

MINNPOST

Trump's decision to pull out of the Arms Trade Treaty: a cynic's guide

Mark Porubcansky

April 29, 2019

There are three ways to think about President Trump's decision to pull the United States out of an agreement regulating the conventional arms trade. Each will feed your inner cynic, but only two seem true. One in particular explains a lot about how the world works.

Trump announced the decision Friday at the annual convention of the National Rifle Association, which long has argued that the treaty signed by President Obama in 2013, but not ratified by the Senate, could affect Americans' gun rights. "We will never allow foreign bureaucrats to trample on your Second Amendment freedoms," Trump declared.

The announcement was an easy win for the NRA, and shifted some attention from its dire financial troubles. (The battle between Oliver North and Wayne LaPierre for control of the NRA that broke into the open at the convention is just the tip of a very large iceberg, and if you haven't read Mike Spies' eye-opening investigation into NRA finances in the New Yorker this month, it's well worth your time.)

Briefly, the Arms Trade Treaty requires countries to monitor arms sales and prohibits them from selling arms in violation of U.N. embargoes, if it's likely the weapons would be used to commit war crimes or fall in the hands of terrorists or organized crime groups. Its effect has been fairly limited. The Arms Control Association says the treaty "does not place restrictions on the types or quantities of arms that may be bought, sold, or possessed by states. It also does not impact a state's domestic gun control laws or other firearm ownership policies."

In other words, it's a Second Amendment issue only if you believe the Constitution gives Americans the right to sell virtually any weapon to anyone anywhere in the world at any time.

So perhaps the whole point of Trump's announcement was to pander to his base. In a bit of political showmanship, he signed a request for the Senate to return the treaty to him while on the NRA stage and then tossed the pen into the crowd. Pandering probably is part of the explanation. But it's not the only reason, and perhaps not the main one.

It's also about money — lots and lots of money — expressed in terms of business for defense contractors and jobs, accompanied by a misguided view of how much influence selling weapons provides. Plus, Trump clearly wants the freedom to do deals unconstrained by multinational agreements, particularly those signed by Obama.

The United States is by far the world's largest arms seller. And you can't blame Trump for that. At least you can't solely blame Trump for that. U.S. arms sales grew rapidly under Obama. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, which monitors global arms sales, said in a March report that the U.S. accounted for 36 percent of global exports of major weapons in the

period 2014-2018, up from 30 percent in the previous five-year period. It sold major weapons to 98 countries. Russia had 21 percent of the market, a significant drop from the previous period. No other country supplies more than 7 percent.

Slightly more than half of U.S. arms exports went to the Middle East, which increased U.S. arms imports by a staggering 134 percent. The biggest single market is Saudi Arabia, accounting for 12 percent of global purchases of major weapons and 22 percent of the U.S. sales.

Arms sales are a big element in Trump's cozy relationship with the kingdom, and it helps explain his resistance to punishing the Saudis for the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and his veto of legislation that would have ended U.S. logistical support for the Saudi military campaign in Yemen.

Several countries have suspended arms sales to Saudi Arabia; others have reduced them. But not the United States. [A striking chart in this CNN report](#) illustrates just how dependent the Saudis have become on U.S. arms sales.

Trump has claimed that a \$110 billion arms deal with the Saudis will create half a million U.S. jobs. Actual sales may fall far short of that total, however, and [Reuters has reported that major U.S. defense contractors were expecting to add only a small fraction of that number of jobs.](#)

Nevertheless, it's one of the reasons Trump cited for not taking a harsher line on the Khashoggi killing. It would be foolish to lose the business, and give Russia and China an opportunity to grab it, he said. Perhaps they would get some of it. But they're still far behind the U.S. in arms sales, and a more prudent president would also factor in the extrajudicial killing of Khashoggi, a U.S. resident, and making the United States complicit in possible war crimes in Yemen.

What about political influence? Much of the foreign policy establishment has for decades lined up behind arms sales as a tool to bolster friendly governments, balance power and make fickle allies behave. Again: perhaps that's the rationale for Trump's decision. But two scholars at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, A. Trevor Thrall and Caroline Dorminey, have done a pretty good job of [blowing up that argument](#). The benefits — economic and otherwise — are much smaller, and the risks much greater than assumed, they say.

Instead of aggressively increasing arms sales, Thrall and Dorminey say the U.S. should be cutting them. Much greater benefits would result, they say — chiefly, “significant diplomatic flexibility and moral authority.”