Research Proposal: American and Russian Competition for Weapons Sales in the Middle East

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19 January 2020

Introduction

Weapons sales are an important and powerful tool in national security practice. Most obviously, they make a strong economic impact by creating high-tech jobs and producing cutting-edge research and development that can be applied in non-military sectors. However, weapons sales can make a larger impact on national security by fostering strong state-to-state relationships and building partner capabilities. Customer states have increasing freedom to choose their weapons suppliers, which is upsetting long-running patron-client relations in the international system. This trend, combined with increasing Russian presence and influence in the Middle East, makes the study of Russian weapons sales in the Middle East a worthwhile research endeavor. In this proposal, I will further make the case for the important role that weapons sales play in national security practice. I will discuss the ongoing competition between the United States and Russia for the Middle Eastern arms market and explore possible research questions to be answered in my final research project. Next, I will explain the importance of such research on American and Israeli national security. Finally, I will discuss a few potential sources, followed by a structure for my research project.

Role of Weapons Sales in National Security

The economic benefits to weapons sales are obvious and might easily distract the novice national security analyst away from the defense benefits. Certainly, the high-tech nature of today’s weapons and the size of the market ($67.9 billion in 2019 US sales - Defense News) is indicative of their economic importance. A 2017 sale of F-15 fighter aircraft to Qatar, for example, was reported to have created 60,000 American jobs (STL Today). Additionally, many important technologies in use outside of the military had their genesis in defense research and development. Further, many arms producers, such as aircraft builder Boeing, also produce similarly high-tech goods for the civilian market. For example, Boeing is also America’s top competitor for civil aviation sales, and no doubt its export of military aircraft help its ability to offer the best product in overseas civil airliner competitions.

In addition to these economic benefits, weapons sales have an even greater impact on the defense pillar of national security. High-end weapons producers, such as the United States and Russia, are able to extend their military superiority to their security partners by exporting these advanced systems. As long as patron-client security interests remain aligned, these sales can act as a force multiplier for the producing country. For example, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates both employed their US-produced F-16s in combat operations over Libya and operations to defeat the so-called Islamic State, hitting targets assigned by the US-led planning teams. In addition to the diplomatic benefits of having these two Arab countries actively participating in coalition operations, this arrangement allowed the United States to achieve the same military effects as it would gain by employing more of its own aircraft and munitions.

Weapons sales to client states may also create a stronger dependence on the patron, ultimately increasing the patron’s influence over the client. The decision to buy a new fighter aircraft is a significant one, not least because of the cost of the aircraft themselves, but also the high financial cost of associated weaponry, training and infrastructure. Additionally, purchasing countries often must adapt their force structures to best absorb and operate these aircraft and their associated systems. These commitments bind the purchaser to the producer for decades of after-sales support, munitions replenishment, and upgrades to both training and the equipment itself. All US Government-managed weapons sales, known officially as Foreign Military Sales or, simply, “FMS,” are governed by contracts stipulating that the weapons will be used only in “legitimate” self-defense or in furtherance of UN-sanctioned military activity. Consequently, the United States has used the threat and actual withholding of follow-on support to apply political pressure on its weapons buyers. The success rate of such pressure tactics has been disputed (Rounds), but it remains an attractive reason to win a sale over other producers.

Weapons sales can also be leveraged to expose vast numbers of the buyer’s military personnel to the producer’s nationals, its own country, and its way of life. The United States methodically takes advantage of the resultant opportunities to wield soft power. The typical purchase of a new American fighter aircraft platform often involves the exchange of thousands of personnel throughout the lifetime of that aircraft, which can last for more than 40 years. This can include training hundreds of the buyer’s aircrews, maintenance, and support personnel. The US Defense Language Institute-English Language Center (DLI) at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, exists solely to teach foreign military members English in preparation for their technical training on US weapons systems or professional education at American military institutions. DLI deliberately maximizes these trainees’ exposure to American culture via field trips and the assignment of a sponsoring American family in order to foster a favorable attitude towards America and Americans.

Selling advanced weaponry also provides opportunities to reduce the unit cost for the producing country’s military. US law stipulates that original, non-recurring research and development costs for major weapons systems must be passed on to FMS buyers (DSCA). Today, budgeting for the development of many new US weapons systems is accomplished with FMS in mind and the F-35 was planned from the beginning to be a multi-national effort, with costs spread to many buyers. Additionally, sales provide opportunities for the selling country to make improvements based on performance information gleaned from buyers’ employment of these systems in combat. For example, Israel employed the F-15 in combat extensively over Lebanon beginning in 1979, whereas the American F-15s had not flown combat missions until Desert Storm in 1991. It stands to reason that the United States would be able to leverage the Israelis’ combat experience in the F-15 in the interim.

