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THE BUSINESS OF GUNS

With New Smart Gun, Industry Pioneer Bets Bigger Is Better

Armatix hopes its 9mm handgun will ease law enforcement's concerns about reliability.

by **Alex Yablon** · @AlexYablon · March 2, 2017

The leading manufacturer of smart guns thinks it has developed a weapon that police will finally trust.

The German gunmaker Armatix has built a prototype of a 9mm semiautomatic pistol, the iP9, that it says should ease concerns from law enforcement and the public at large that firearms equipped with technology that prevents unauthorized firing may be unreliable.

The gun looks like a slightly futuristic, streamlined version of the semiautomatic pistols that have been standard police sidearms for the past three decades. In addition to using a wristwatch equipped with a radio-frequency identification (RFID) chip that unlocks the iP9 to fire when it is within 10 inches of the weapon, shooters can activate the gun on a smartphone app, which works at a longer range than the watch (the exact proximity is still being decided) and collects data on the number of rounds fired.

The company has also turned the gun's pistol grip into a PIN pad. Users who don't want to rely on a watch or their phone can unlock the gun by squeezing their fingers in sequence, which will enable the weapon to be fired until the same code is re-entered to turn it off.

The new weapon is the closest any company has yet come to a personalized version of the 9mm, single most popular type of handgun in the United States, carried widely by police and civilians. The company believes the iP9's caliber, and technological improvements, give consumers a product they can actually use — and trust.

“The 9mm is the most popular caliber of handgun in the world,” Wolfgang Tweraser, the CEO of Armatix’s American subsidiary, told The Trace. “Now that we have this new model, we can get smart guns out to the world.”

The company recently gave Al Jazeera a sneak peak of the prototype on a visit to its Munich headquarters.

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The iP9 should be ready for a demonstration before law-enforcement officers by late summer, Tweraser says, where they will be able to try out the weapon at a range. He said he hopes to put the weapon into production by early 2018.

The potential of smart guns has excited gun-safety advocates for years. Making it possible for only an authorized user to fire a weapon could potentially prevent accidental shootings and shootings by children, as well as reduce gun theft and protect owners from having their own guns turned on them. But the technology has been dogged by fears that it could make weapons less reliable in a life-or-death self-defense scenario.

For the past three years, a group of activists in a coalition called MetrolAF have been pleading with police forces to explore smart guns. While more than a hundred police departments have signed a letter of interest in smart guns in the abstract, none were willing to try out existing models while on patrol.

Jim Pasco, head of the Fraternal Order of Police, the national patrolmen’s union, told Politico that officers “shouldn’t be asked to be the guinea pigs in evaluating a firearm that nobody’s even seen yet.” Big city police chiefs, like Greg Suhr, the recently retired head of the San Francisco Police Department, have been more enthusiastic about the technology, but none have yet initiated any pilot program to actually test a smart gun. One roadblock has been a lack of a model that actually fits police officers’ needs.

“All of them said they find the technology promising,” said Rabbi Joel Mosbacher, a MetrolAF leader. “But they need a 9mm option.”

Armatix’s previous release was the iP1, a futuristic-looking pistol, which only fires when the user is wearing a wristwatch embedded with an RFID chip. But the iP1 could chamber only a .22 round, the smallest caliber available, and cost \$1,375 for both the gun and watch.

Tweraser said he believes the iP9’s larger caliber will be more appealing to police, who might then agree to try them out in the field and thus demonstrate their reliability to consumers. Crucially, Armatix’s 9mm model meets the federal standards for smart guns set by the Department of Justice last November. The standards

were created after President Barack Obama requested that the Department of Justice research what would be necessary for a smart gun suitable for law enforcement use. The DOJ required that any suitable pistol be chambered to shoot either a 9mm or the somewhat less common, slightly larger, .40-caliber round.

Tweraser said he thinks that the new model, with its multiple methods of authentication, will exceed law enforcement expectations. The PIN-code activated grip, in particular, is designed with law enforcement in mind.

“Police were worried about what might happen, say, if they are hurt while on duty and need to switch shooting hands, which could move the gun too far from a watch or phone, or if partners had to switch weapons,” Tweraser said. “Many police also wear gloves, which would make a fingerprint reader unsuitable. Those shouldn’t be problems with the PIN.”

Stephen Teret is a professor of public health at Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Gun Policy and Research, and an expert on smart guns. He agreed that the new varied authentication methods will be seen as favorable to law enforcement, but notes that they could come with trade-offs, too.

“The whole point of the movement to get personalized guns out there is to reduce as much as possible the likelihood that an unauthorized person could use the weapon,” Teret said. “If the gun can be activated by anyone who can squeeze their fingers around the grip in the right order, that’s not as highly personalized as a fingerprint reader or an RFID chip. It’s a compromise.”

Even if the new security features prove more marketable, Armatix may have a hard time getting the iP9 into stores until it overcomes some policy hurdles. New Jersey notably set back the cause of smart guns when it passed a law in 2002 mandating that as soon as the personalized weapons were commercially available anywhere in the country, no other kind of firearm would be allowed for sale in the Garden State. That had an unintended consequence: gun advocates boycotted and threatened the two stores that attempted to stock the iP1, believing that might trigger the New Jersey law.

The incidents generated bad public relations for smart guns, even though New Jersey’s attorney general determined the iP1 did not, strictly speaking, meet the standards for personalized firearms set by the law.

Last year, the New Jersey law’s original sponsor, State Senator Loretta Weinberg, a Democrat, put forth a new bill with a less rigid mandate, which would simply require New Jersey gun stores to stock smart guns alongside conventional guns. The proposal passed the state’s legislature, but was vetoed by the state’s Republican governor, Chris Christie.

