

Arms exports: Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President



Check against delivery!

I would like to start by thanking Ms [Hannah] Neumann and Members who have contributed to this important resolution on European arms export. I think it includes many useful suggestions that will help me to deal with a difficult subject like this on a more convergent, transparent and responsible way.

Decisions on arms export receive great attention and are politically sensitive because, indeed, trade in arms may potentially carry the risk of serious breaches for human rights, humanitarian law and regional stability. Most of the times the three things together.

A strict implementation by Member States of the agreed Common Position on arms export is, therefore, essential to uphold European Union values and strategic objectives. As you state in you Report, this is also crucial for our credibility as a geopolitical player. A high level of convergence as regards its full application will indeed more effectively ensure respect for human rights and international law by all parties involved.

I think we can say that we, the European Union, are moving fast in the field of defence: European Defence Fund (EDF) and European Peace Facility (EPF) will serve to strengthen internal collaboration on defence matters to make the European Union a more capable security provider at the global level. Our defence industries will become ever closer intertwined, they will strength our strategic autonomy, the protection of our citizens, while fostering innovation and saving costs. All that is right, but at the same time, in this context, further convergence of arms export policies becomes still more important.

As mentioned in your draft resolution, maintaining a vibrant and innovative defence industry in the European Union is a key component of our strategic autonomy and our European defence. It serves to ensure our capabilities and reduce dependency, while the defence industry is also a major source of

technological innovation.

I may give you more examples: in 2018, it generated more €100 billion of revenues and supported more than 400,000 jobs in Europe. To ensure a thriving defence industry, exports are essential.

Of course, the defence industry is different from other industrial sectors and deserves a special consideration, taking into account its obvious links to national and international security, human rights and humanitarian values. That is why the European Union Member States have also exported control rules in place for military equipment, since 2008.

Under the Common Position on arms export, Member States assess arms export license applications, against a number of criteria established to ensure our strategic interests and also our values. A review of this text was finalised last year. The Council agreed that the Common Position still serves its purpose, but introduced some changes to bring the text in line with the adopted Arms Trade Treaty, and other recent developments.

Honourable Members,

In your own assessment on the Common Position on arms export control, you stress three key objectives: the need for increased control, convergence and transparency.

First, on your support for an increased control. Let me start by saying that I am grateful your report welcomes Operation IRINI's objective to implement the United Nations arms embargo on Libya. This is a concrete example of what the European Union does to prevent arms ending up in the wrong hands.

Further, as a global actor, the European Union supports outreach activities to assist countries in the European neighbourhood and beyond, in setting up arms export control mechanisms and implementing the Arms Trade Treaty.

Second, on transparency. The European Union Member States are already among the most transparent countries, including in arms export. Still, in order to increase the possibility for further scrutiny and accountability, I am glad to say that, this year, the European External Action Service will launch a public searchable database on its website, to allow all stakeholders to consult and analyse Member States' arms exports in a user-friendly way. So, everybody will be able to know what the Member States arms export is about in a way that everybody could know whatever data they want about it.

Third and last, increased convergence. Member States are holding regular exchanges to share information on policies, denial of licenses and possible measures. As a concrete result, a new initiative has been launched and the Working Party on Arms Export is currently preparing a Council Decision to set rules on end-user certificates for the export of small arms and light weapons and their ammunition.

Honourable Members,

Let me conclude by anticipating that the next annual European Union arms

export report on 2019 will become available shortly; probably next month, in October -two months earlier than in previous years. It will bring a lot of precious information about these developments.

I would like to thank you for your attention. I am looking forward to hearing your points of view.

Thank you very much.

Link to the video: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-194774>

Closing remarks

Thank you President.

I understand your criticism, I heard some interesting points, let me summarize some of your points.

First, criticism on export from Member States to sensitive destinations. Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have been mentioned.

But as one of the Members [of the European Parliament] who participated in the debate rapidly remembered, decisions when issuing export licenses are taken at the national level. There isn't anything we can do from the European Commission. This is a decision that is taken at the national level, but we can call for more convergence in arms export policy, as the Member States implement it. On that I agree completely. We are together because we think we can behave together in accordance with international rules which reflect our values. It is a Member States competence but we need more convergence on the way these Member States implement this competence.

You have also called for an arms embargo for specific destinations. I could also agree but an arms embargo to specific destinations requires unanimity in the Council. You should be aware of that, and you know how difficult it is to have unanimity today. We can try to agree on arms but then you have to implement them, and the experience shows how difficult it is to do so, as we try to do it with Operation Irini in Libya. First, unanimity, then the willingness to really implement the decision.

Honorary members, Ms President,

Military weapons have an indispensable role in the preservation of security, freedom and peace, provided they are used in accordance with International Law, Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law. You cannot pretend to have security and to protect freedom and peace without having military resources, but you have to use them in accordance with the law, and weapons of war are by definition capable of inflicting death and destruction.

This ambivalence means that governments that export weapons must ensure that they are traded and used in a responsible and accountable way, and prevent their diversion to terrorists, criminals and other unauthorised users. This must remain our ambition, to control the use of these weapons so they are not misused. But by definition weapons inflict death and destruction and our role

is to try to be sure that they are used in accordance with the rules of war and with the rules that protect human rights.

Accountability for arms export decisions can only take place when authorities are transparent. The European Union does all it can to ensure that utmost transparency is being upheld. This enables national parliaments, civil society, and also the European Parliament to hold informed debates.

The Council and the Parliament clearly agree that the strengthening of the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base should be accompanied by closer cooperation and convergence in the control of exports of military technology and equipment.

I will continue working on the process of increased convergence and promoting more transparency in arms export in the framework of the competences of the Commission and of the High Representative.

Thank you.