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“If We Don’t Sell It, Someone Else Will”: Dependence and Influence in U.S. Arms Transfers

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March 2023

“If We Don’t Sell It, Someone Else Will”: Dependence and Influence in U.S. Arms Transfers

Examining assumptions about dependence and influence in the U.S. security cooperation enterprise.

By Elias Yousif

“If we don’t sell them arms, someone else will,” has become a well-known refrain in the arms trade world, implying that partners cut off from U.S. defense exports will quickly source them from other suppliers. But there is reason to believe that there is far more complexity to the issue than suggested by this simple axiom. Multiple factors shape the cost-benefit analysis of partners considering turning to alternative defense exporters as a result of arms transfer suspensions, curtailments, or conditions imposed by the United States, suggesting a need to reexamine key assumptions underpinning the U.S. security cooperation enterprise.



U.S. provides training to Iraqi forces. Photo by Cpl. Cansin Hardyegritag via DVIDS.

Introduction

The United States remains the world's largest arms exporter, commanding nearly 40 percent of the international arms trade – more than twice than the next closest competitor, Russia.¹ For more than seven decades, this vast military assistance and cooperation enterprise has been among the principal tools the United States has reached for to forge and demonstrate the endurance of international partnerships. Amounting to billions of dollars in arms sales and security assistance each year, American arms transfers are broadly seen by policymakers as vital foreign policy investments that not only support U.S. security interests but also serve as important sources of political influence among foreign recipients.

The perceived centrality of security cooperation in sustaining Washington's international partnerships has resulted in a widely-held aversion to curtailing, conditioning, or suspending foreign arms transfers even in the face of concerns around human rights violations, corruption and diversion, or other indicators of poor governance. Key to this aversion is the fear not only of losing political influence, but also that competitors or adversaries will supplant the United States as the defense partner of choice. Often encapsulated as “if we don't sell them arms, someone else will,” the refrain reflects a fundamental assumption of current U.S. arms sales policy: that partners who are cut off from U.S. arms will seek them from U.S. competitors, creating the risk that they may drift into the spheres of influence of rival governments.

This assumption – that curtailing or exercising conditionality in arms transfers risks eroding U.S. influence in favor of strategic competitors – has helped justify continued arms transfers to governments implicated in a variety of behaviors that may undermine U.S. interests. But despite the broad acceptance of this assumption in the executive branch, Congress, the defense industry, and other sectors, there are compelling reasons to subject the premise to more robust scrutiny. This brief examines the theoretical and practical realities surrounding a foreign security partner's choice to transition, whether partially or in full, to another arms supplier, and the ensuing implications for concepts of influence and leverage stemming from U.S. security cooperation. The brief will then apply these insights to two case studies in which the United States elected to suspend or curtail arms transfers to a foreign recipient and will examine that recipient's subsequent import and alignment choices. The brief concludes with initial findings and suggestions for further research, including potential quantitative studies of global arms transfer data.

Methodology and Purpose

This brief offers a short overview of elements of arms dependency that belie certain assumptions reflected in the “if we don’t sell” axiom. It is not intended to explore all the nuances, data, or case studies required to develop a more expansive analysis. Instead, the brief aims to demonstrate that the topic is worthy of further study, including a more expansive enumeration and review of the theoretical components of dependence, as well as quantitative research using arms transfer data to examine the consequences of arms transfer reductions for recipient behavior.

Information in this brief is derived from desk research and select interviews with experts on arms transfer dependency and on the selected case studies. An initial literature review examined past studies on arms transfer dependency as well as concepts related to arms for influence. Additionally, arms transfer data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s (SIPRI) database on international arms transfers helped inform analysis of the selected cases studies.



Iraqi howitzer. Photo by Spc. Eric Cerami via Flickr.

“If We Don’t Sell” and the Basics of Arms Transfer Dependence Theory

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- An importing state’s decision to transition from one arms supplier to another is based on cost-benefit judgements. A number of structural and practical variables raise the costs of seeking alternative sources of arms.
- The variables that increase the costs associated with transitioning from one arms supplier to another contribute to arms transfer dependency. These variables can range from issues related to international ideological alignments, challenges related to integrating incompatible capabilities, costs of adopting and sustaining new systems, readiness, or limited financial means.
- While states may pursue strategies to mitigate dependence, these strategies must be weighed against the benefits of closer alignment with an external patron.