The New Jersey law also drew the ire of gun-rights groups like the National Rifle Association.

“NRA opposes government mandates of expensive, unproven technology, and smart guns are a prime example of that,” a post on the gun group’s website reads.

The problem could be compounded if Massachusetts passes its own law with a mandate on smart guns, which State Senator Cynthia Creem, a Democrat, recently introduced to the legislature. An aide says that bill may be revised in committee in light of its similarities to the troubled New Jersey law.

For his part, Tweraser, the Armatix executive, opposes any kind of smart gun mandate, though he would have preferred it if New Jersey had revised its law last year.

“I agree with the NRA,” he said. “I don’t think there should be a mandate. Armatix doesn’t want to be at odds with other gun manufacturers.”

[Photo: [Al Jazeera YouTube](#)]

Correction: an earlier version of this article stated that the Armatix iP1 was sold for \$1,800. That price is out of date.

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GUN POLICY

Spotlight Falls on Red-State Democrats as a New Gun Fight Brews in Congress

National concealed carry 'reciprocity' is a top NRA priority.

by **Dan Friedman** · @dfriedman33 · February 28, 2017

Legislation long pushed by the National Rifle Association that would allow people who are permitted to carry concealed guns in their home state to carry in every other state — regardless of local restrictions — stands a better chance than ever before of becoming federal law.

John Cornyn of Texas, the second-ranking Republican in the Senate, introduced a new version of a national “reciprocity” bill with 31 GOP co-sponsors on Monday. With a similar measure enjoying strong support in the House, and with President Donald Trump seemingly eager to support the NRA, the bill’s chances may rest on whether Senate Democrats can muster enough opposition to defeat it.

Cornyn told The Trace that he is “hopeful” the bill will receive support from enough Democrats to clear a 60-vote filibuster-proof threshold.

“All it is is a driver’s license for concealed carry,” Cornyn said. “If you can drive in Texas, you can drive in New York and follow New York laws.”

A Senate vote could be close. In 2013, in a vote that received limited attention amid a more prominent fight over tightening background check laws, 13 Democrats voted for a version of Cornyn’s bill. Seven of those senators — Jon Tester of Montana; Joe Manchin of West Virginia; Joe Donnelly of Indiana; Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota; Martin Heinrich and Tom Udall of New Mexico; and Mark Warner of Virginia — remain in office.

Udall told The Trace that the 2013 vote reflects his general support for the concept of concealed carry reciprocity. The other Democratic senators who previously supported national reciprocity either did not respond to a request for comment or refused to comment, saying they had not reviewed the new legislation.

Senator Chris Murphy, a Connecticut Democrat who has led previous efforts in the Senate to tighten gun laws, is opposed to the bill.

"It's playing down to the lowest common denominator," he told The Trace.

The bill would allow any person "entitled and not prohibited from carrying a concealed firearm" in their home state to carry in other states, regardless of whether they meet permitting requirements in that state.

The differences between those requirements can be vast. Eleven states do not require any permit at all to carry a concealed gun in public, following New Hampshire's enactment of a new law last week. Other states, like North Carolina and Ohio (among others), require would-be license holders to take firearms classes. And still others, like New York, impose so many restrictions that it can be nearly impossible to obtain a license.

On many other issues, from abortion to voting rights, Republicans have asserted the right of states to make their own laws, independent of the federal government. The Cornyn bill, if adopted, would be a significant departure from that ideology.

"The idea that Texas's laws on guns should apply to Connecticut or New Hampshire or Vermont is absurd given Republicans' traditional position on states' rights," Murphy said. "So we've got to call Republicans out for their hypocrisy."

New York's attorney general, Eric Schneiderman, a Democrat, previously told The Trace that a national reciprocity law would "undermine the core principles of federalism, the traditional police powers of state governments, and the safety of law enforcement officers across the country."

The bill does make some allowances for local laws and ordinances. Out-of-state conceal-carry holders would still need to obey local restrictions on carrying guns in government buildings or schools, for example.

Many of the Democratic senators who previously supported national concealed-carry reciprocity are up for re-election in 2018. They will likely face lobbying from the NRA and other gun groups to support the bill. Their position this time may depend on how much pressure they receive from opponents of the measure, including groups like Americans for Responsible Solutions, headed by former U.S. Representative Gabby Giffords of Arizona and her husband, the astronaut Mark Kelly. The group held a news conference on Tuesday to express opposition.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer on Tuesday stopped short of saying he will urge fellow Democrats to oppose the bill, though he criticized the measure.

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“I will certainly oppose it, and I would hope we would oppose it,” he said.

Senator Dianne Feinstein, a California Democrat, told The Trace that passing such a bill would be the “worst thing” she could imagine the Senate doing this year.

Murphy said he doesn’t think supporters of the legislation can muster 60 votes to overcome a filibuster.

In a bid to appeal to Democrats, Comyn’s bill does not contain some of the more controversial provisions in a companion House proposal introduced by Representative Richard Hudson, a North Carolina Republican. Unlike the House bill, the Senate measure would not allow people to use an out-of-state permit to carry a gun in their own state, a loophole through which gun owners could duck more restrictive local laws. Comyn’s bill also differs from Hudson’s bill by excluding provisions that would repeal a federal law creating gun-free school zones and allow people with out-of-state permits to personally sue police officers for damages that might result from being questioned about their weapons.

“They removed some of the harsher edges, but I wouldn’t overstate the importance” of those exclusions, said Lindsay Nichols, senior attorney at the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. “It’s pretty much doing the same thing.”

Comyn said he does not expect his bill to receive consideration by the full Senate or by the Judiciary Committee before lawmakers tackle top Republican priorities, including repealing the Affordable Care Act and enacting tax cuts.

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