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Trump's Transactional Follies: The Consequences of Treating the Arms Trade like a Business

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International relations is not, as former president Donald Trump would like us to believe, purely transactional. States, particularly great powers, often do things that follow a political rather than an economic logic. Great powers provide public goods for their allies, even if those allies sometimes free ride. They maintain a network of bases and military forces stationed in foreign countries, and offer allies and friendly states various trade deals.¹ President Trump's business approach to international relations often overlooked or ignored many of the nuanced norms of international politics. This was particularly visible when it came to the arms trade, where Trump's focus on the bottom line ignored the political consequences of arms sales, which are one of the many tools in the foreign policy repertoires of states, and are often used to express political alignments. For example, in 2019 the U.S. sent Javelin missiles to Ukraine to express support for Ukraine and against Russian aggression, a message which was sent and received even though the missiles were never intended to make it to the front lines.² Trump's transactional approach ignored the political-signaling function of arms sales, which will have lasting effects on U.S. political relationships. The Biden administration will need to quickly consider how best to adjust U.S. arms sales policies to align with its foreign policy goals and reassure allies of continued U.S. commitment.³

The United States, like most major powers, uses arms sales to send signals about its political relationships. Receiving, or not receiving, certain arms can be a way of welcoming a state into the inner circle, or drawing a sharp line between core and peripheral allies. For example, U.S. Military Sales and Assistance Manuals – a key policy document for selling arms – all state, “The willingness of the U.S. Government to sell military equipment varies country by country in accordance with the military requirement, ability to maintain and

¹ Bruce Klingner, Jung H. Pak, and Sue Mi Terry, “Trump Shakedowns Are Threatening Two Key US Alliances in Asia,” *Brookings* (blog), December 18, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/12/18/trump-shakedowns-are-threatening-two-key-u-s-alliances-in-asia/>; Brian Blankenship, “Promises under Pressure: Reassurance and Burden-Sharing in Asymmetric Alliances” (Columbia University, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8281QPF>; Michael J. Lostumbo, Michael J. McNerney, Eric Peltz, Derek Eaton, David Frelinger, Victoria A. Greenfield, John Halliday, Patrick Mills, Bruce R. Nardulli, Stacie L. Petryjohn, Jerry M. Sollinger, and Stephen M. Worman, *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Strategic Benefits* (Rand Corporation, 2013), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR201.html; Patrick Mills, Adam Grissom, Jennifer Kavanagh, Leila Mahnad, and Stephen M. Worman, *A Cost Analysis of the U.S. Air Force Overseas Posture: Informing Strategic Choices*, Research Report, RR-150-AF (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2013), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR100/RR150/RAND_RR150.sum.pdf; Joanne Gowa, *Allies, Adversaries, and International Trade* (Princeton University Press, 1994).

² Luis Martinez, “What are Javelin Missiles and Why They’re Being Mentioned Repeatedly during the Impeachment Hearings,” *ABC News*, 15 November 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/javelin-missiles-ukraine/story?id=65855233>; Amy MacKinnon and Lara Seligman, “Far From the Front Lines, Javelin Missiles Go Unused in Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, 3 October 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/03/far-from-the-front-lines-javelin-missiles-go-unused-in-ukraine/>; Fred Kaplan, “Why Ukraine Matters,” *Slate*, 1 November 2019, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/11/trump-ukraine-aid-javelins-obama.html>.

³ Remarks by President Biden, 4 February 2021, “America’s Place in the World.” Speech given at U.S. Department of State Headquarters, Washington, DC. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.

use, compatibility with existing inventory, and *impact on the preconceptions and the actions of the buyer's neighbors*.⁴ In other words, the U.S. expects its arms sales to send a signal about its relationship with the buyer, and expects this signal to affect the behaviors of neighboring states. Concern with signaling and preconceptions explains why the U.S. and NATO allies were so enraged by Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 missile defense systems in July 2019. As one scholar explained, "It's a political statement that the U.S. doesn't have hegemony and control over NATO members and particularly over Turkey."⁵ The United States was concerned that the S-400 purchase foreshadowed a bigger rift between Turkey and NATO.⁶ Providing arms is one way for a state to signal political closeness and endorse the behavior of the receiver, just as receiving arms can be a way of claiming political support and demonstrating one's political alignments. Yet the Trump administration ignored nearly all of these signaling dynamics, and as a result sent confused signals that complicated U.S. relationships with allies and adversaries alike.

