

Good News on Arms Sales, Sort Of

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Scrolling through the latest sobering report on the multi-billion-dollar global weapons business, I found myself wondering what Mikhail Kalashnikov would think of it. Mr. Kalashnikov is the inventor of the AK-47, the world's most popular assault rifle—developed in the Soviet Union more than 50 years ago and used by regular troops and rebel armies around the globe.

He is a clever man, but also a reflective one. A couple of weeks ago, in an interview with a German tabloid, he acknowledged that he was proud of his invention. But with hindsight, he said, he wished he'd come up with something of service to humanity, "like a lawnmower," instead of an instrument of death.

One suspects that he would read the U.S. Congressional Research Service's report *Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 1994–2001* with a profound sense of sorrow, as much for what it says about Russia's role in the world arms trade as for its overall message.

There's some good news in the latest edition of this CRS report, for anyone who thinks a drop in weapons sales is a positive development.

The value of weapons delivered to the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and

Latin America dropped dramatically last year, from US\$22.1 billion to US\$14.4 billion. The value of arms transfer agreements, US\$16 billion, was the lowest since 1994 when adjusted for inflation.

But arms deals were also hard to pull off in 1997, during the last global economic downturn. The conclusion of the report's author, Richard Grimmett, is that the arms trade is like any other business: When economies are growing, there's money to spend. When they aren't, there isn't. Arms embargoes against outlaw states may have a small effect, but it's dwarfed by the impact of financial pressures on big weapons buyers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Taiwan.

It won't come as any surprise that the United States is the No. 1 architect of arms deals with the developing world. But their value was cut almost in half last year, and the U.S. share of the market declined to 43.6 percent from 46.3 percent. Russia made fewer deals, too, but its market share rose significantly—from 29.6 percent to 35.7 percent. The report doesn't say how many AK-47s were included, but it does cite much bigger weaponry: scores of tanks to India, destroyers to China, helicopters to South Korea,

MiG fighter jets to Yemen and Burma.

Why sorrow? Because this is about all that's left of socialist internationalism, for which so many sacrificed so much over the past century. Soviet-era contacts and alliances are the key to Russia's market position. "Many of Russia's traditional arms clients are less wealthy developing nations that were once provided generous grant military assistance and deep discounts on arms purchases," Mr. Grimmett writes. Whatever ideals inspired the Soviet Union and its supporters, killing machines are a big part of its legacy to the world.

My bet, however, is that next year's CRS report will show that the market-share gap between Russia and the United States has widened again. As the Federation of American Scientists notes in the latest issue of its *Arms Sales Monitor*, countries with dubious records on human rights and respect for international agreements are finding it easier to procure U.S. weapons.

The reason is the "war on terrorism." It's a great argument for arms sales or military aid to countries whose armies are battling insurgencies—even if they have little or nothing to do with al-Qaeda. Whether they can afford them is beside the point.