*Weapons Sales in the Middle East: An Examination of US and Russian Strategy*

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Introduction

Weapons sales are an important aspect of national security strategy for both the United States and Russia. While the economic gains are important, the defense benefits are far greater. This essay will explore the strategic aspects of American and Russian weapons sales. To keep the scope manageable and to provide tangible examples, the paper will primarily focus on sales to the Middle East region. The paper will discuss differences between American and Russian weapons sales strategies, followed by some conclusions on areas for improvement on both sides. But first, a review of the role of weapons sales in national security is needed.

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 - (Mehta)) 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 (Boeing Wins $6.2 Billion Qatar Contract for 36 F-15s). 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 helps its ability to offer the best products 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 (Schanz). While much has been written about Saudi Arabia’s inability to convert an investment of tens of billions of dollars in military expenditures into real strategic capabilities that fully capitalize on IT-RMA (see Exum and Ostovar, for example), the real advances in some Arab countries to build tactical and limited operational capabilities has been mostly overlooked. While the Saudi and Emirati participation in the conflict in Yemen has highlighted targeting, intelligence, and planning shortfalls, what has largely gone unnoticed is the Arab states’ abilities to project airpower and hit targets with precision-guided munitions while sustaining minimal losses. America’s Arab partners first tested these advances in the coalition operations to defeat the so-called Islamic State (Schanz) and then applied them in both Yemen and Libya. Certainly, the US defense planning efforts should treat the Arab states’ acquisition of these capabilities as an offset. While the traditional model of arms sales to the region perhaps saw a deterrent value in simply providing the equipment, today’s strategies need to take into account that some of these clients have at least minimal capability to employ highly advanced fighter aircraft and weaponry.

Another strategic role for weapons sales is that they can strengthen the client’s 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 (Warren).

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 (Non-Recurring Costs and Waivers). 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 Approach to Weapons Sales

Information on American weapons export strategy is widely available in a variety of documents, such as the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the President’s Conventional Arms Transfer Policy. Arms exports are governed by legislation such as the Foreign Assistance Act and the Arms Export Control Act (AECA). Additional details on US policy can be gleaned from public testimony by Administration officials involved in weapons sales.

The National Security Strategy describes the importance of strengthening partnerships and alliances, but largely leaves it up to subordinate documents to determine how this will be accomplished. The National Defense Strategy provides requisite detail. It outlines three primary ‘lines of effort,’ for defending the United States:

* First, rebuilding military readiness as we build a more lethal Joint Force;
* Second, strengthening alliances as we attract new partners; and
* Third, reforming the Department’s business practices for greater performance and affordability. (Mattis)

The second line of effort, “strengthening alliances as we attract new partners,” is the area in which arms exports operates. In order to carry out this line of effort, the NDS prescribes activities such as encouraging “effective investment in modernizing [partners’] defense capabilities… greater defense cooperation,” and an emphasis on interoperability: “In consultation with Congress and the Department of State, the Department of Defense will prioritize requests for U.S. military equipment sales, accelerating foreign partner modernization and ability to integrate with U.S. forces” (Mattis).

Administrations from both political parties have emphasized the important role played by weapons exports in national security by publishing Presidential policies on the subject. President Obama’s strategy was outlined in Presidential Policy Directive/PPD-27, published in 2014, while President Trump, in 2018, issued the “National Security Presidential Memorandum Regarding U.S. Conventional Arms Transfer Policy.” Both documents are remarkably similar, emphasizing the important role of arms sales in boosting US and partner national security, strengthening relationships, promoting interoperability, developing influence, creating access, and enabling burden sharing. The Trump Administration’s policy uniquely signals a role of weapons exports in great power competition: “In making arms transfer decisions, the executive branch shall account for…the likelihood of the transfer reducing ally and partner dependence on United States adversaries” (Trump). Both Administrations’ policies highlight the importance of exercising responsibility in weapons exports, describing the imperative of avoiding sales that may foster instability, enable transnational organized crime, endanger the compromise of sensitive US technology, risk proliferating weapons of mass destruction, or be used to violate universal human rights.

The Congressional testimonies on June 15, 2017, of two senior national security officials who were both deeply involved in the US weapons exports arena provide rich additional insights. The first witness, Vice Admiral Joseph Rixey was serving as the director of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, which establishes and leads the US Government in implementation of US weapons export policy. He was joined by Ambassador Tina Kaidanow, acting Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs in testimony before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, US House Foreign Affairs Committee. In his testimony, Admiral Rixey summarized US weapons sales strategy into three main objectives: the imperative of mutual benefit for the United States and importing country, the importance of safeguarding US sensitive technology, and the responsibility to avoid sales that could result in violation of human rights. Rixey explained the importance of the total package approach, a longstanding practice in US arms exports that ensures customers are provided not just with the weapon systems, but with training, spares packages, maintenance, and logistics arrangements. Such procedures are in place to provide partners with long-term military capabilities, not just equipment that may not end up being used to its full potential.

Russian Approach

There is not as much information publicly available on Russia’s arms sales strategies or its procedures. There are some think-tank analyses of Russian weapons exports and official statements that are helpful in reconstructing an overall framework. Additionally, much can be gleaned from public statements from the Kremlin and media interviews with officials and Russian arms industry executives. The material available indicates that the economic driver for arms sales is much stronger for Russia than the United States. The United States and Russia compete primarily for the same markets—Asia-Pacific and the Middle East—with the former being slightly more lucrative than the latter. Russia attracts clients seeking to avoid the end-use constraints that come with buying American products. It also offers equipment at lower cost that gets the job done, which mirrors the old Soviet “techno-indifferent” culture. While the United States bundles its equipment with training and logistics, Russia has recognized that its clients seek such support and have committed to developing the capability to provide it.

