Conceptualizing small arms control in the Horn of Africa Region:
An epistemological debate

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Abstract

Arms control is an important intervention measure aimed at reducing the likelihood of war or the intensity of violence once it occurs. As a theory and practice, arms control has two sides to it. On one side is the control of non-conventional arms such as nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. On the other is control of conventional weapons including small arms and light weapons (SALW). Control of small arms and a major focus of this study, is essential for the realization of international peace and security. However, the problem of proliferation of SALW still persists despite the numerous efforts to control arms through the regulation of production, trade and misuse of illicit and licit SALW. Why this paradox? This article provides the philosophical arguments on why and how small arms persist despite the intervention measures. Organized into an introduction to the practice of arms control followed by epistemological debates on arms control this article concludes that poor conceptualization impacts negatively on the interventions in Horn of Africa region. This article contributes to the body of knowledge by providing a critical analysis on small arms responses besides providing an alternative ways of conceptualizing arms control in the region.

Keywords: Small arms, Arms control, Conceptual challenge, Epistemology

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the paradox on why small arms proliferation persists in spite of the vast global and regional policies to control the instruments of violence. (Shahzad, 2018,) posits that arms control is simply a policy or agreement on who may own which arms and under what conditions. It involves limiting of arms through the reduction of the number of armaments, types of weapons or their delivery systems.

Although, disarmament is interchangeably used with arms control, the two terms are not synonymous. Disarmament is the complete abolishment or elimination of certain armaments. It is a project that completely prohibits states certain types or categories of armaments. The disarmament measures include weapons collection initiatives, weapons destruction and disposal initiatives, decommissioning weapons systems as well as moratoriums and prohibitions (Lafollette, 2000).

In the African context, disarmament largely fits to the broader process of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR). This is because DDR is an important aspect in post-conflict societies. It prevents conflicts from recurring and creates the conditions more conducive for regional arms control (Alusala, 2007)

Arms control and disarmament function primary through the actions of states. States spearhead the process of negotiating, signing and ratifying treaties. Non-state actors such as individuals, economic classes, interest groups, bureaucracies and Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also involved in the arms control agenda. They help the state to formulate policy, implement and evaluate programmes and activities especially those on small arms (Damien, 2016).

Since the 1990s measures to control the circulation of illicit small arms and regulate the legal trade in small arms have been on a rise (Muggah and Sang, 2013). Despite these global and regional efforts, proliferation of small arms continues to be a challenge. Production, transfers and misuse of both legal and illegal arms are on an increase and have negative implications on peace and security. In the Horn of Africa region, several governments have been burning firearms to demonstrate their commitments towards the reduction of illicit firearms and create public awareness on the dangers of small arms (Mwanika, and Snodgrass, 2013). In spite of this, several illustration exist where firearms are employed for terrorism, pastoral conflicts and urban criminality in the region. The Horn region, as matter of fact, is one of the most heavily armed parts of the World. Demand for small arms amongst civilians also increases annually by (six) 6 per cent in several countries (Wepundi et al. 2012). Therefore, instead of the availability of small arms going down, it keeps rising with no apparent explanation. This is a paradox that was investigated.

2.0. Theoretical approaches

Critical theory, an approach widely used in this study posits that knowledge is created in reflection of interests. It is always for someone and to serve certain purpose (Viotti and Kauppi, 2019). Critical theory is associated with the work of Frankfurt School. The school consisted of intellectuals like Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse and Jurgen Habermas. Critical theory works within the Marxist tradition. It is a belief that, knowledge is always and irreducibly conditioned by historical and material contests (Basu, 2012). By questioning theoretically the intellectual, social, cultural, political, economic and technological trends in modern society, the truth may be realized. Using critical theory the study establishes that latent interests undergird the knowledge on firearm controls.

3.0. Small arms control in Horn of Africa: An epistemological debate

3.1 The Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa region comprising eight countries of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda is an active hub for small arms trade and the various intervention measures (Mulugeta, 2017). It is a region situated close to the Middle-East where global issues of concern like oil and the Arab-Israeli conflict interface. It also contains major cross-roads and sea routes such that oil and natural gas exports to the European market from the gulf countries, are shipped through the shores of the Gulf of Aden, Bab al-Madab and the Red sea route. In fact, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the African continent meet in the Horn of Africa region (Bereketeab, 2016).

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3.2. Concepts and issues in small arms control in Horn region

Concepts on small arms and their intervention are based on the United Nations (UN) definitions which is the reference point for most definition on small arms. Small arms according to UN are military type or commercial type weapons. They include, pistols, rifles and machines guns. It is a categorization of weapons based on characteristics, user perspective and level of harm (Stavrianakis, A. (2019). Crude weapons which kill as much as rifles in the Horn of Africa are not part of this categorization

Small arms are considered an emerging security issue in the Horn of Africa region (Grip, 2015). They are taken to be new weapons that are shaping the landscape of modern warfare. The history is therefore tied to the 1990 period when new war thesis, internal conflicts, civil wars and other contemporary concepts emerged. The flare-up of pastoralist conflicts, urban criminality and terrorism in the region accentuated this thinking. The former UN Secretary General, Boutros Boutros *Agenda on peace of 1995* for practical disarmament further underscored this philosophical understanding (Garcia, 2006).

