

INKSTICK

To Arm or Not to Arm Ukrainians?

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“Adults in a Room” is a series in collaboration with The Atlantic Council’s New American Engagement Initiative (NAEI). The series stems from NAEI’s monthly networking events that call on analysts to gather virtually and hash out a salient topic. This series aims to give you a peek into their Zoom room and a deep understanding of the issue at hand in less than the time it takes to sip your morning coffee, without the jargon, acronyms, and stuffiness that often come with expertise.

The \$40 billion US aid bill to Ukraine recently passed by Congress includes about \$20 billion in weapons and is the single largest arms transfer in US history. While the support of Ukraine’s defense is a worthy cause for such a colossal arms sale, it raises questions about how effective US arms transfers are at achieving their intended goals. In the past, US weapons have often ended up in the hands of adversaries, been turned against civilians, or used against the US itself. How can those outcomes be avoided in Ukraine and elsewhere? Is there a need to fundamentally change the US approach to arms sales?

The Atlantic Council’s New American Engagement Initiative’s (NAEI) May roundtable brought several experts to discuss US arms sales. Participants discussed the hazards involved in weapon transfers and how the system might be reformed. Of particular interest to the group was whether China and Russia might replace the United States as an arms supplier if it reduced its role as the leading weapons supplier globally. Ultimately, the hotly debated question was whether arms sales are generally advancing US interests or whether they come back to harm those interests. Four experts shared their takeaways from the discussion below.

Christopher Preble, Co-Director, New American Engagement Initiative, Atlantic Council

Weapons are not like cartons of milk; they don't become unusable after an expiration date. As a result, things sold to foreign governments with the very best of intentions have sometimes — and, arguably, often — fallen into other actors' hands over the years, exposing US personnel and US partners and allies to great risk.

Take, for example, the sale of advanced weaponry to Iran under the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in the 1970s. The Iranians received high-performance aircraft, including the vaunted F-14 Tomcat fighter plane. In addition, they purchased advanced anti-ship missiles like the Harpoon. But after the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini sent the tyrannical Shah into exile in 1979, the combination posed a threat to US Navy ships operating in the Persian Gulf for decades.

The Iranians managed to keep the planes flying despite being denied access to American technicians and US-made spare parts by cannibalizing inoperative F-14s in their inventory. Indeed, the Tomcat was made famous in the film “Top Gun,” but a more historically accurate rendering of these planes in service would have shown US-trained *Iranian* pilots shooting down Iraqi aircraft. During the eight-year-long Iran–Iraq war, Iranian pilots scored over 200 air-to-air kills, including 62 that were attributed to the F-14's AIM-54 Phoenix missile. The US Navy, by contrast, operated F-14s for over 30 years but fired only three Phoenix missiles in anger — and none struck their targets.

The US Navy's Kidd-class destroyers tell a similar tale of weapons systems' long shelf life. The Shah's government purchased the four modified Spruance-class vessels, but the United States reneged on the deal after the Shah was ousted. They are now known as the Kee Lung class; the United States sold all four ships to Taiwan in 2001.

When US policymakers sell weapons, they know who the initial buyers are, but don't — can't — know where they'll eventually end up.

Rachel Stohl, Vice President, Research Programs, Stimson Center

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has understandably galvanized an extraordinary international effort to deliver the means of national defense to Kyiv. However, this assistance brings into stark relief broader challenges to oversight, accountability, and risk mitigation that are inherent to the wider world of international security cooperation.

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Between February and May 2022, the United States provided an unprecedented \$4.6 billion military aid to Ukraine, nearly two billion more than it had provided to Kyiv between 2014 and 2021. Moreover, with the passage of the recent \$41 billion supplemental, Ukraine is set to become the largest single-year recipient of US security assistance in the 21st century. While supporting Ukraine's right to sovereignty and self-defense is necessary, the tidal wave of military assistance the west is committing to Kyiv does not come risk-free. The most immediate danger is that expanding Western military assistance sparks an escalation from Moscow, which sees military support to Kyiv as akin to a Western proxy war and has targeted logistics and supply networks that move foreign weaponry.

The United States has an unfortunate history of embarking on large-scale military assistance programs, initiated with sound strategic intentions, only to see its beneficiaries lose, misuse, or otherwise divert American sourced weapons, creating a host of national security risks for the United States. For example, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction recently released a report detailing the collapse of Afghan security forces that leftover \$7 billion of US military equipment unaccounted for or in the hands of the Taliban.

All too often, US arms find their way to new battlefields. Ukraine has an unfortunate history of the illicit arms trade with old weapons stocks diverted onto the black market in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse and Russia's 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea. The current influx of new, even more, advanced weaponry has starker dangers.

