



Taiwan Is Competing for Arms With the Middle East, Not Ukraine

The United States should pause deliveries to partners such as Saudi Arabia to free up weapons for Taipei.

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Returning from a visit to Taipei in February, U.S. Rep. Mike Gallagher, the Republican chairman of the House’s recently established select committee on China, expressed concern about the pace of arms deliveries to Taiwan, including the much-discussed \$19 billion backlog, telling the *New York Times*, “We have to prove that we’re willing to deliver.”

The scale of the backlog has been widely cited by political leaders on both sides of the aisle as an indicator of a weak U.S. defense industrial base that is unready for a major-power war and unable to meet demands from Russia’s war in Ukraine and a potential conflict over Taiwan simultaneously. Gallagher’s Democratic co-chair, Rep. Ro Khanna, made this Ukraine-Taiwan trade-off explicit in a late April speech on U.S. competition with China, in which he also called for the use of the Defense Production Act to dramatically ramp up U.S. weapons production. The argument that U.S. aid to Ukraine must be cut to allow for sufficient support to Taiwan also has many advocates beyond Capitol Hill, chief among them Elbridge Colby, the lead architect of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, and Kevin Roberts, the president of the Heritage Foundation.

Ensuring that Taiwan is prepared to deter and defend itself from Chinese aggression should be a priority for the United States and will require trade-offs. But cutting aid to Ukraine or supersizing U.S. weapons production is not the best way to get Taiwan the arms that it needs. Taiwan’s greatest competitor for many of the systems that it requires most has not been Ukraine but large buyers in the Middle East—and Taiwan is developing an increasingly capable defense sector that is able to produce a growing number of key systems indigenously. To meet Taiwan’s arms requirements more efficiently, the United States should redirect arms transfers that currently support large Middle Eastern buyers to Taiwan and invest more in co-production and capacity building for Taiwan’s own defense industrial base.

While the war in Ukraine has received much of the blame for slow deliveries of systems such as Javelin and Stinger missiles to Taiwan, Taiwan’s weapons backlog predates the war. Furthermore, to this point, Taiwan and Ukraine have received arms through two different channels. Most of the aid that Ukraine has received has come from U.S. stockpiles through presidential drawdown authority—which Taiwan only became eligible for under the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act—rather than foreign military sales, on which

Taiwan has traditionally relied. Taiwan therefore has been shopping for new weapons, while Ukraine has been receiving old ones.

Rather than Ukraine, Taiwan has competed most directly with other countries purchasing new systems. Among its biggest competitors are large buyers in the Middle East, including Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. These countries not only buy many of the systems Taiwan needs most, but they also buy these weapons in large quantities—often exceeding what has been allocated to Ukraine, from stocks or otherwise.

Based on data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, between the start of former U.S. President Barack Obama's Asia pivot in 2012 and 2022, the United States has delivered thousands of weapons to these five Middle Eastern countries, including 25,658 TOW missiles, 8,512 Hellfire missiles, 46 Patriot air defense systems, 2,526 Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems, 1,241 Javelins, 645 Harpoon missiles, 459 Stingers, 24 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), 250 Abrams tanks, 21 F-16s, and other missiles, ammunition, and military vehicles. These are all systems that Taiwan could use for its defense, and many are included in the \$19 billion backlog. Diverting even some of the production capacity devoted to these five countries over the past 11 years would have increased Taiwan's defense stocks substantially.

While Ukraine has received a large number of Javelin, Stinger, and TOW missiles, compared with these Middle Eastern buyers it has received substantially less of most of the other systems Taiwan needs. For example, Ukraine has been promised just two Harpoon coastal defense systems and received one Patriot battery but zero Hellfire or longer-range missiles, and its HIMARS were modified to limit their targeting range. Moreover, while Ukraine and Taiwan do need some of the same systems, they face vastly different battlefield demands that limit the extent of any overlap. Ukraine is fighting a ground war of attrition, in close proximity to its adversary, and needs short-range artillery and air defense most of all. Taiwan will instead face air and maritime warfare and needs longer-range missiles and air defense and anti-ship capabilities.

Taiwan and Ukraine may compete more directly for newly built weapons as excess U.S. stocks are consumed. But a review of new production promised to Ukraine through the Defense Department's Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative finds limited overlap between capabilities Ukraine will receive and those Taiwan needs. There are some systems slated to go to Ukraine that could benefit Taiwan, including National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems, HIMARS, and a range of different types of drones. But quantities are relatively low and are unlikely to delay key arms transfers to Taiwan.

While there are and will continue to be trade-offs between resources committed to Taiwan and Ukraine, the same can be said for resources committed to arming other allies and partners, many of which have less severe security concerns and far more problematic human rights records. For the weapons systems Taiwan needs most, it is large buyers in the Middle East—and not Ukraine—that have been and likely will continue to be the biggest drain.

The fastest and most efficient way to get needed weapons into Taiwanese hands would be to pause or reduce deliveries to large arms buyers in the Middle East—specifically Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, at least temporarily. Though these Arab states do have some legitimate security concerns, particularly coming from Iran and its proxies, substantial and largely condition-free arms transfers to these countries have frequently fueled regional

conflicts, produced security outcomes that are antithetical to U.S. interests, and contributed to human rights violations.

Furthermore, these countries often acquire advanced systems—such as Harpoon missiles and Patriot air defense systems—that provide prestige but are not well matched to the threats they face from Iran and elsewhere. Despite these well-documented issues, U.S. arms sales to these five countries are massive, amounting to \$111.8 billion in new authorizations and notifications since the start of the Trump administration. Saudi Arabia alone has just over 40 billion in new purchases of U.S. weapons over this time period. Redirecting a large portion of these arms and the production capacity it takes to produce them toward Taiwan would make a big difference when it comes to speeding and expanding Taiwan’s arms deliveries. For instance, even today Taiwan waits behind Saudi Arabia for its 750 Harpoon missiles, despite its far more urgent need for these systems.

Reprioritization of production capacity will help arm Taiwan more quickly but may not be sufficient to meet Taiwan’s medium- and longer-term needs. Washington will also need to invest more heavily in Taiwan’s defense sector, including through co-production, transfer of technologies that Taiwan’s defense industry requires to advance its indigenous capabilities, and provision of assistance to upgrade and speed up existing production lines.

Taiwan has a growing indigenous defense industry that is especially capable in the development and production of air defense systems and medium- and long-range missiles. Current proposals for speeding arms deliveries to Taiwan focus on ramping up the U.S. defense industrial base to wartime capacity, but this will take years and feed ever higher levels of defense spending. Investment in Taiwan’s indigenous defense industry can yield returns more quickly, augment U.S. arms sales, and increase Taiwan’s ability to arm itself under a blockade or during a conflict when U.S. resupply is not an option.

Both parts of this approach could receive pushback from members of Congress, defense contractors, and certain U.S. security partners. Portraying these decisions as temporary and strategically necessary would be one way to allay such concerns. More generally, the Biden administration has demonstrated a willingness to compromise U.S. economic gains for national security when it comes to competing with China.

Speeding up and increasing arms sales to Taiwan will come with trade-offs. But neither supersizing the U.S. defense industrial base nor terminating aid to Ukraine is the best choice. If the United States is serious about arming Taiwan “to the teeth,” as Gallagher has urgently recommended, it will pause or slow arms deliveries to partners with less urgent need, including large buyers in the Middle East, to divert this production capacity toward Taiwan and invest more heavily in Taiwan’s defense sector to build additional capabilities and self-sufficiency.

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