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The US Must Monitor Arms Sales

Small arms and light weapons empower bad actors and reduce human freedom around the world.

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New Jersey Democrat Bob Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, recently published an op-ed announcing legislation that would make Colombia a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA). Columbia is a major recipient of U.S. weapons sales, receiving over \$1 billion in arms since 2012. Unfortunately, these weapons have been used to support a government that attacks human rights protesters, supports human trafficking, and commits sexual violence.

The problems in Colombia are not specific to that country but reveal a broader failure to monitor the final recipients of U.S. weapons. The U.S. must fix this problem before allowing Colombia or any other major American-weapons-recipient to become a MNNA.

Previously, the State Department monitored the destination of U.S.-weapons exports. In March 2020, former President Donald Trump shifted that responsibility to the Commerce Department. Since then, Washington has transferred over 4,000 firearms to Central America's Northern Triangle and approved more than 110,000 in future sales.

This end-use monitoring regime is problematic, according to a recent report by the Government Accountability Office. The GAO notes that the Commerce Department only conducted two end-use checks in 2021. In the six previous years, by contrast, end-use checks led to seizure of 130 firearms, 3,500 firearm components, and 217,00 rounds of ammunition. Failing to conduct end-use checks means that many of the 4,000 recently transferred firearms likely will end up in the wrong hands.

Failing to oversee these transactions is both negligent and renders the U.S. complicit in homicide. Central America's Northern Triangle—Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—contains 47 of the 50 cities with the most murders in the world. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms studied the origin of recovered firearms in Mexico and the Northern Triangle in 2019, and found that the U.S. manufactured 43.7 percent of the recovered firearms in El Salvador, 34.8 percent in Guatemala, and 42.8 percent in Honduras.

The U.S.'s failure to perform end-use checks is a recipe for human-rights tragedies. It is also a security risk with economic downsides for the U.S. The Cato Institute's 2021 Arms Sales Risk Index, for example, found that small-arms and light-weapons sales empower authoritarian rulers, fund criminal organizations, and amplify existing violence and conflict. Small-arms and light-weapons sales made with little oversight have empowered the dictatorial regime in Venezuela, forced people to seek asylum due to threats and mass killings from Honduran gangs, and resulted in the killing of civilians throughout Central America.

It is effectively impossible for an arms recipient to disperse a large weapons system like an F-35, which would be obvious and easy for Washington to prevent. But dispersing a handgun, particularly when the U.S. is not monitoring its final recipient, is much easier. The U.S. is thus indirectly aiding the same criminal gangs and cartels that the U.S. targets in international drug-trafficking operations. In El Salvador, soldiers sell American-made grenades and other light weapons to the Milenio Cartel, whom the U.S. authorities then chase. Similar stories occur in Guatemala and Honduras.

In Mexico, an average of 500 guns are illegally smuggled every day and eventually end up in the hands of gang and cartel members throughout South and Central America. Because the Commerce Department fails to closely track the end-users of weapons, U.S. weapons end up destabilizing a region and threatening global human rights—all at the American taxpayer's expense. Corporate interests are eager to maintain this ineffective regime, but lawmakers should put human rights at the forefront of U.S.-arms-sales policy.

There is another fiscal cost to the lack of arms-sale oversight. The U.S. military is inevitably used to combat downstream problems flowing from unmonitored arms sales. Recipient countries ask for U.S. aid to address resulting security concerns. Indeed, the U.S. spent over \$38 million between 2015-2019 disrupting firearm trafficking in Central America.

As the late P.J. O'Rourke said, "freedom is not empowerment. Empowerment is what the Serbs had in Bosnia. Anybody can grab a gun and be empowered." Small arms and light weapons empower bad actors and reduce human freedom around the world. The costs to Americans from these arms sales should make Congress think twice before touting their economic benefits.

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