Because only a handful of states possess the ability to independently meet their defense production needs, most countries must turn to foreign states and manufacturers to source defense articles and services.² This reality forms the fundamental basis of arms transfer “dependency,” whereby a recipient state, by virtue of requiring an external supplier’s support to meet perceived national security needs, creates a level of dependency and, thus, a degree of leverage on the part of the exporter.

The degree of importer dependency is a function of the cost and benefit of the arms relationship perceived by both the importer and exporter. Among the conditions that shape those cost-benefit analyses are:³

- 1. Threat Perception:** The extent to which a recipient government perceives a threat that could make necessary the use of military means, requiring either new arms imports or a high readiness of arms already deployed.

2. **Self-Sufficiency:** The extent to which a recipient state can cover its needs for arms from indigenous production, and/or the rapid start or expansion of domestic arms production.
3. **Diversification:** The extent to which a recipient state has diversified its arms supply among a number of suppliers.
4. **Alternative Suppliers:** The availability to a recipient state of alternative suppliers, which depends on:
 - the number of alternative producers of a given type of arms;
 - the recipient country's financial resources;
 - the recipient country's ideological flexibility;
 - the recipient country's degree of diplomatic isolation; and
 - the ability of the recipient country's forces to convert to new weapon systems.
5. **Parts, Training, Maintenance, and Sustainment:** The extent to which a recipient state is self-sufficient in acquiring or producing spare parts, training and maintenance, overhaul, and repair, and can integrate alternative platforms into existing defense structures.

Each of these factors inform important interest-based calculations that can shape the costs of seeking alternative sources of arms.

For example, threats that importers perceive of as needing to be addressed by military means are clearly a necessary condition for dependency; without a need for military equipment and services, severing an arms relationship would come at little meaningful cost to the importer.⁴ But the nature of threat perceptions can also have significant bearing on dependence and the potential leverage of an exporter. A state that perceives physical military threats as likely, imminent, and severe in magnitude is likely to incur a greater cost in security terms from any rupture with a supplier that undercuts readiness. On the other hand, a country for which security threats seem remote and of only marginal severity would likely incur fewer financial, operational, and readiness costs by transitioning to another supplier.

Another factor shaping an importer's degree of dependency is the availability of alternate sources, both actual or potential, of necessary defense articles and services. This could include the capacity to replace imports with domestic production or the availability of other external suppliers. Here again, certain factors will shape the availability of these choices. Does the state possess the technical, industrial, or human capital to quickly ramp up domestic production? Are the capabilities available from other suppliers? Do those suppliers coordinate their policies? Are substitute capabilities available? Are alternatives financially viable? In many cases, these factors can prove prohibitive or at least costly, helping to explain the decision to import from the original supplier in the first place.

The type of capability under consideration will also impact the likely availability of alternate supplies. Small arms and light weapons, for example, are relatively simple to produce, can

be easily made in large quantities, are manufactured all over the globe, and are generally comparable in capabilities.⁵ Compare that to advanced fighter aircraft or other highly sophisticated systems, and not only does the market become much smaller, but the likelihood that such a system can be produced domestically also shrinks.⁶ Moreover, these advanced systems are less likely to be interoperable with or functionally comparable to those of competing suppliers.

When it comes to sourcing from alternate external suppliers, factors beyond simple market forces play a role. Arms relationships are commonly seen as indicators of international alliances and partnerships, reflecting an alignment of interests between supplier and importer. In that context, supply networks can be partially dependent on ideology, as was often the case during the Cold War.⁷ Increasing multipolarity has changed those dynamics, but alignment still has a notable bearing on the menu of suppliers an importer might be able to select from.



U.S. arms transfers to Ukraine. Photo by Senior Airman Christopher Quail via DVIDS.