It's Not Just the Economy

One of the consistent refrains under the Trump administration was that arms sales would create jobs at home. Trump believed that he could create a "Buy America" plan that would increase U.S. arms sales, and expected U.S. diplomats to "be salesmen" and promoters of U.S. weaponry.⁷ He said that the U.S. should sell \$110 billion in arms to Saudi Arabia because that money would be an investment in the U.S. economy and would create "hundreds of thousands of jobs, tremendous economic development, and much additional wealth."⁸ But as Jonathan Caverley points out, arms sales are very poor job creators: Lockheed Martin estimated that a \$6 billion helicopter deal would potentially create 450 U.S. jobs.⁹ Nonetheless, the Trump administration acted under the assumption that selling arms was a good business idea, and ultimately sold arms to countries that previous administrations had blocked for political reasons. For example, he unlocked \$3 billion in arms sales to Bahrain, which the Obama administration had paused because of human rights concerns.¹⁰ This general approach of prioritizing economics over politics meant that previous political concerns, including human rights, took a back seat. As the Stimson Center's Rachel Stohl noted, "This administration has demonstrated from the very beginning that human rights have taken a back seat to economic concerns."¹¹

⁴ United States Military Sales and Assistance Manual, 1973, p. F-2, emphasis added. <http://www.samm.dscs.mil/samm-archive/1973-masm-archive>.

⁵ Quoted in "First Shipment of Russian S-400 Systems Delivered to Turkey," *Al Jazeera*, 12 July 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/7/12/first-shipment-of-russian-s-400-systems-delivered-to-turkey>

⁶ Selim Sazak, "Why Did Turkey Buy Russian – Not Western – Missile Defense Systems?" *The Washington Post*, 17 July 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/07/17/why-did-turkey-buy-russian-s-400/>; Jennifer Spindel, "What Turkey's Purchase of a Russian Air Defense System Means for the U.S. and NATO," *The Washington Post*, 23 July 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/07/23/what-turkeys-s-400-purchase-means-us-nato/>.

⁷ Mike Stone and Matt Spetalnick, "Exclusive: Trump to Call on Pentagon, Diplomats to Play Bigger Arms Sales Role - Sources," *Reuters*, January 8, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-weapons-idUSKBN1EX0WX>.

⁸ Glenn Kessler, "Analysis | Trump's \$110 Billion in Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia: Still Fake," *Washington Post*, October 11, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/10/11/trumps-billion-arms-sales-saudi-arabia-still-fake/>; Alexia Fernández Campbell, "Trump Says Selling Weapons to Saudi Arabia Will Create a Lot of Jobs. That's Not True.," *Vox*, October 17, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/10/17/17967510/trump-saudi-arabia-arms-sales-khashoggi>.

⁹ Jonathan D. Caverley, "Want to Punish Saudi Arabia? Cut Off Its Weapons Supply," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/12/opinion/saudi-arabia-arms-sales.html>; Ethan B. Kapstein and Jonathan Caverley, "Biden Must Base Arms Sales on U.S. Interests—Not U.S. Jobs," *Foreign Policy* (blog), February 25, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/25/biden-must-base-arms-sales-on-u-s-interests-not-u-s-jobs/>; See also Jennifer Spindel, "With Arms Sales, 'It's Not Just the Economy, Stupid' – Duck of Minerva," *Duck of Minerva* (blog), October 12, 2018, <https://duckofminerva.com/2018/10/with-arms-sales-its-not-just-the-economy-stupid.html>.

