

U.S. Signature Needed to Advance Global Arms Trade Treaty

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On Monday June 3, leaders from dozens of states will gather at the United Nations in New York to sign the new Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). The ATT will—for the first time— establish common international standards that must be met before states authorize transfers of conventional weapons or export ammunition and weapons parts and components.



Over time, the ATT can help tip the scales in favor human rights and human security when states consider arms transfers. As Secretary of State John Kerry said April 2: "It will help reduce the risk that international transfers of conventional arms will be used to carry out the world's worst crimes, including terrorism, genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes."

In order to realize the full potential of the treaty, however, leading states beginning with the United States must promptly sign and ratify the treaty and begin the hard work of implementing and enforcing the national laws required to meet the standards established by the ATT.

The United States played a key role in the negotiations on the Arms Trade Treaty, it helped overcome the blocking actions of Iran, North Korea, and Syria, and was crucial to winning the [overwhelming support of the UN General Assembly for the treaty](#) on April 2. The vote was 155 in support, 3 opposed, and 22 abstentions. Now, President Obama can help build support for the treaty and move it closer toward entry into force by agreeing to be among the first world leaders to sign the pact on June 3.

Unfortunately, the Barack Obama administration has not yet signaled whether it will be among the first nations to sign, even though there is no serious legal or technical issue that should hold-up U.S. signature on the ATT.

That's a shame because President Obama should be leading from the front, not trailing behind. Hesitation on the part of the President only gives the world's other major arms dealers, such as China and Russia, a cynical excuse not to sign and ratify the Arms Trade Treaty.

By signing the ATT, President Obama would also send a strong message regarding the illegality of arms transfers to the Assad regime in Syria and other gross human rights abusers. The ATT prohibits arms transfer authorizations to states if the state "has knowledge at the time of authorization that the arms or items would be used in the commission of genocide, crimes against humanity, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, attacks directed against civilian objects or civilians protected as such, or other war crimes." Assad is clearly guilty of such offenses. The Arms Trade Treaty will help to bring other states up to the standards for arms transfers that are already built into U.S. law and practice. The treaty also:

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- requires states to establish regulations for arms imports and exports in eight major categories: battle tanks; armored combat vehicles; large-caliber artillery systems; combat aircraft; attack helicopters; warships; missiles and missile launchers; and small arms and light weapons;
- requires states to assess the potential that the transfer "could be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian law" and "international human rights law," terrorism, organized crime, and take into account the risk of serious acts of gender-based violence or acts of violence against women and children. If there is an overriding risk of any of these negative consequences, states are required not to authorize the export;
- requires that all states establish effective regulations on the export of ammunition and weapons parts & components, which often allow conflicts to continue long after original arms transfers have been executed;
- requires regular, annual reporting on all arms transfers, which would help improve transparency and public accountability for states' actions; and
- calls for regular conferences of states parties to review implementation of the treaty and developments in the field of conventional arms, which should allow states to consider new types of conventional weapons that may emerge.

U.S. signature for the ATT would solidify the United States' strong commitment to preventing mass atrocities and protecting civilians from armed conflict.

And contrary to the false assertions of the NRA, the ATT has no effect whatsoever on the legal rights of U.S. citizens to keep and bear arms. In fact, the treaty recognizes the "legitimate trade and lawful ownership, and use of certain conventional arms for recreational, cultural, historical, and sporting activities, where such trade, ownership and use are permitted or protected by law."

In the absence of a strong statement of the United States' intention to sign in the very near future—and no later than when the President attends the September 2013 UN General Assembly meeting in New York—the administration's credibility and seriousness on the issue will be undermined.

Failure by the White House to sign the ATT soon will also undercut the many U.S. allies who support the treaty—including the U.K., France, Germany, Australia, and Japan—and momentum toward the treaty's formal entry into force will be slowed.

The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) represents an important, historic step forward in dealing with the unregulated and illicit global trade in conventional weapons and ammunition, which fuels wars and facilitates criminal violence and human rights abuses across the globe—from Syria to Sudan, from Democratic Republic of Congo to Colombia, from Mali to Mexico, and beyond.

Mr. President, it is time to make it clear you will sign the Arms Trade Treaty.

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