Like the United States, Russia also sees both geopolitical and economic benefits to weapons sales, though the economic advantages are relatively more significant to Russia than the United States. Export of natural resources still figures heavily in the Russian economy, and defense equipment production is one of Russia’s few high-technology industries. It provides employment for 2.5 million people, which is 800,000 more than in the United States. While these numbers represent only 3% of the Russian workforce, they comprise one third of Russia’s manufacturing jobs. Historically, weapons exports have also kept production lines open when domestic demand slowed down (Connolly and Sendstad).

Arms exports have been an important element of Russian foreign policy since the Soviet era: “[p]olitical goals were the dominant factor when the decision to export conventional arms was taken” (Kirshin). Connolly and Sendstad cite Moscow’s aims today for its arms exports: “supporting its image as a global power, maintaining an independent foreign policy, expanding

its influence in the regions to which it is able to export arms, and initiating and strengthening

defence relations… in 2012, President Putin stated that arms exports were ‘an effective instrument for advancing [Russia’s] national interests, both political and economic’ (Connolly and Sendstad). In December 2013, Dmitry Rogozin, Deputy Prime Minister, went as far as to say that “Russia’s arms sales are the most important element of Moscow’s relations with other countries” (Borshchevskaya).

Although some analysts posit that a Russian strategy is to sell to customers that the United States avoids (Connolly and Sendstad), the facts are more nuanced. More likely, the importers look to Russian weapons in order to diversify their arsenals or avoid the end-use restrictions that come with American arms. An executive of Rostec, a Russian government-owned corporation involved in the production and sales of defense equipment, stated in a November 2019 interview, “Many nations say: ‘We don’t want any foreign-made equipment to be placed on this platform.’ I ask them: ‘Why?’ They say: ‘Because we fear that at a certain stage some other countries will stop supplying, and then we’ll have problems’” (Martin and Insinna). Egypt’s choice of Russian MiG-29s and French Rafales in 2015 should have come as no surprise to the United States Government following the lengthy and frustrating US suspension of weapons sales to Egypt following the overthrow of President Morsi (Bayoumy). However, it was discovered that even the Rafales could not be delivered to Egypt without the concurrence of the United States, which produced key components (Tran). In February 2019, Saudi Arabia was similarly unable to take delivery of arms produced by the UK and France because of German embargoes against the Kingdom (Waterfield). Certainly, arms buyers are taking note of these difficulties and are consequently nudged towards Russia. The Rostec executive continued, “So our main advantage is we are a very reliable supplier. We never apply any political tags” (Martin and Insinna).

It is well supported that Russia offers weapons that aren’t always as sophisticated as American arms, but are cheaper and often more reliable. The Rostec executive, Victor Kladov, states, “if you compare Russian helicopters to Western helicopters, ours come at a cheaper price.

They may be not so much sophisticated in terms of electronics, but then electronics fail, especially in harsh conditions. Ours are reliable” (Ibid). A Chatham House analyst agrees: “Russian weaponry is relatively inexpensive and, generally speaking, often more robust than comparable American systems” (Connolly and Sendstad).

While the United States has long touted its “Total Package Approach,” which bundles logistics, parts, and training into its weapons sales packages, Russia has signaled its intent to provide better support after sales. The Rostec executive continued: “Another challenge is that nations want lifetime support plans. We have so much equipment scattered all over the world — both Soviet-made and Russian-made — and in many places it doesn’t work because we don’t have a technical service center. So we are creating a network of services and follow-up support” (Ibid). President Putin himself stated in a regular Kremlin meeting to discuss weapons exports: “In addition, timely maintenance and good repairs are among the key parameters of the competitiveness of military products. We never stop talking about this. We should stay close to the client and redouble efforts to increase the number of maintenance service centres in the clients’ countries” (Kremlin).

Conclusions

The ability of some Arab states to implement key elements of IT-RMA in order to project advanced combat airpower beyond their own borders, as proven during operations to defeat the so-called Islamic State, is a clear offset in the strategic environment. These states have employed their new-found capabilities as tools in an increasingly aggressive foreign policy in areas such as Libya and Yemen. The United States, largely responsible for providing the equipment and training that led to this fundamental shift, must carefully consider how to mitigate the accompanying threats while leveraging concomitant opportunities. While these new capabilities can provide an increased level of deterrence against Iran or other common foes, the Arab partners have used their US-supplied arsenals in a manner inconsistent with US policy. Until the United States updates its weapons sales policies with buy-in across both the executive and legislative branches, Arab requests for new weaponry is likely to be met with resistance in Congress and lead to delays that will erode partner confidence, which creates a Russian strategic advantage. Russia can exploit it by continuing to offer weaponry that is good enough but contains no foreign components and thus comes without political strings attached. Consequently, these Arab states can rely on Russian weaponry to continue engaging in aggressive foreign policy in places such as Libya and Yemen without the risk of running afoul of US end-use restrictions. The United States could counter in the information sphere by highlighting the added effectiveness that the total package approach brings to its weapons. Indeed, Russia could continue to work on closing that gap by offering training and post-sales support for its own arms.

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