United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA)
Symposium Series on Transparency and Confidence-Building Measures in the context of disarmament and international security

Session 2: Military Transparency, Conventional Arms and the Arms Trade
30 June 2026

This meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule. Accordingly, this summary reflects the substance of the discussions without attribution. The views expressed are those of the participants and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations, UNODA, or its Secretariat.

Overview and Objective

The second session of the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) Symposium Series on Transparency and Confidence-Building Measures (TCBMs) examined the role of military transparency in strengthening international peace and security, with a particular focus on military expenditure, conventional arms and the arms trade. Experts discussed current development and dynamics in the field, particularly focused on instruments such as the UN Register on Conventional Arms (UNROCA), the UN Report on Military Expenditure (UNMilEx), the Repository on TCBMs, the UN Disarmament Commission recommendations on TCBMs and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT).

Transparency as a Foundation for Trust

An overarching theme throughout the session was the relationship between transparency and trust. Participants emphasized that transparency measures are intended not only to provide information, but also to foster predictability in State behaviour, reduce the risk of misperception, and support confidence-building. By shedding light on military capabilities, expenditure, and arms transfers, transparency can help prevent misunderstandings, lower tensions, and contribute to arms control and cooperative security. At the same time, participants noted that these mechanisms are operating in an increasingly challenging environment marked by heightened geopolitical tensions, rising military spending, ongoing armed conflicts, and rapid technological change, raising questions about how existing instruments can remain effective and relevant.

Participants also highlighted that transparency serves purposes beyond interstate confidence-building. Arms transfers and military spending have significant humanitarian, security, and governance implications, with potential impacts on conflict dynamics, human rights, and corruption. In this context, transparency was viewed as an essential safeguard for accountability, enabling oversight of defence procurement and military expenditure by governments, parliaments, civil society, and the public. Participants noted that corruption risks in the defence sector remain substantial in many countries, underscoring the importance of robust transparency and oversight mechanisms to mitigate waste, inefficiency, and misconduct.

Existing Transparency Mechanisms: Progress and Persistent Challenges

When reviewing the key instruments, participants noted encouraging recent increases in reporting rates to both UNROCA and UNMilEx, with gains visible across most regional groups. At the same time, they observed that participation levels remain below their full potential and that relatively few States report consistently from year to year.

Several factors were identified as challenges for Member State's reporting. These included limited national capacity, reporting fatigue arising from multiple reporting obligations, competing priorities, and concerns regarding confidentiality and national security. The discussion highlighted efforts undertaken by the United Nations and partner organizations to support reporting, including outreach activities, capacity-building workshops, guidance materials, and improvements to digital reporting platforms. Participants emphasized the importance of continued assistance and coordination across different transparency instruments to reduce duplication and ease reporting burdens on States. Positive cooperations between UNODA, the ATT Secretariat, UNIDIR and SIPRI were mentioned.

The Role of Civil Society and Open-Source Information

The discussion also examined transparency practices beyond multilateral reporting frameworks.

Participants highlighted the growing contribution of civil society organizations, independent researchers, and open-source information to transparency efforts. These actors play an important role in monitoring reporting trends, analysing submitted information, identifying gaps and good practices, and producing resources that support implementation.

Particular attention was given to civil society monitoring of the implementation of the Arms Trade Treaty. It was noted that independent analysis of ATT reporting has helped identify areas where transparency can be improved, including the timeliness, consistency, and level of detail provided in annual reports. Such monitoring can also support dialogue with States, promote good practices, and encourage more meaningful transparency.

The discussion underscored the importance of ensuring sustained support for independent monitoring initiatives. Participants stressed that publicly available information remains essential for civil society organizations to perform their role effectively and to contribute to broader transparency objectives.

Corruption, Accountability and Good Governance

Another topic receiving considerable attention was the relationship between transparency and corruption risks in defence spending and arms transfer. Participants noted that periods of rapid military procurement and increased defence spending can heighten vulnerability to fraud, corruption, and poor oversight.

In this context, transparency was described not only as a confidence-building tool but also as a mechanism that supports accountability and good governance. Reporting on transfers, procurement decisions, equipment types, and financial values can help enable effective oversight by auditors, parliamentarians, and other accountability actors. Participants suggested that States which demonstrate transparency may also be perceived as more reliable and trustworthy international partners, thereby strengthening defence cooperation and broader security relationships.

Adapting Transparency Measures to Emerging Technologies

The challenges posed by emerging technologies were an additional topic of discussion. Questions were raised regarding whether existing reporting categories and transparency mechanisms are adequately equipped to address evolving forms of military capability, including autonomous systems and dual-use applications.

The discussion highlighted the possibility that future confidence-building measures may need to focus less on traditional categories of weapons systems and more on functions, capabilities, and the services that underpin military operations. Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that transparency measures remain adaptable as technological developments continue to transform the security landscape.

Looking Ahead

In reflecting on future directions, participants stressed that transparency instruments should continue to evolve in response to changing political and technological realities. They emphasized the need to strengthen participation, improve the quality and usability of reported information, and ensure that transparency measures generate practical benefits for States.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of connecting expert analysis and civil society insights with decision-making processes. Participants identified both formal avenues, such as review processes and groups of governmental experts, and informal engagement with national authorities and legislators as potential pathways for advancing TCBMs.

The third session of the Symposium series, tentatively scheduled for September, will focus on Reducing the risk of nuclear conflict, building on the themes and discussions introduced during the previous session.