

The “America First Arms Transfer Strategy” Reorders US Arms Transfer Priorities

A newly released U.S. arms transfers strategy elevates economic and industrial priorities at the expense of strategic and foreign policy imperatives

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Conventional Arms

February 12, 2026

On February 7, the Trump administration released Executive Order 14383, “[America First Arms Transfer Strategy](#).” While the directive supplements rather than replaces the 2018 Conventional Arms Transfer Policy, reinstated by the Trump administration in April 2025 under Executive Order 14268, the new order amplifies President Trump’s primary focus on economic and industrial aspects of the U.S. arms trade. As a

result, the new order effectively flips the hierarchy of objectives for U.S. arms transfers, elevating commercial considerations at the expense of higher-level strategic imperatives.

What is an “America First Arms Transfer Strategy”?

The Trump administration’s order lays out what it calls an “America First Arms Transfer Strategy” that is intended to “ensure that future arms sales prioritize American interests by using foreign purchases and capital to build American production and capacity.” In a pivot from past approaches, the listed objectives for U.S. arms transfers focus almost exclusively on the domestic defense industrial sector, including enhancing U.S. production capacity and supporting and expanding the defense industrial base. The order also envisions a more active advocacy role for U.S. officials in promoting arms sales, particularly for capabilities relevant to American acquisition priorities.

The directive tasks relevant agencies to address “inefficiencies” in the arms transfer enterprise, including for Enhanced End-Use Monitoring (EEUM) and with respect to Third-Party Transfers (TPTs) – the process by which partners receive authorization to re-transfer arms they’ve previously received from the United States to a third-party recipient. For the most part, these directives imply a reduction in what the document refers to as “onerous” regulation.

The executive order also dedicates a section to “Enhancing Accountability and Transparency” in U.S. arms transfers. While that heading might suggest some promise in improving public oversight and visibility, the mandate for the interagency task force focuses on transparency that benefits industrial actors and buyers, with the goal of improving sales performance, not oversight of U.S. arms transfer decisions.

What The New Strategy Says about U.S. Arms Transfer Approaches

Though the new executive order is meant to supplement the 2018 CAT policy, it still reflects a significant departure from longstanding U.S. approaches to arms transfers. Critically, the strategy's objectives make only a passing reference to U.S. foreign policy, representing a foundational shift in U.S. arms transfer policy. Since 1995, CAT policies have included consideration of support for the American defense industrial base, but none have made such priorities the centerpiece of the enterprise. President Trump's supplement clearly shifts the center of gravity of CAT policy away from high-level strategic statecraft to supporting defense industrial capacity and economic activity. Though commercial and national security interests are not zero-sum, the shift in priorities could raise questions about how policymakers will judge arms transfer decisions when the economic and foreign policy imperatives are at odds.

Beyond the question of supporting U.S. domestic production and industry, the strategy fails to address a contradiction in the Trump administration's approach to international security partnerships. At a time when the United States has adopted a far more hostile approach to longstanding partners and allies, including economic coercion and military threats, traditional customers for U.S. weapons will inevitably have to weigh the risks of depending on an increasingly capricious and potentially adversarial supplier for its military hardware. The "America First" approach, which explicitly aims to expand U.S. dominance of the global arms market, does little to address that conundrum or express how efforts to advocate for U.S. arms transfers will align with demands that partners adopt a greater degree of defense independence.

Over the short and medium term, many U.S. security partners will continue to rely on U.S. defense exports. Decades of investment in sustainment, logistics, training, and interoperability structures have created a substantial degree of dependency among many of the largest recipients of U.S. defense transfers. But as global defense spending rises, it's likely that some partners will see strategic incentives to invest more in their own defense industrial bases or diversify their supply chains.

Conclusion

For several years, deficiencies in the American defense industrial base have been a central concern for both Democratic and Republican policymakers. Efforts to sustain Ukraine's war against Russia's invasion and the simultaneous provision of weapons to Israel's war in Gaza revealed significant limitations in American defense production capacity and the relative limits of existing stockpiles. Moreover, the rapid expansion of Chinese and Russian defense industries has thrown into even starker relief the challenges faced by the United States.

Nevertheless, while addressing these challenges remains an important national security imperative, the strategy announced on February 6th fails to acknowledge the multidimensional character of arms transfers and the profound strategic consequences of the enterprise. A focus on the economic benefits of U.S. arms transfers misses an opportunity to ensure that the United States undertakes security partnerships that have long-term strategic benefits and are consistent with U.S. foreign policy objectives and national security imperatives.