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April 2025

U.S. President Donald Trump rescinded his predecessor's Conventional Arms Transfer (CAT) Policy, which was intended to encourage restraint and adherence to higher human rights standards in governmental approvals of arms transfers.

The White House offered no explanation for the decision, announced in a March 14 statement, and did not put forward a replacement policy. The United States is the world's largest arms supplier.

President Joe Biden's policy, embodied in National Security Memorandum 18 (NSM-18), was released in 2023. It differed from those issued by President Barack Obama and Trump, in his first term, by adopting the objective of "prevent[ing] arms transfers that risk facilitating or otherwise contributing to violations of human rights or international humanitarian law." (See *ACT*, [May 2023](https://www.armscontrol.org/aca/2041) (<https://www.armscontrol.org/aca/2041>.)

Trump's rescission of NSM-18 and the lack of a replacement could complicate U.S. arms transfer operations by leaving federal agencies to make decisions at their own discretion on the basis of laws and regulations that offer little policy guidance, arms trade experts Elias Yousef and Rachel Stohl wrote in a March 20 analysis for The Stimson Center.

All presidents have released a CAT policy since the first one was introduced by President Jimmy Carter in 1977. The administration could direct agencies to refer to Trump's 2018 CAT policy, which integrated economic objectives into arms transfers policy, but also mentions the goal of reducing civilian harm, Yousef and Stohl suggested.

Trump also revoked National Security Memorandum 20 (NSM-20) Feb. 21. Announced by the Biden administration in 2024, it expanded on NSM-18 to require "credible and reliable written assurances" that a recipient country would use U.S. weapons "in accordance with international humanitarian law and, as applicable, other international law."

The impact NSM-18 and NSM-20 have had on elevating human rights concerns in U.S. arms transfer decisions is disputed. In a May 2024 report required by NSM-20, the Biden administration said Israel may have violated international humanitarian law in its war on Gaza, but cited a lack of verifiable evidence as reason to continue arms transfers, Reuters reported May 10.—*LIPi SHETTY*

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