Additionally, for importers that do wish to look elsewhere for a particular capability, simply finding a comparable or alternative source may be just the first challenge. A new platform will likely also require new systemic chains of supply, sustainment, and maintenance, as well as new processes to develop interoperability between the new system and those already in service. In some cases, interoperability between systems sourced from different suppliers is either prohibitively expensive or simply not possible. Accordingly, integration efforts are no small task, especially if doctrines, structures, and sustainment systems reflect those of a state's historical patrons.⁸

Similarly, pivoting to an alternate supplier could risk jeopardizing existing supply relationships that would still be necessary for sustaining systems already in service. If an importer's transition to another supplier ruptures the relationship with its former patron, it could jeopardize sustainment and maintenance packages that are essential to keeping highly technical capabilities functioning, undercutting readiness.⁹

Dependency is also shaped by financial considerations, especially in the context of military assistance relationships that sustain arms imports. Countries that receive financing or grants to acquire weapons systems from a particular exporter will face added financial challenges trying to source a comparable capability from elsewhere, especially if alternate suppliers do not offer the same levels of assistance.¹⁰ This is especially true for countries that have become accustomed to highly advanced and expensive systems that are made financially viable only by long-standing military assistance relationships with external partners. It may even be the case that a country cannot independently finance its defense sector without external support, adding to dependency.¹¹ Similarly, co-production or offset agreements may also add to the costs of transitioning platforms, especially if these reflect significant domestic investments on the part of the importer.

While states can seek to mitigate dependence by diversifying their defense supply, relying on multiple different systems imported from different sources creates its own challenges. It may require more specialization and separate training and maintenance systems, meaning the importer will miss out on practical efficiencies that can be gained from the streamlining of systems, practices, and logistics.¹² Moreover, many countries select exporters specifically to build interoperability with a patron. Turning to an alternative supplier could jeopardize, both practically and diplomatically, the potential of the importer to operate alongside its preferred partners.

Finally, the decision to look to alternative sources for arms will depend, in part, on the burden of the conditions being placed on transfers from the original exporter as well as the scale and scope of any possible suspensions. Onerous conditions that are fundamentally at odds with a recipient's core national interests may alter an importer's cost-benefit analysis in favor of seeking alternatives. Similarly, broad and comprehensive suspensions, such as an arms embargo, could leave the importer with no choice but to look to alternatives, assuming the actor is unwilling to alter its censored behavior. On the other hand, tailored conditions or narrow suspensions are less likely to tip the scale of cost in favor of seeking alternatives.

Ultimately, importers have the ability to sever a defense relationship or transition from one exporter to another. Indeed, there are a number of reasons why a country may see some benefit to diversifying its sources of materiel, including to mitigate dependency. Nevertheless, those choices come with certain costs, some of which may prove prohibitive, acceptable, or mitigatable. In short, these choices have far more complexities than supposed by the refrain "if we don't sell it to them, someone else will."

Arms Dependency, Influence, and U.S. Security Cooperation

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Arms transfer dependence and concepts around “arms for influence” are closely related; some level of dependence is arguably necessary to form the basis of influence.
- Assumptions embodied by the “if we don’t sell, someone else will” theory are, to varying degrees, at odds with the idea that exporting states derive influence through arms transfers and security cooperation.
- “If we don’t sell, someone else will” suggests a level of fragility in U.S. security partnerships and raises questions about how the United States should consider the risk associated with imposing conditions on or curtailing arms transfers with certain partners.

In addition to enabling partners to meet shared security threats, one of the principal aims of U.S. arms transfers is to cultivate influence with importing states.¹³ The term influence is broad, but can be generally understood as the development of relationships, sway, leverage, or soft power that can be used to shape the behavior of a recipient state.

Accordingly, the concepts of arms transfer dependence and influence are closely related. If influence is the “manipulation of the arms transfer relationship in order to coerce or induce a recipient-state to conform its policy or actions to the desires of the supplier-state,” it requires some degree of dependency created by scarcity in the availability of arms.¹⁴ If an importer could easily satisfy its defense needs from any number of alternative sources, then arms would not offer any meaningful leverage to the exporter.

But beyond the economics of influence and dependence, it is also worth considering how “if we don’t sell, someone else will” reflects the nature of strategic alignment between the United

States and its security cooperation partners. Arms relationships are not purely commercial, particularly for superpowers like the United States.¹⁵ Instead, arms relationships are meant to connote strategic alignment between the exporter and recipient – signals of commitments from both sides as to a shared set of interests, with varying degrees of scope. Moreover, for the United States in particular, arms transfers are intended to be a gesture of Washington’s commitment to the security of the recipient beyond the immediate capability in question.