American and Russian Arms Sales in the Middle East

The United States and Russia are two primary arms suppliers in the Middle East. European, Chinese, and South American manufacturers also enjoy significant market share, but the scope of this research project will be limited to American and Russian sales in the region. There are several reasons behind this limitation. First, this project will primarily explore the defense utility of weapons sales and not the economic benefits. Arguably, the United States gains much (but not all) of the military benefit of a sale when the buyer chooses a Western European competitor. The UK, Germany, and France, all NATO allies, are top arms exporters and most systems they sell would also orient the buyer towards NATO in a manner similar to the processes described above. If US operations in Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria/Iraq are an indication, any new near-term US coalition activity would be associated with a NATO operation. Therefore, arms provided by NATO allies would enable nearly the same level of interoperability as that offered by US weapons.

Conversely, sales awarded to Russia are generally damaging to US national security. While the United States has made it known that it seeks to withdraw its presence from the Middle East, no doubt it wishes to maintain influence. Russian arms sales to the region displace that influence. Moreover, purchases from Russia provide a benefit to the Russian arms industry that could affect NATO’s edge in the European theater. Finally, as the arms supplier of choice to Iran and Syria, Israel’s primary state-level threats, the Russian arms industry benefits at the expense of Israel’s national security. It is for these reasons that a study of American and Russian competition for arms sales in the Middle East is useful.

Methodology

It will be useful to develop a side-by-side comparison of the two countries’ weapons sales programs in the Middle East. Are there differences in the stated purposes of each? Does Russia primarily seek economic benefit to the sales or is Moscow also seeking to maximize political advantage? Are sales handled differently by these two competitors? For example, FMS is well known for its “Total Package Approach,” that offers initial and long-term support and training with any major sale. The United States has learned that this philosophy is the best way to provide long-term defense capabilities. Does Russia have something similar or does it merely sell the equipment? My research will attempt to answer these questions.

It will also be a worthwhile endeavor to conduct a few case studies of recent successful Russian arms sales to Middle Eastern countries and analyze the reasons behind their success. Notably, Russia sold advanced Su-35 fighter aircraft to Egypt in 2019 in spite of heavy pressure from the United States and threats of economic sanctions. Turkey is famously purchasing the S-400 anti-aircraft system from Russia in spite of threats of sanctions and expulsion from the exclusive F-35 membership club. Most recently, it appears that Iraq is on the cusp of purchasing S-400s. Finally, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two long-time, nearly exclusive buyers of Western military equipment, have flirted with the possibility of buying aircraft and air defense equipment from Russia. My research project will attempt to exhaustively examine the available evidence to determine why Russia has seemingly been successful. Ultimately, this research could help the United States better understand an apparent emerging trend of some Middle Eastern countries to prefer Russian weapons over American arms. Further, I hope to offer tangible recommendations for the United States to compete better against Russia in the Middle East weapons markets.

Research Questions

Owing to the purposes described above, the most likely research questions to be answered are as follows:

1. What factors are responsible for Russia’s seeming success against the United States in recent weapons sales competitions?
2. How can the United States better compete against Russia in Middle Eastern weapons sales?

Sources

I seek to leverage primary sources when at all possible and, when not available, to utilize secondary sources. There is abundant legislation governing American arms sales, which is all publicly available. Additionally, the United States Department of Defense publishes many of its FMS policies and procedures online. To fill in any gaps, I will request phone interviews with key officials having knowledge about American weapons sales strategy. I do not expect that primary sources on weapons sales internal deliberations in Russia or Middle Eastern countries to be as readily available, nor do I expect to be granted interviews with government officials. However, the Kremlin does periodically publish weapons export strategy information, which will be examined closely. Additionally, some full-text media interviews with executives of Russia’s arms producers have been published and these will be analyzed as well. I expect that buyers’ deliberations will not be as readily available and secondary sources will have to be utilized for much of my analysis on these subjects.

Structure

The structure of this research project will likely undergo minor modifications until publication, but the following is a general outline:

* Introduction
  + Role of Weapons Sales in National Security
  + Research Questions and Hypotheses
  + Value of the Research Project
  + Structure of the Project
* Chapter 1: Analysis of US Weapons Sales Programs
* Chapter 2: Analysis of Russian Weapons Sales Programs
* Chapter 3: Case Study – Sale of Su-35 Aircraft to Egypt
* Chapter 4: Case Study – Sale of S-400 Air Defense System to Turkey
* Chapter 5: Case Study – Iraq’s Interest in Russian Air Defense Systems
* Findings
* Conclusions

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