With the situation in Ukraine evolving quickly, Congress and the White House should undertake thorough and dispassionate assessments of the strategic risks posed by arms transfers to Kyiv and develop measures that address diversion, loss, and misuse in Ukraine's volatile and complex environment. While it may well be the case that those assessments find the risks are justified by other national security imperatives, ignoring the dangers entirely undercuts mitigation efforts and the longer-term security.

Jennifer Kavanagh, Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Russia's position as the second-largest seller of conventional weapons is likely significantly undermined by its war in Ukraine. Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) arms transfer database show that Russia was responsible for about 20% of total arms sales between 2017–2021. Russian weapons are attractive to some buyers due to their lower price and Russia's willingness to sell without preconditions. However, a combination of Western sanctions and the demands of combat operations in Ukraine is likely to make it difficult for Russia to remain a top exporter in the near- and medium-term.

The disruption of Russian arms sales will create challenges for countries that depend on Russian military technology, including large clients like India, Vietnam, Egypt, and Algeria, but also countries in sub-Saharan Africa. To offset this gap, some countries may turn first to China. Although a smaller player (the fourth-largest seller in 2017–2021), China has been seeking to expand its arms exports. China's weapons, like Russia's, tend to be cheaper and come without conditionality, essential for buyers who face restrictions on purchases from the United States.

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THE UNITED STATES BECOMES COMPLICIT IN HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES AND

UNNECESSARY CONFLICTS.

In addition, several Russian clients already buy weapons from China, and so may find Chinese arms to be suitable replacements if Russian supplies dry up. For example, according to SIPRI data, China has been Algeria's second-largest source of weapons (after Russia) over the past ten years. Algeria announced new purchases from China just earlier this year. Angola also purchases weapons from Russia and China and, due to human rights concerns, faces constraints in finding alternate sellers. Other displaced buyers may turn to the United States for the higher quality of its systems and partnership benefits that often come with US arms transfers. Turkey, for instance, has reportedly ended several weapons deals with Russia and indicated a renewed interest in purchasing systems from the US and other NATO suppliers.

However, US policymakers should avoid viewing the demands of these buyers strictly through the lens of US-China competition. Selling arms solely to pre-empt China could fuel new arms races and undermine US interests in other ways. Instead, policymakers should identify a narrow and clear set of strategic goals to guide arms sales decisions consistently across buyers. For example, already the United States is moving toward new arms deals with two major Russian clients, Egypt and India. Pulling these countries away from Russian arms may deepen Russia's

isolation over time but should be buttressed by industrial base investments in recipient countries and military training.

The disruption to Russian exports may also affect blackmarket arms sales. The massive influx of Western weapons to Ukraine with minimal end-use monitoring may infuse the black market with new supplies just as buyers are left looking for new sellers. This could be especially concerning in the Middle East and Africa, where blackmarket arms already fuel territorial conflicts.

Jordan Cohen, Policy Analyst, Cato Institute

Do US weapons provide Washington with “leverage” over its clients? A former high-ranking diplomat certainly believes so, arguing that arms transfers give “the United States leverage and influence.”

Unfortunately, the only leverage US weapons sales provide is the type that recipient countries use to receive ever more arms, despite their risks. According to academic studies, foreign aid for influence and arms for influence attempts are unsuccessful.

The Cato Institute’s arms sales risk index project sees similar results. For example, Saudi Arabia has the largest recipient of American-made weapons since 2009. Riyadh has used these weapons against US interests to continue ravaging Yemen and an “anti-corruption purge” to crack down on those fighting government corruption.

Former President Donald Trump ironically understood the follies of arms providing influence. Congress attempted to cancel sales to Saudi Arabia after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. But Trump argued that “we would be punishing ourselves” by canceling these weapons transfers. He believed that stopping the weapons flow would hurt the United States more than the Saudis, and as a result, these sales would continue.

Weapons sales instead created a “reverse leverage.” In other words, any exertion of leverage by the United States became self-harming because economic and political blowback from canceling a sale is significant. Further, if the United States cancels a sale, there is a risk that the recipient will seek arms from a US competitor. Research finds that US military aid causes recipient states to be oppositional instead of cooperative. Yet, the weapons continue to flow. For example, the Saudis asked for and received weapons to defend their homeland but used them to wage human rights abuses in Yemen.

Ignoring risk gives other countries leverage over the United States, not the other way around. “Arms for influence” becomes a self-licking ice cream cone. The more weapons that are

transferred to risky countries, the more the United States becomes complicit in human rights abuses and unnecessary conflicts.