

Understanding the Evolution and Emerging Volatility of US Arms Transfer Policies

How the more frequent and substantial revisions to U.S. conventional arms transfer policies point to a strategic drift in U.S. security cooperation approaches

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On February 6, 2026, the Trump administration released [Executive Order 14383](#), “Establishing an America First Arms Transfer Strategy,” which outlines the approach to implementation of the administration’s 2018 Conventional Arms Transfer (CAT) Policy, reinstated in April 2025 under [Executive Order 14268](#). The new strategy makes clear that implementation of the 2018 CAT policy [pivots the focus](#) on conventional arms transfer decisions from strategic and national security objectives to economic and commercial imperatives. This approach not only represents a profound shift in

the U.S. approach to defense and security cooperation but also risks compromising the principle that the United States should undertake security partnerships that have long-term strategic benefits and are consistent with U.S. foreign policy objectives and national security imperatives.

To better understand how the “America First Arms Transfer Strategy” adds to the potential strategic and foreign policy risks inherent to the U.S. arms trade, it is worth putting the strategy into context by describing the evolution of U.S. CAT policies and analyzing the policy contradictions presented by the newly amended directive.

What is a CAT Policy?

Though their contents vary, CAT policies are frameworks that outline how the whole of the U.S. government will review and evaluate arms transfer decisions. The guidance is intended to orient U.S. security cooperation and assistance toward a set of topline objectives and ensure they reflect broader policies and interests. These directives are intended to define the key criteria and goals that shape the adjudication of arms transfer decisions and have, at various times, both encouraged and put limits around U.S. security cooperation and assistance. While they are not legally binding, these executive directives offer important signposts for how the U.S. government views arms transfers within its broader approach to international affairs.

The Evolution of U.S. CAT Policies

Changes to U.S. CAT policies have been relatively infrequent since they were first introduced by President Carter in 1977. Although President Reagan released his own policy that rescinded many of the restraint-minded aspects of his predecessor’s directive, it was another 14 years before President Clinton issued a revision in 1995 (the first of the post-Cold War era). That policy stood for nearly two decades before President Obama replaced it in 2014, reflecting the substantial changes in

international security priorities following the September 11th attacks and the Global War on Terror. The Obama policy reintroduced the concept of restraint in U.S. arms sales and placed greater emphasis on human rights and governance considerations. Nevertheless, the 2014 policy by and large echoed the standard principles that had historically underpinned U.S. arms transfers with a focus on supporting allies and enabling America's vast system of defense partnerships.

The CAT policy introduced during President Trump's first term included more significant changes and began the era of routine revisions. The 2018 directive drew significant attention for elevating the importance of the commercial and economic aspects of the U.S. arms trade, implying a degree of parity between those interests and more traditional national security priorities. Moreover, Trump's policy went beyond listing support for the defense industrial sector as an objective of U.S. arms transfers by presenting the enterprise as supporting domestic economic development and growth — a first for a CAT policy. The policy was also the first to introduce civilian harm in its text, listing mitigation as a specific policy objective for U.S. arms transfers.

Five years later, President Biden issued a new directive that also departed from historical practice. In what is the lengthiest CAT policy to date, Biden's executive order placed new emphasis on human rights, international humanitarian law, and restraint. Most significantly, it committed the U.S. government to refrain from transferring arms if those arms were "more likely than not" to contribute to atrocities and certain human rights abuses — a substantially lower bar than the "actual knowledge" standard of past policies. Nevertheless, while the new policy paved the way for some encouraging developments, the promise of a more human rights-minded approach to arms transfers remained unfulfilled, exemplified by the Biden administration's largely unrestrained and unconditioned military support for Israel's campaign in Gaza.

Upon returning to office, President Trump rescinded President Biden's 2023 policy and, in March of 2025, reinstated his 2018 directive. While there remained concerns about the elevated economic and commercial objectives, the policy retained familiar language emphasizing the importance of ensuring that arms transfers reflect core foreign policy and strategic interests. However, while Executive Order 14383, issued on February 6, purports to supplement rather than replace the 2018 Conventional Arms Transfer Policy, it fundamentally reordered CAT policy priorities, giving primacy to domestic economic and industrial objectives at the expense of the strategic focus that had been at the center of all past directives.

The Significance of CAT Policy Volatility

Over the past 12 years, the frequency of CAT policy revisions reflects the erosion of the strategic consensus that had long been the bedrock of U.S. arms transfer approaches. Indeed, notwithstanding the 1981 Reagan directive, revisions to CAT policies have reflected important changes in the wider strategic environment while remaining relatively consistent in presenting arms transfers as instruments of statecraft in service of key national security interests. In this way, past CAT policies have presented arms transfers not just as a global commercial enterprise like any other, but as inherently risky and uniquely consequential, warranting their subordination to higher-level strategic priorities.

Since 2018, however, dramatic swings in CAT policies have introduced a new level of volatility into arms transfer frameworks, undermining the strategic coherence of U.S. security cooperation, preventing the development of desperately needed reforms, and exacerbating critical national security risks. Moreover, the new focus on commercial and industrial interests undercuts long-standing efforts to improve the effectiveness of security cooperation as a foreign policy instrument, including ensuring that Washington avoids partnerships that are at odds with its national security interests, is

able to maximize the leverage and influence generated by arms transfers, and minimizes the risks arms transfers present to stability, good governance, and civilian protection.

Conclusion

The political whiplash in revisions to U.S. arms transfer policy poses a serious challenge to the development of more effective, responsible, and sustainable security cooperation approaches. When the metrics for effective and meaningful policy keep shifting, assessing the efficacy of U.S. arms transfers becomes more difficult, especially when the fundamental purpose of the enterprise remains in flux. Moreover, the dramatic policy swings exacerbate the sense of uncertainty among allies, especially as they weigh what role the United States should play in their long-term defense and security planning. Most importantly, while there will always be an ebb and flow to policy priorities, the foundational core of U.S. arms transfer approaches should not reflect the whims of any single administration. Without greater ballast in U.S. security cooperation policy, there is a risk that arms transfer decisions will become increasingly unmoored from U.S. national interests — a dangerous prospect amidst an increasingly volatile global environment.