As such, the “if we don’t sell, someone else will” axiom – which implies that current or potential U.S. security partners could easily turn to U.S. adversaries for arms – betrays a concerning superficiality in arms transfers as a mechanism for building durable partnerships or influence. If the imposition of certain conditions would result in a nominal partner looking elsewhere for arms, it’s possible that the relationship was foundationally weak. Moreover, such fragility may imply a more general misalignment of interests and perspectives that could undermine the utility, from a U.S. perspective, of improving the defense capabilities of that partner.



Filipino and U.S. soldier during joint military exercises. Photo by Sgt. Jennessa Davey via DVIDS.

Obviously, there is an enormous amount of nuance to these ideas in practice. The degree of alignment, character of the partnership, burden of conditions, quantity or character of systems potentially being withheld, and the landscape of the global arms market all play a role in an importer's decision to consider alternative sources of armaments. Moreover, even close partners have and derive benefit from a diverse set of arms relationships with multiple exporters. Nevertheless, for an enterprise that the United States frequently insists is central to developing meaningful international partnerships, "if we don't sell, someone else will" is conceptually at odds with the notion of arms transfers as a source of leverage.

Additionally, it is worth considering the actual strategic risks stemming from the transition of an erstwhile partner to another arms exporter. Implicit in the "if we don't sell" concept is the idea that a partner's transition from the U.S. to another exporter would place that partner in the orbit of a potential rival, elevating the global influence of a peer-competitor. However, it seems odd that the degree of influence that the rival supplier might earn from a new arms relationship is assumed to be so effective compared to the known volatility in the influence experienced by the United States in its arms relationships.

This assumption is especially troubling in the context of the value compromises the United States has made to preserve arms relationships with some of its partners. If the influence a rival derives from its arms transfers is to be just as unpredictable as that enjoyed by the United States, it should cast doubt on the need for Washington to compromise on its human rights, civilian protection, and good governance imperatives for the sake of preserving a risky partnership.¹⁶

In other words, assumptions in the current paradigm may inflate assessments of the strategic and practical damage to U.S. interests of a partner's transition to another supplier. In this context, the risks and potential benefits of severing an arms relationship with a partner and disassociating from their behavior may be deeply skewed. For partners that are conflictual, have a misalignment of interests with the U.S., and engage in behaviors contrary to U.S. interest, a transition to a different supplier may create many similar burdens for the new patron while alleviating them for the United States.

Assumptions that inflate the perception of risk associated with a partner's transition to another supplier can incentivize a "race to the bottom," in which the United States perpetually seeks to minimize the perceived burden of security cooperation conditions for the sake of preserving a relationship that is neither meeting U.S. security needs nor aligned with American values.



U.S. and Pakistani F-16 jets. Photo by Christopher Parr via DVIDS.

Arms Transfer Dependency in Practice

The complexity of arms transfer dependence and concepts underpinning “if we don’t sell, someone else will” is best illustrated by examining real world cases. This section briefly looks at two cases in which the United States curbed its arms transfers with a partner country – Pakistan and Turkey, respectively – and provides a short assessment of the decisions’ overall impact on the partner’s import decisions and broader bilateral relations.

Pakistan

The U.S. security partnership with Pakistan has long been unsteady, with notable peaks and valleys in U.S. arms transfers. Variance in the depth and scale of security cooperation between the two countries offers some useful illustrations of variables that shape dependency. While Islamabad has reacted to the fragility of its security cooperation relationship with Washington by seeking to diversify its suppliers, the makeup of international orders, challenges in capability substitution, and issues of prestige and alignment have all lessened, to some degree, Pakistan’s willingness to pivot entirely from its partnership with the United States.

U.S security cooperation with Pakistan dates to the country’s founding in 1947 – a time when early Cold War concerns in Washington about expanding Soviet influence in the region dovetailed with Islamabad’s fear of perceived threats from neighboring India.¹⁷ But the relationship was a turbulent one, as reflected in the volatile nature of U.S. security assistance over the interceding decades. At moments of strain, the United States would cut or suspend assistance, often as a result of restrictions created by law, most notably following revelations about Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program and in the aftermath of military coups.¹⁸

Nevertheless, other security imperatives continued to catalyze investments in the defense partnership. Afghanistan, in particular, would repeatedly be a source of shared interest that would jumpstart arms transfers, as was the case following both the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and, later, the post-9/11 U.S. invasion. But in both cases, as Afghanistan eventually diminished in importance for U.S. policymakers, disagreements between Washington and Islamabad that had been temporarily set aside again became sources of tension that were reflected in declining arms transfers and military assistance.



Pakistani F-16. Photo by Rob Schleiffert via Flickr.

This instability in the arms partnership did lead Pakistan diversify its supply as a matter of national security. However, the ideological bifurcation of the international system during the Cold War limited Islamabad's options; in the context of the hegemonic rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union, transitions between camps were strategically and practically difficult. Accordingly, even during times when U.S. assistance was curtailed, Pakistan's imports from the Soviet Union, the only comparable exporter in terms of sophistication of capabilities, remained negligible.¹⁹

Conversely, Pakistan was able to consistently turn to China for arms, with notable spikes during times of U.S. suspensions.²⁰ But imports from Beijing were not one-for-one substitutes for U.S. arms. Throughout the Cold War, Chinese exports to Pakistan were largely made up of small arms, light weapons, and other less advanced capabilities.²¹

That dynamic has changed in recent years, as China advanced the sophistication of its defense exports and has been able to offer increasingly modern platforms as alternatives to those available from the United States.²² But even with deepening ties and opportunities, there is nuance in the Pakistan-China relationship. While China is an increasingly important security partner for Pakistan, certain U.S. systems remain central to Islamabad's defense.²³ In particular, American F-16's, originally made available during the Reagan administration, hold important practical and symbolic value for Pakistan. Beyond the tactical utility of these jets and their potential benefits compared to those sourced from Beijing, the F-16's are also points of national pride and seen as representative of Islamabad's gravity in the world of global affairs and U.S. foreign policy.²⁴ In other words, despite repeated suspension of U.S. military assistance, Pakistan has continued to prioritize its fleet of American F-16's, and has made notable, albeit tactically narrow, concessions to preserve a level of relations with Washington that would facilitate continued supply or sustainment of the aircraft.²⁵

Still, Islamabad has long seen China as a useful means for mitigating its arms dependence on the United States. Since the 1960s, China has been the largest source of Pakistan's military hardware, accounting for more than 40 percent of the country's defense imports.²⁶ Recent co-production agreements for Chinese JF-17 aircraft, the purchase of other capabilities, and clandestine efforts to collaboratively reverse engineer U.S. platforms all indicate an increasingly close partnership centered on high end systems.²⁷

On the whole, Pakistan's dependence on U.S. arms and the degree of influence Washington could derive therein have always been limited. During the Cold War, Pakistan's imports illustrated how issues of ideology and international order can constrain the availability of alternative arms sources. Similarly, limitations in the technological sophistication of systems on offer by countries like China illustrate the challenges in sourcing comparable systems when arms are suspended. On the other hand, the scope of Washington's suspensions, the instability of the partnership generally, and a ramping up of defense ties between the United States and India led Pakistan to alter the cost-benefit calculus of expanding its arms imports from other sources, especially China.

Issues of dependence and influence derived from arms in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship have also had to contend with the vast divergence of perceived interests between Washington and Islamabad. On issues ranging from Afghanistan, China, and India to nuclear non-proliferation, the disparity in perspectives on core strategic concerns was large enough to create additional incentives for Pakistan to mitigate its defense dependency and to wrest itself from U.S. influence. Beijing, on the other hand, shares a broader relationship with Islamabad that is thought to contribute to its influence in Pakistan, including expanding commercial, financial, and diplomatic alignments.²⁸

Turkey

Disputes between the United States and Turkey have often been reflected in declines in security cooperation between the two countries. As such, Turkey has sought to limit its arms dependency on the West by seeking out alternative defense relationships. But Ankara's systemic integration of U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) standard platforms as well as the strategic benefits it enjoys from alliances with its Western partners have constrained its ability to pivot substantially away from its conventional exporters. Accordingly, Turkey's security cooperation relationship with the United States illustrates several key arms dependency concepts, including international alignment challenges as well as doctrinal and infrastructural barriers to the adoption of incompatible defense systems.

