

One Meeting after Another

UN PROCESS UPDATE

This year's UN Update chapter recaps the key features of the Fifth Biennial Meeting of States (BMS5), the latest meeting on the UN Programme of Action (PoA),¹ held in June 2014 (see Figure 3.1). After a brief review of the process leading to the adoption of the BMS5 outcome document, the chapter identifies sources of value added in the document as compared with previous PoA-meeting text. The last section of the chapter reviews the issues that are up for discussion at the next meeting on the PoA calendar, the Second Open-ended Meeting of Governmental Experts (MGE2), scheduled for June 2015.

As described in the chapter, the BMS5 outcome document features practical implementation measures in the areas that states discussed, namely stockpile management; marking, record-keeping, and tracing; and international cooperation and assistance. It builds on previous PoA meeting outcomes by, for example: promoting women's participation in PoA-related processes, highlighting the importance of stockpile security in conflict and post-conflict situations, and emphasizing training in building sustainable capacity for PoA implementation.

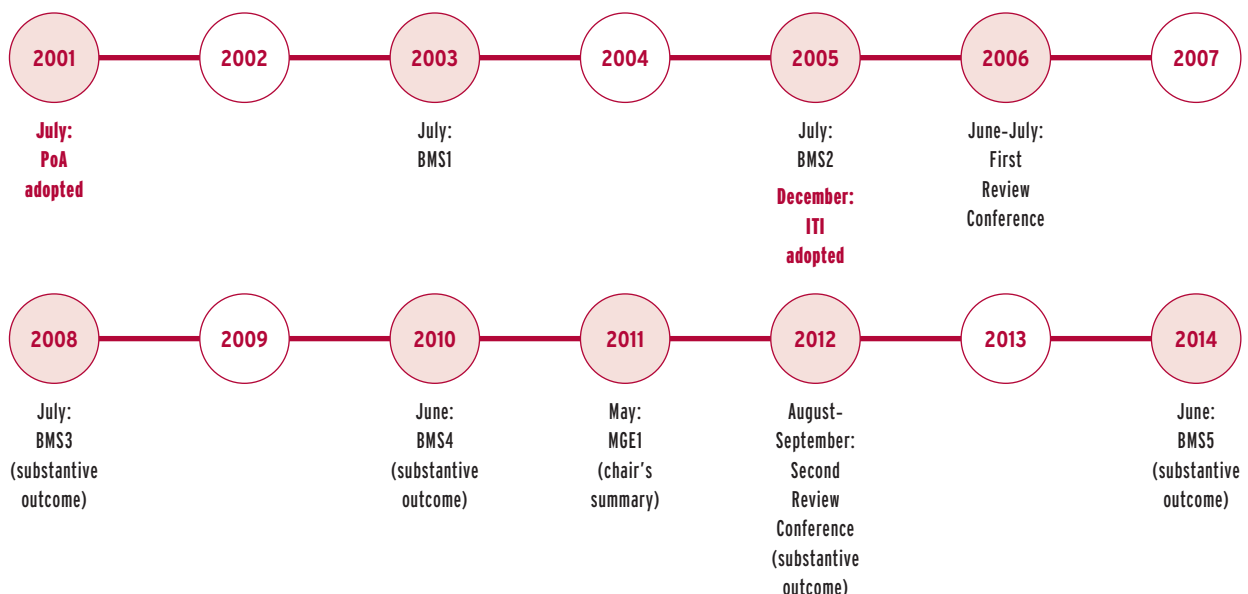
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While there are some important omissions from the BMS5 text, such as full acknowledgement of related UN Security Council work on small arms, these do not weaken the document's focus on practical implementation measures. In addition to those already mentioned, such measures include steps to enhance the tracing of small arms in conflict and post-conflict situations and the exchange of tracing results and other information in order to identify and reduce diversion risks—in each case, building on discussions at the Second Review Conference in 2012.

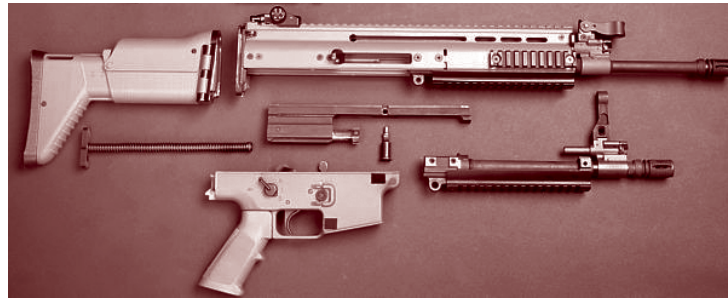
In addition to building on past PoA meetings, the BMS5 outcome makes important connections to future meetings, in particular MGE2—putting the topic of recent developments in small arms manufacturing, technology, and design on its agenda. As described in the chapter, specific challenges to small arms control efforts arise in at least three new areas: modular weapons design, polymer firearm parts, and 3D printing. The chapter also examines the opportunities that some new technologies offer for improved small arms control.

Modular weapons typically feature a core (fixed) section around which most other major parts and components can be changed in order to meet different operational needs. This complicates the task of unique identification as the weapon will usually bear conflicting serial numbers following a change of parts if the latter have been marked with such numbers, as the International Tracing Instrument (ITI)² recommends. Policy responses include the identification of a 'control component' for modular weapons and common approaches to the marking of this and other parts of the weapon.

Figure 3.1 **Timeline of PoA meetings**



Gun manufacturers are increasingly using polymers in the production of firearm parts such as handgun frames (primary structural components), largely due to their lower weight and cost. Unlike metal firearms, however, polymer guns are difficult to mark durably, as the ITI prescribes; arms traffickers who seek to make a polymer gun untraceable will normally succeed in doing so once they remove the serial number that the manufacturer has marked on the frame. Policy guidance is needed on issues such as the marking methods applicable to polymer firearm parts and the depth and placement of such markings.



A partially disassembled SCAR-L (light version of the Special Forces Combat Assault Rifle).
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Falling prices, improved technology, and other factors have led to a boom in additive manufacturing ('3D printing') in recent years, at both the industrial and consumer (hobbyist) levels. In early 2013, 3D-printed guns hit the news with the production of the first functioning 3D-printed firearm, the 'Liberator' handgun, made almost entirely of polymer. While current norms, both national and international, are largely adequate for the control of 3D-printed firearms, their application is more difficult given the diffusion of increasingly powerful 3D-printing technology to individuals and small groups. Criminals and non-state armed groups may find 3D-printed guns attractive since, when unmarked, they are untraceable and because many security screening devices have difficulty detecting firearms made largely of polymer (although that is not true of the metal ammunition they still use). While firearms produced using traditional manufacturing techniques still easily outperform their 3D-printed counterparts, governments have a clear interest in preparing for the day when fully functioning 3D-printed firearms can be produced easily and economically.

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As mentioned already, new technologies pose various challenges to small arms control, yet they can also help strengthen implementation of the PoA and ITI in areas such as weapons marking, record-keeping, and tracing, stockpile security, and the prevention of unauthorized use. The chapter describes some of these new technologies while also noting the numerous barriers that stand in the way of their widespread adoption—in particular, for many countries, the cost of establishing supporting infrastructure (databases and networked IT).

MGE1, held in May 2011, helped alert states to new developments in small arms manufacturing, technology, and design that made PoA and ITI implementation more difficult in several areas. MGE2 offers UN member states an important opportunity to engage with these challenges and indicate how to respond. ■

Notes

- 1 Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects.
- 2 International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons.