

RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

Ukraine and the Pentagon's potentially deadly garage sales

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Amidst the flood of lethal aid for Ukraine, the Biden administration announced that it had transferred several attack helicopters into Kiev's control through the Excess Defense Articles program. The same program has also been used to give Ukraine former Coast Guard cutters.

Why does this little-known program deserve attention? Because its use over the past decade has inadvertently resulted in American military equipment in the hands of ISIS, Hezbollah, and the Taliban.

Washington must learn the common lesson of these mistakes before making it again in Ukraine: think twice about the fragility of an intended recipient before loading them up with American gear. Otherwise, that gear may ultimately benefit an adversary or some other unsavory actor.

From aging warships and heavy artillery to boots and even underwear, the Pentagon is constantly trying to figure out what to do with billions of dollars worth of military equipment that it no longer needs. The Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program is the official mechanism for getting rid of these items by providing them to other nations at a bargain rate.

This "cleaning out the garage" program can seem like a win-win: it saves on the labor costs of demilitarizing items and it can strengthen strategic partners. The Army transferred 9,800 tons of excess assets to foreign governments through the program in 2016 and saved \$11.4 million in disposal costs. The Coast Guard, meanwhile, glowingly described using the program to provide ships to a "compatriot in the struggle to preserve freedom of the sea."

The only problem is that some of those "compatriots" who receive EDA transfers are so fragile that they can't stop their American-made equipment from ending up in the wrong hands.

In Iraq, official reports warned for years that the Iraqi Army suffered from high desertion rates. Observers noted a corrupt force where "loyalties to sect or tribe competed with their willingness to serve the Iraqi state." Regardless, Baghdad received hundreds of armored personnel carriers, machine guns and howitzers through EDA transfers between 2010 and 2014.

ISIS quickly secured these assets after Iraqi forces dissolved, with some instances of Iraqi soldiers literally dropping their weapons to flee. The terrorist group modified American vehicles into improvised explosive devices and used captured American howitzers to shell Iraqi cities.

A similar problem of end use has occurred in Lebanon. America has transferred hundreds of vehicles, arms and other equipment over the past decade in an attempt to shore up the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Officials claimed no equipment would ever be used by Hezbollah, which the United States has designated as a terrorist organization. These assurances came despite the fact the group had participated in the government of Lebanon since 1992, regularly coordinated with the LAF and experts warned that it had infiltrated the state security apparatus.

In 2017, images surfaced of Hezbollah fighters driving American vehicles in Syria. Israeli intelligence and military officials confirmed that these carriers were originally provided to the LAF. Hezbollah is increasingly poised to access more transferred assets, as top generals warn that Lebanon's long-running economic crisis "will inevitably lead to the collapse of all state institutions, including the LAF."

The withdrawal from Afghanistan provided the most recent example of EDA transfers ultimately benefiting American adversaries. Reports to Congress over the nearly two decades of training the Afghan forces stressed that military assessments were "often unable to evaluate the impact of intangible factors such as leadership, corruption, malign influence, and dependency."

Still, the EDA program was used to send vehicles, machine guns, sniper rifles and communication systems to this fragile partner between 2010 and 2018. The force the White House hailed as "well-equipped as any army in the world" due to American generosity would soon be quickly routed. The victorious Taliban held a parade in Kabul with their newly captured American equipment, while other fighters took their American weapons and gear with them to countries like Iran.

As Congress considers proposals to prioritize Ukraine for years to come in EDA transfers, it should also consider Ukraine's eerie echoes of similar situations. In the past two decades, Ukraine's ranking on the Fragile States Index has jumped by 22 spots. In 2020, the Cato Institute's Arm Sales Risk Index ranked Ukraine as a riskier recipient than Lebanon. In 2021, the European Court of Auditors reported that "grand corruption and state capture are endemic in Ukraine" and that "tens of billions of euros are lost annually as a result of corruption."

In these pages, Taylor Giorno reported that illicit military weapons trafficking had already been a persistent problem in Ukraine, particularly since the 2014 revolution and outbreak of war in the east. She referenced a Small Arms Survey briefing on illicit arms flows in 2017 that found that, of the more than 300,000 small arms that disappeared from Ukraine from 2013 to 2015, only about 13 percent were ever recovered.

Meanwhile, extremist groups have made clear their desire to send foreign fighters to take part in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Neo-Nazi aligned militias have already been documented in possession of armaments originally provided to Ukraine.

What is the likelihood that a fragile government under enormous pressure in Ukraine will be able to prevent transferred equipment from falling into hands that have other designs for it besides

countering Russia? Not nearly enough debate in Washington has wrestled with this prudent question.

Strengthening security partners is good, and so is saving taxpayer money. But when it comes to the Excess Defense Articles program, the policy must be “better safe than sorry.”

Congress should take a much harder look at the fragility of Ukraine and every other EDA recipient before approving transfers. Otherwise, Americans might spend another decade watching bad guys around the world brandish equipment that originated from a Pentagon garage sale.