Turkey has been a close U.S. security partner for decades – in fact, it was a military assistance package for the Turkish government that amounted to one of the first acts of Truman Doctrine and U.S. Cold War containment strategy.²⁹ But despite shared Cold War concerns

and Turkey's 1952 ascension to NATO, disagreements have repeatedly strained security ties between the two countries and have resulted in several military assistance and security cooperation suspensions.

Following the end of the Second World War, military cooperation between Washington and Ankara grew significantly, including through U.S. use of Turkish bases and the temporary stationing of nuclear armed missiles in the country.³⁰ But Turkey's rivalry with fellow NATO member Greece and their disputes over Cyprus damaged U.S.-Turkish ties, eventually resulting in a congressionally imposed arms embargo in 1975 following Turkish occupation of Cypriot territory.³¹ Though it was eventually repealed, the embargo illustrated the disparity in perspectives between Washington and Ankara on a number of key issues. While other exigencies largely kept arms transfers flowing, moments of particular divergence were reflected in security cooperation declines.

In the post-Cold War period, other disagreements emerged that would again hamper security cooperation, particularly over Kurdish issues, which on several occasions resulted in curtailments of U.S. arms transfers to Ankara.³² Those disagreements and others eventually resulted in Turkey's decision to purchase Russian S-400 air defense systems over Washington's objections. As a result, Ankara was ejected from the multi-nation F-35 joint strike fighter program.³³

Despite ups and downs in the partnership, the United States has remained Turkey's largest arms supplier. Notably, even declines in transfers from Washington over policy disagreements did not result in a dramatic uptick in imports from American rivals, and Ankara has overwhelmingly imported from other NATO countries when it could not turn to the United States.³⁴

Additionally, coordination among other Western arms exporters offers a practical example of how alignment can limit arms import choices. It has been common for fellow NATO members to align their policies of arms transfers to Turkey with one another, mitigating the chance that Turkey could simply turn to another comparable partner to source an equivalent system. For example, following Turkish operations in Northern Syria against Kurdish groups, a number of EU countries suspended arms transfers to Ankara, while the EU foreign ministers agreed to adopt "strong national positions regarding their arms export policy to Turkey."³⁵ Because Turkey has shaped its defense doctrine and infrastructure around NATO systems, the coordination among Western allies in suspension has diminished the menu of options available to Turkey for sourcing from alternative suppliers.

Additionally, though Turkey did make the controversial decision to purchase S-400 air defense systems from Russia over the objections of the United States and other fellow NATO members, the fallout offers some useful insights into arms dependency. Despite being removed from a joint-production arrangement for the fifth generation F-35 joint strike fighter, Turkey did not quickly attempt to pivot away from American manufacturers and towards competitor

aircraft. Instead, Ankara has pressed Washington to proceed with a stalled F-16 deal and has even refrained from activating the Russian air defense system for fear of further sanction and jeopardizing aircraft sales from the West.³⁶ Though Ankara has threatened to turn to Russian Su-35 jets instead, many see this as a bargaining tactic, especially since Turkey has invested so heavily in the production and sustainment infrastructure for the F-16.

Turkey's dilemma reflects both issues of international alignment and integration in arms dependence. The S-400 deal damaged Ankara's standing in its most critical alliance structure and defense industrial source in NATO. It has since sought to mitigate the damage of that decision and maintain security relations with its key suppliers within the bloc.³⁷



Guided-missile destroyer USS The Sullivans (DDG 68) sails next to Turkish Navy corvette TCG Burgazada (F-513). Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Kevin Frus via DVIDS.

The deal also highlighted the degree to which Turkey's defense infrastructure has been built around integration with NATO specific capabilities, including sustainment and domestic maintenance frameworks. Indeed, Turkey is the largest foreign operator of the F-16, and a transition to an alternative, even a European option, would require costly reworking of logistics and maintenance operations.³⁸ Accordingly, even the import of S-400's did not mark a watershed moment for Turkish defense imports. Turkey has largely been focused on mitigating the fallout from the decision and trying to ensure consistency in its defense pipeline.

