

DEFENSE**Trump to unleash more global arms sales**

The easing of restrictions on international weapons deals could create U.S. jobs, but critics fear it will inflame war zones.

By **BRYAN BENDER** and **TARA PALMERI** | 09/29/2017 05:09 AM EDT

 President Donald Trump is pictured. | Getty

The Trump administration recently launched a review of export regulations governing drone technology that had been put in place in 2015. | Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images

President Donald Trump is preparing to ease some restrictions on U.S. weapons sales overseas, sparking concerns about further flooding the international market with high-tech weapons and inflaming feuds in hot spots like the Middle East.

The changes, which could include enlisting the State Department and Pentagon to more actively advocate on behalf of American arms manufacturers, are set to be included in an executive order or presidential memorandum that Trump will issue this fall, according to three administration officials involved in the deliberations.

The U.S. is already the global leader in weapons exports, accounting for more than half the world's annual arms deals. The new "arms transfer initiative," being run out of the White House National Security Council, aims to make U.S. companies more competitive when allies are shopping for fighter jets, ground vehicles, warships, missile defenses and other military gear in an intensely competitive market, the officials told POLITICO.

Those efforts would include establishing a more active government role in pushing U.S. products, beyond what military and diplomatic officials already do to help defense firms sell their wares internationally. This could also strengthen the defense industrial base and create jobs on production lines that Pentagon investments don't fully support.

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"It is about making sure we are doing everything we can to promote the competitiveness of American trade," said a State Department official involved in the discussions who, like the other sources, was not authorized to speak publicly. "The message from the NSC is we can certainly be doing more."

The changes, which officials insist are also intended to enhance Americans' interests around the world, would be the latest in a series of moves by Trump to relax former President Barack Obama's restrictions on U.S. military activities.

The Trump administration recently launched a review of export regulations governing drone technology that had been put in place in 2015, and is also reported to be taking steps to make it easier for American arms manufacturers to sell to international buyers.

It has also green-lighted sales of precision-guided munitions to Saudi Arabia that the Obama administration held up over concerns they have been used to kill civilians in the offensive against rebels in Yemen. In addition, Trump has reversed restrictions on arms sales that were in place for Bahrain and Nigeria.

Overall, new data show that in the first eight months of 2017, the total value of U.S. arms transfer notifications has nearly doubled — to \$48 billion — compared with the same period in 2016. Those figures are for arms sales conducted directly between the companies and foreign customers — known as direct commercial sales — as well as those conducted through the Foreign Military Sales process, which is overseen by the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency.

"Do they want to move from a position to where U.S. companies dominate the world market, to where they are crushing the competition?" asked William Hartung, director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy, a Washington think tank. "I don't know how much of a bigger footprint they could have."

The administration's new push involves the departments of State, Defense and Commerce, which have authority over the export of military equipment and are drawing up proposals

for White House review. Two officials said they expect an order from Trump as early as October.

Among the areas under review, the officials said, are revamping the Conventional Arms Transfer Policy, which lays out the criteria for selling military-grade weapons to foreign nations. The administration is also seeking to make "more user friendly" the International Traffic in Arms Regulations, which have not been significantly rewritten since 1984, another State Department official said.

Streamlining the process by which U.S. companies can obtain export licenses for weapons sales has long been a major lobbying objective of the defense industry, whose advocates complain that even recent changes in the process are not enough to ensure they remain competitive.

Some leading industry associations express concern that the U.S. lead is at risk of slipping.

"While the United States dominates the global aerospace and defense export market, a shifting business and political landscape, coupled with domestic acquisition hurdles, are constricting industry's competitive edge," maintains the National Defense Industrial Association, which represents many leading arms manufacturers.

Tina S. Kaidanow, the acting assistant secretary of State who runs the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, recently hinted at the administration's objectives.

"We are developing this initiative because the Administration believes that strengthening the defense capabilities of U.S. allies bolsters our ability to protect the United States by being a force multiplier for the U.S. warfighter, and ultimately benefits U.S. industry by driving new innovation and creating high-quality American jobs," she told a Capitol Hill event hosted by the Aerospace Industries Association.

Another potentially controversial step the administration is considering would develop new ways to leverage U.S. diplomacy to help companies get a leg up on foreign contracts. The U.S. government already plays a role in helping American companies compete, including deploying security assistance officers from the Pentagon and State Department who work out of U.S. embassies.

In a response to questions from POLITICO, the NSC said the administration "has undertaken a review of our policy on arms sales and wherever possible is working to remove unreasonable constraints on the ability of our companies to compete."

But it also stressed that removing constraints cannot come at the expense of U.S. foreign policy interests. Those include ensuring that sensitive technologies do not fall into the wrong hands, become used for unintended purposes or are used against American troops or interests.

"The Trump Administration is pursuing a deliberate approach to our arms export policy, ensuring that such sales better align with our national security and foreign policy objectives as well as economic imperatives for American jobs," the statement said. "The Administration is intent on ensuring that U.S. industry has every advantage in the global marketplace, while at the same time ensuring the responsible export of arms and dual-use technologies."

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By RACHANA PRADHAN and DAN DIAMOND

But any moves to make it easier for U.S. companies to sell arms is likely to raise concerns, especially in conflict zones or in countries with shoddy records on democracy and human rights.

"The questions I would have are what are the motivations?" said Rachel Stohl, who directs the Conventional Defense Program at the Stimson Center, a nonpartisan think tank. "The United States is the world's largest arms exporter. Are there markets closed to the United States? Yes. Are there reasons they are closed? Yes. Are those reasons good? I think they are."

She added: "While you can always improve bureaucratic process, those fundamental goals of supporting our foreign policy and supporting democracy and human rights need to be recognized. My concern is there is such an emphasis on selling more that we are losing the notion of restraint and why that restraint exists. I don't believe the argument that 'if we don't sell to them, someone else will,' is reason to go into a new market.

Hartung, another skeptic of increased foreign arms trade, said he believes the move "is about jobs, jobs, jobs. I think Trump is more focused on that than Obama was."

He noted that many of the big-ticket weapons the United States is pushing are those the U.S. doesn't purchase anymore or buys only in small numbers, "like F-15s and F-16s."

"More of it is domestic pork-barrel politics dressed up as national security," Hartung said.

The White House insists such sentiments are off the mark.

"President Trump knows that success of our companies in the global marketplace means job creation at home and better economic benefits overall for the United States," the NSC said. "While some policy changes are likely forthcoming, it is important to remember that there are reasons for limiting the sales of certain types of systems to certain potential customers. We need to make sure that these systems are sold to and operated by those who are able to use them properly and for legitimate purposes, such as counterterrorism, and are not used to deliver weapons of mass destruction or otherwise undermine our interests."