CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Ratification of OAS Firearms Treaty: What Does it Mean?
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President Barack Obama announced on April 16 that he intends to seek ratification by the Senate of the 1998 Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and other Related Material (known as CIFTA).

Q1: What is CIFTA?

A1: This international treaty calls for cooperation among members of the Organization of American States (OAS) to prevent and combat the illegal manufacture and trafficking of arms and explosives. CIFTA states that ratifying countries shall: adopt measures to seize illegal firearms; control the export, import, and transit of weapons; detect and prevent illicit trafficking; keep and exchange relevant information related to weapons manufacture, sale, and transit; cooperate in training of authorities and sharing technical assistance to carry out the treaty; provide mutual legal assistance; allow for the use of controlled delivery as a law enforcement tool; and make arms trafficking an extraditable offense. The convention entered into force in 1998. It was signed by President Bill Clinton in 1997 but was never ratified by the Senate. The United States is one of only four of the 34 OAS members not to have ratified CIFTA (along with Canada, the Dominican Republic, Saint Vincent, and the Grenadines.)

Q2: How will CIFTA improve regional security?

A2: The need for the United States to ratify CIFTA has never been greater. Large quantities of weapons from the United States are illicitly trafficked into Mexico, helping fuel the surge in narcotics-related violence that is afflicting that country. It is nearly impossible to purchase weapons legally in Mexico, and gun stores in U.S border states sell twice as many weapons as those in any other U.S. region. In 2005, the year after the U.S. ban on assault weapons expired, Mexican authorities seized more than 10,000 smuggled weapons, of which 90 percent came from the United States. As drugs flow north into the United States and arms are smuggled south, rates of violence in Mexico and Central America are skyrocketing, with increasingly more law enforcement officials falling victim. In 2008, the United States and Mexico signed a multiyear $1.4 billion program to combat the threat of drug trafficking in Mexico, Central America, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic known as the Mérida Initiative. With this, the United States recognized that its own security and well-being are linked to that of its neighbors in the Americas. CIFTA provides another important mechanism for enhancing regional security by focusing on the key variable of weapons trafficking. The United States cannot exhort other OAS members to comply with the terms of a treaty that it has not itself ratified.

Q3: How will other countries react to this announcement?

A3: Ratification of CIFTA sends a positive signal to our neighbor Mexico and to other countries in the region that the United States is determined to be a reliable partner in efforts to promote the security of all citizens in the Americas. This announcement, along with the naming of a former federal prosecutor as a "border czar" underscores a commitment by the Obama administration to cooperate more closely with Mexico in countering narcotics trafficking and other security threats that affect both countries.

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