Despite the continued relevance of the United States and other Western partners on Turkey's defense sector, it is unclear what meaningful influence has been generated through security cooperation activities. Turkey has continued to take actions that are consistently at odds with U.S. interests, including destabilizing activities in Iraq and Syria, deepening relations with Moscow, escalatory behavior in the Mediterranean vis-à-vis Greece, and obstructionist positions on NATO issues.³⁹ In other words, it is difficult to assess how even nominal dependency is shaping Ankara's behaviors or policies in a way that benefits U.S. interests.

Still, Turkey has increasingly sought to mitigate military dependency through the development of its own defense industrial sector, with some notable successes. The severe military supply crunch endured during the U.S. arms embargo of 1975-1978 spurred investment in domestic capabilities that would continue even after the embargo's suspension.⁴⁰ In the decades since, Turkey's defense sector has grown substantially, making Ankara among the world's most significant arms exporters and reducing the share of its defense equipment sourced abroad from 70 percent to 30 percent.⁴¹ Still, such measures of dependence mitigation do not directly lend to the influence of American competitors, nor do they eliminate dependence entirely.⁴²



Turkish F-16. Photo by NATO via Flickr.

Conclusion

The feasibility of transitioning from one defense supplier to another is shaped by a number of factors, many of which are beyond the control of the importing state. No matter the circumstances, such transitions come with practical and strategic costs that the importer must weigh against the benefit of a new supplier. At times, the risks associated with dependency are significant enough to warrant costly transitions for importers. At other times, those costs could prove prohibitive. In either case, the thinking reflected in the “if we don’t sell, someone else will” axiom fails to capture the complexities and nuances of arms import decision making in the context of a historically dependent relationship.

Accordingly, in moments when the United States is faced with an arms transfer dilemma, policymakers should consider the degree of dependence the importing partner has on American exports, especially when those decisions are at odds with American values and other non-security imperatives. Additionally, such an assessment could also help tailor specific conditions for arms transfers to ensure they maximize their potential to shape recipient behavior or compliance.

Concepts surrounding U.S. arms transfers, arms dependence, and arms for influence shape critical elements of the U.S. security cooperation enterprise and are worthy of more in-depth study. Further research could include a more expansive review and assessment of dependency theory and its real-world manifestations, as well as the actual political influence wielded by arms transfers. Additionally, the subject would benefit from large scale quantitative assessments that evaluate how declines in U.S. arms transfers shape defense decisions of partner countries. While some studies have used data analysis to examine elements of arms transfer dependency, a more tailored approach could focus on the unique considerations of the United States and its specific objectives for security cooperation.⁴³

Additional factors unique to the United States would also be worthy of more in-depth study. For example, cost and bureaucracy, two factors said to be more onerous in U.S. arms transfers than transfers from other suppliers, are often cited as undermining the appeal of U.S. security cooperation on the part of potential importers. Examining how these realities shape importer decision making compared to other factors, including more substantive conditions and compliance issues, could be of particular value to U.S. policymakers.

The field would also benefit from research that assesses the net impact on U.S. interests from partners transitioning to another supplier. While much of the popular discussion on the subject tends to focus on the damage such transitions may have on U.S. strategic interests, little research has considered the potential benefits the United States might accrue from curtailments or suspensions. Such benefits may include reputational dividends from distancing Washington from the behavior of a certain partner, the freeing up of resources to invest in more stable security partnerships, or underscoring the credibility of U.S. conditions in its security cooperation enterprise.

“If we don’t sell” reflects a broadly accepted set of assumptions that have long underpinned a relatively cautious attitude towards reducing U.S. security cooperation with risky partners. Concerns that any declines in or imposition of conditions on arms transfers could lead partners to pivot to alternative sources have acted as a bulwark against greater discretion in American security cooperation. Accordingly, enhancing understandings of how arms transfer conditions, curtailments, or suspensions shape both the decision making calculus of recipient states and U.S. foreign influence could help contextualize and sharpen U.S. security cooperation policy to ensure it is maximizing American interests and more fully aligning with American values.



U.S. arms transfers to Afghanistan. Photo by Richard Bumgardner via DVIDS.

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