in dangerous border regions—with little support from other state forces. As with many factors associated with diversion, vulnerability in these cases often stems from broader security sector mismanagement.

High-order national stockpile diversion

High-order stockpile diversion involves the theft of large volumes of munitions, sometimes running into many hundreds of tonnes. Like low-order diversion, it is often facilitated by poor stockpile management practices, but in many cases it results from factors that are much broader than the management of arms and ammunition. Weak state structures, a lack of accountability within political and military administrations, and associated loopholes in transfer regulations conspire to present often highly placed individuals with the opportunity to divert munitions. Compartmentalization of arms management responsibilities appears to have the greatest bearing on diversion.

Surplus stocks are often at particular risk because their illicit transfer may not directly affect the functioning of a given state's armed forces. As a result, not only are diversions less likely to be 'missed', but individuals may perceive diversion under these circumstances as a lesser crime than stealing active stocks. This phenomenon is particularly acute in states facing economic collapse and associated political and administrative turmoil, such as those of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. In cases such as this, highly placed military officials are able to capitalize on their command of military finances, equipment, and personnel—and the fact that their units continue to receive military equipment—to plunder state assets.

However, high-order diversion is not confined to states that experience major systemic failure. The case of contemporary Iraq suggests that, even when highly organized modern military systems are nominally responsible for arms management, control over arms and ammunition can become fragmented when insufficient attention is paid to ensuring transparency regarding and accountability for munitions (USGAO, 2007, pp. 10–11).

High-order diversion is a systemic problem, involving the plunder of all types of state assets, ranging from the theft of military funds to the illegal loan of government capital, the use of military aircraft for commercial charter, and the expropriation of military facilities and land.

Taken at face value, controlling diversion of this magnitude appears to be contingent on very broad structural changes to state administrations and has

linkages to wider issues such as good governance and accountability. Curtailing high-order diversion is, however, not an insurmountable challenge. Addressing it necessitates detecting it in the first place. Effective stockpile management, and particularly accounting procedures (CHAPTER 5), have the potential to play a critical role in identifying corrupt officials and weak points in the national stockpile. High-order diversion may be a deep structural problem in the defence sectors of some states, but relatively basic management mechanisms may be pivotal in combating it in others. Foremost among these is the destruction of surplus stock (CHAPTER 9), which removes the temptation to divert from the equation entirely.

Progress to date

Some of the primary driving forces behind the most prolific cases of high-order diversion—such as those in the post-Soviet states of the 1990s—have dissipated in recent years. However, there is some justification for claiming that, while permissive economic and administrative conditions have dissipated, the broad facilitating factors—namely large surpluses and potentially compartmentalized arms management systems—remain in place in many states. Iraq stands as the most recent and vivid example of how runaway arms management systems can still develop and present huge problems of diverted munitions.

These cases excepted, the problem of low-order division probably remains undetected (or, at the very least, under-detected) in many states. Some countries simply do not have the accounting and oversight systems to identify the fact that they lose a steady stream of arms and ammunition to the illicit market. In some regions, as much as 40 per cent of illicit ammunition has been diverted via these means, with little recognition of that fact by the states concerned (Bevan, forthcoming).

Where security forces do not have to account for the ammunition they expend in engagements or training, when commanding officers cannot oversee the use of weapons, and where no records are kept of the numbers of rounds issued, munitions are easily diverted. In many countries, the scale of diversion will remain unclear unless systematic accounting procedures are adopted as part of broad, effective measures applied to the national stockpile.

Conclusion

Diversion is a problem that affects all state armed forces to greater or lesser degrees. Even the most highly organized and structured security forces lose weapons and suffer theft, leading to acquisition by criminals and other illicit users.

All stocks of arms and ammunition are susceptible to diversion, regardless of where they are stored or deployed in the national stockpile. Effective accounting and security procedures therefore need to apply to all categories of ammunition if states are to keep risks of diversion within acceptable limits and maximize the efficient use of the national stockpile. At present, however, diversion from national stockpiles (and particularly low-order diversion) remains an opaque phenomenon and one that deserves urgent policy attention. ■

Notes

- 1 An expanded version of this chapter, focusing on the diversion of small arms and small arms ammunition, will be published in the *Small Arms Survey 2008* (Bevan, forthcoming).
- 2 Experimental ammunition refers to ammunition undergoing development and testing.
- 3 For further information on accounting, see OSCE (2003).

Further reading

- Bevan, James. 2005. 'Violent Exchanges: The Use of Small Arms in Conflict.' In *Small Arms Survey. Small Arms Survey 2005: Weapons at War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 179–203.
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- Bourne, Mike and Ilhan Berkol. 2006. 'Deadly Diversions: Illicit Transfers of Ammunition for Small Arms and Light Weapons.' In Stéphanie Pézard and Holger Anders, eds. *Targeting Ammunition: A Primer*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey, pp. 99–131.

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