OPINION

Why are Canadian arms fuelling foreign conflicts?

LLOYD AXWORTHY AND **ALLAN ROCK**
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL
PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 3, 2026

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

People attend the CANSEC trade show, billed as North America's largest multi-service defence event, in Ottawa in 2023. Roughly half of Canada's defence exports go to the U.S.

JUSTIN TANG/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Listen to this article

Learn more about audio

05:56 1X

Lloyd Axworthy is a former Canadian foreign minister and chair emeritus of the World Refugee and Migration Council. Allan Rock is a former minister of justice and attorney-general of Canada and Canadian ambassador to the United Nations.

Canadians take pride in our country's role as a principled voice for international law, arms control and responsible multilateralism. In 2019, when Canada acceded to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), there was strong public support for our government's pledge that Canadian arms exports would never contribute to human-rights abuses.

Most of Canada's defence exports around the world, including to the U.S., are comprised of parts and components that are not commonly found to be used in abusive or controversial ways. Generally, importers have to provide information on end-use which includes what the technology is used for, and who the technology would be used by (e.g. the U.S. Coast Guard, ICE, etc.)

Vancouver mogul Jim Pattison's company under fire for proposed sale of U.S. property to ICE

But Canada's current arms-export system contains a loophole so large that it undermines the very values we claim to uphold. This gap allows weapons, components and technologies made in Canada to enter global conflicts through indirect channels. Because roughly half of Canada's defence exports go to the U.S., and because those exports are exempt from the permitting and assessment rules applied everywhere else, most Canadian military goods face no case-by-case review and no public reporting.

Canada calls its system rigorous. Yet for much of our export activity, there is effectively no oversight at all.

The consequences are not theoretical. Canadian-made parts are reportedly contained in weapons sold to Israel, which has killed civilians in Gaza. Arms bearing the logo of a Canadian manufacturer have appeared in the hands of paramilitary groups in Sudan. The United Nations and human-rights observers have repeatedly warned that unmonitored arms flows have fuelled some of the world's gravest humanitarian crises.

NDP MP Jenny Kwan.

SPENCER COLBY/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Now, a private member's bill tabled in the House of Commons aims to address this issue. Bill C-233 (the End the Loopholes Act) was introduced by NDP MP Jenny Kwan. The bill would amend the Export and Import Permits Act to ensure that weapons, components and explosives exported to the United States receive the same level of oversight as those sent anywhere else. Its premise is simple: Canadian standards should be consistent and universal.

Opponents argue that Bill C-233 would cripple Canada's defence industry. It would not. The bill does not restrict manufacturing, sales or innovation. It merely standardizes reviews so that exports to the United States undergo the same process as all others. Factories will continue to operate, jobs will remain secure, and responsible oversight will strengthen – rather than weaken – confidence in the sector.

Canadian arms still being sent to Israel, tax data suggest

Others claim the bill would weaken Canada's role in NATO. This, too, is mistaken. Nearly every NATO country is a party to the ATT, and many apply oversight to all exports, including those to the United States. Canada's blanket exemption is the outlier, not the norm. Aligning Canadian practice with that of our allies would reinforce our credibility and commitment to shared principles.

Some suggest the bill would hinder military aid to Ukraine. It would not. Assistance to Ukraine is delivered through a separate, expedited process in the Department of National Defence. Bill C-233 affects only commercial exports to the United States, not transfers to Europe or Ukraine. Conflating those systems is misleading.

Nor would the bill, which would govern exports and not imports, affect how the Canadian Armed Forces procure equipment.

Without a permitting process, Canada cannot ensure that components shipped south are not later incorporated into weapons sold to high-risk end-users. While the treaty allows administrative flexibility, it does not allow countries to exclude specific partners from core assessment requirements. Canada's exemption is inconsistent with both the spirit and the letter of the ATT.

Ottawa reviewing two Canadian-owned companies over Sudan links

Addressing this gap is especially urgent because of Donald Trump's military recklessness. American forces have violated international law repeatedly. Mr. Trump has also deployed troops and armed ICE agents to American cities, resulting in violence and loss of life. We ought not to be sending military gear to Mr. Trump's America without assurance that it will not be used unlawfully.

Canadians deserve transparency about where our weapons go and how they are used. Ensuring that Canadian-made goods do not contribute – directly or indirectly – to atrocities abroad is both a moral duty and a strategic necessity. Closing this gap would ensure that Canadian values do not stop at the border.

Parliament now faces a clear choice: maintain an outdated exemption that undermines Canada's credibility, or adopt a modern, principled system that reflects our commitments and responsibilities. Bill C-233 is the responsible path. We urge Members of Parliament to support it.

Sign up for the Opinion Newsletter. Keep your opinions sharp and informed with a helpful summary of The Globe's most provocative columns, covering politics, world affairs, business, arts, health and the way we live

SIGN UP | EXPLORE NEWSLETTERS

Report an editorial error

Report a technical issue

Editorial code of conduct

Related stories

Under Donald Trump, Canada's former best friend is now our most dangerous threat

TONY KELLER

In the Trump era, the F-35 is no longer the right plane for Canada

TONY KELLER

Canada shipped a record share of oil to non-U.S. countries in November

More from Opinion

OPINION

The Ghost in the machine is outpacing the real world. That's a huge risk – and, for Canada, an opportunity

LAURENCE B. MUSSIO AND COSIMO PACCIANI

OPINION

Canada is uniquely unprepared for the dire national-security crisis we are now in

ANDREW COYNE

OPINION

Do Canadians really need to be hearing from Pete Hoekstra this much?

PETER DONOLO AND DAVID HERLE

OPINION

Why there's an opportunity for Canada to help build new free-trade relationships

JOHN IBBITSON

OPINION

Despite praising Harper's fiscal management, Carney embraces Trudeau's budget policies

KONRAD YAKABUSKI

Danielle Smith aims a water pistol at Ottawa

Terms & Conditions

Community Guidelines

Privacy Policy

Disclaimer

Subscribe

Business services

Contact us

Reader services

About us

© Copyright 2026 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved.

351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Andrew Saunders, President and CEO