Although the subject of small arms control and its literature is framed as a new and emerging security threat, the history of firearms in the Horn of Africa region dates back to much earlier periods. The first attempt to control arms sales from Europe to the Horn of Africa region was in late 19th Century. In July 1890, a moratorium by the 13 European States, Persia, USA and Zanzibar was adopted. The moratorium is also known as the *Convention Relative to the Slave trade and Importation into Africa of Firearms, Ammunition and Spirituous Liquors* or even Brussels Act (Grip, 2017).

The environment which interventions on small arms have to operate from is, volatile, challenging and characterized with ambiguities (Njoroge and Mwagiru, 2019). The volatility of the region is linked to prevailing conflicts, crime and terrorism all of which, increases the demand and supply for small arms (Kamwesiga, 2016). Incessant pastoralist conflicts, perceived and real sense of insecurity, shrinkage of land resource, and politicization of mega projects are for instance linked to small arms demand in Isiolo in Kenya (Mkutu, 2019). Terrorism, another contributing factor for armed insecurity increases the volatility of the region. Most areas in Somalia are dominated by Al-Shabaab (Maruf, 2018). The terrorist group has established governance structures responsible for overseeing criminal activities including gun-running in Somalia and along the Kenya-Somalia border. This illustrates a nexus between arms trafficking and terrorism.

The environment which small arms intervention operate from is challenging. This is because of porous borders. Nearly all countries in Horn of Africa share borders that are long, porous and ineffectively policed (Behr, 2018). Due to these vulnerabilities, small arms traders and traffickers exploit the gazetted entry points to smuggle small arms some of which originate from

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Yemen through ports of Bosaso, Kismayo and Haradhere (Graduate Institute of International, Development Studies, 2012).

Another challenge pertaining to the environment is that policies that govern licit and illicit small arms are ambiguous. In Kenya, there is no objective methodology in the process of securitization. Weapon control measures in pastoralist areas are political. Lack of a clear policy to register illegal small arms, for instance, is an impediment to successful efforts to control weapons in pastoralist areas. The media in Kenya aptly captures this aspect.

In July 2015, for instance, Deputy President, William Ruto in his bid to appease the pastoralist communities, directed that all illegal weapons possessed by civilians be registered with the police or security administration. This political declaration on registration of firearms is misplaced and not well thought out government directive. Most officers in these pastoral regions are in a dilemma on how to treat those in possession of illegal arms. The policy on registration rather than surrendering the illegally held weapons is taken by the officers as an act of legitimization to illegality by the government. It opens up room for local communities to continue acquiring guns that may be used to commit crimes (Ngetich, 2015).

Moreover, disarmament operations in pastoralist regions are also ethno-political. Community's support for disarmament, takes place if, it does not affect them. If affected, then local politicians tend to influence the disarmament processes so as to gain politically. They incite their communities to resist the disarmament exercise arguing that it would render them vulnerable to external aggression from enemy communities (Wepundi, 2011).

In Somalia, all strategies revolving security are handled by the Somalia spy agency-NISSA (Ombati, 2020). It maintains records on firearm imports and use in Somalia. Ironically, the spy agency supports Al-Shabaab activities in Somalia. Besides supplying Al-Shabaab with weapons, Al-Shabaab is depended upon for disarmament operations. As such Al-Shabaab is entering into informal agreements with clan elders to collect weapons. The reluctance of clans to disarm in Somalia therefore stem from this inextricable linkage between clan affiliation and officialdom (Nduwimana, 2013). Competing regional rivalries which are historical, militarization of the Red sea through the establishment of foreign bases in Djibouti are additional challenges to the problem of proliferation in the Horn of Africa (Knopf, 2018).

Owing to conceptual flaws coupled with the volatility, challenging and ambiguous characteristics of the operating environment weapons control efforts in the region have become adhoc, reactionary or 'mere *jerk reactions'* (. They are resorted to in emergency situations like the eruption of pastoralist conflicts in the northern rift regions of Kenya or when clan related conflicts in Somalia becomes intense. Consequently, concepts on arms control and disarmament, have become inter-changeably used in the Horn of Africa region, sometimes, with a degree of conceptual slippage. Arms control are used at times, to refer to disarmament and vice versa. This interchangeable use of terms overtime is obfuscating efforts to control weapons effectively in the region.
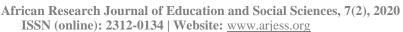
4. Conclusion

Concepts, objectives and resources are necessary for grand strategizing on aspects pertaining small arms control. The elements must balance so as to ensure there is a good buy in while ensuring that such agreements do not founder. The unbalanced concepts, objectives and resources on small arms control impacts negatively on the proper implementation and outcomes of the intervention measures. This has been the case in the Horn of Africa region. The strategies that are applied are adhoc and only resorted to in emergency situations. Such situations include the eruption of pastoralist conflicts in the north rift parts of Kenya, armed crime in the urban settings or the clan related conflicts in Somalia. This short range emphasis in small arms control practices in Horn of Africa limits their reach.

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