¹⁰ Mike Stone and Matt Spetalnick, "Exclusive: Trump to Call on Pentagon, Diplomats to Play Bigger Arms Sales Role - Sources," *Reuters*, January 8, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-weapons-idUSKBN1EX0WX>.

¹¹ Stone and Spetalnick, "Exclusive."

With economic concerns at the fore, U.S. arms sales under Trump overlooked the ways in which governments can use arms sales (or embargoes) to pursue political goals. Even if withholding arms transfers has questionable effects on human rights behaviors, withholding arms can be an important normative step.¹² Previous research has suggested that human rights violations do effect U.S. arms sales and that instances of human rights violations do effect U.S. decisions to sell certain weapons and that instances of human rights violations do effect U.S. decisions to sell certain weapons.¹³

Deciding to sell arms to Bahrain was just one example of the shift in focus for arms sales under the Trump presidency. In a national security presidential memorandum of 19 April 2018, the administration emphasized U.S. competitiveness, jobs, and supporting U.S. manufacturers as key criteria for selling arms. The memorandum lists eight policies for selling arms; all but one focus on competitiveness and technological advantages in manufacturing. The lone non-economic criterion mentions reducing “the risk of national or coalition operations causing civilian harms.”¹⁴ In the section on the economic security of the U.S., the memorandum promises to “simplify the regulatory environment” for selling arms abroad. As William Hartung noted, this often means downgrading the importance of human rights and other strategic concerns.¹⁵ One immediate consequence of treating arms sales like a business, then, was a missed opportunity to use arms sales to try to improve human rights behaviors.

Arms Sales and Signaling

Overlooking human rights considerations was an immediate effect of the Trump administration’s approach to arms sales. There are likely to be longer-term consequences due the administration’s lack of understanding about the political dynamics that are the main drivers of the arms trade. States use arms sales to signal their political alignment with – and approve of the behaviors of – other states.¹⁶ Arms sales to Saudi Arabia approved by the administration signaled U.S. support for Saudi military action, and missed the opportunity to signal discontent with the Saudi regime after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018. Similarly, Trump saw U.S. arms sales to Taiwan as both a business deal and a way to score points domestically, overlooking the rift that the sales caused with China precisely because of the signals sent by arms transfers. These are just two examples of the Trump administration’s lack of understanding about the arms trade, which meant it sent signals about political alignment without even recognizing that they were sending these messages.

Signaling Support for Saudi Arabia

¹² Jennifer Erickson, “Punishing the Violators? Arms Embargoes and Economic Sanctions as Tools of Norm Enforcement,” *Review of International Studies* 46, no. 1 (2020): 96–120.

¹³ Erickson, *Dangerous Trade: Arms Exports, Human Rights, and International Reputation* (Columbia University Press, 2015); Richard A.I. Johnson and Spencer L Willardson, “Human Rights and Democratic Arms Transfers: Rhetoric versus Reality with Different Types of Major Weapon Systems,” *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2018): 453–64; Shannon Lindsey Blanton, “Promoting Human Rights and Democracy in the Developing World: U.S. Rhetoric versus U.S. Arms Exports,” *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 1 (January 1, 2000): 123–31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2669298>; Erickson, “Stopping the Legal Flow of Weapons: Compliance with Arms Embargoes, 1981–2004,” *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 2 (2013): 159–74.

¹⁴ Administration of Donald Trump, National Security Presidential Memorandum NSPM-10, 19 April 2018, p. 2. Available at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-201800254/pdf/DCPD-201800254.pdf>

¹⁵ William Hartung, “Trump Policy and Trends in U.S. Arms Sales,” *Reinventing Peace* (blog), June 21, 2019, <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2019/06/21/trump-policy-and-trends-in-u-s-arms-sales/>.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the politics of selling arms, see: Alexandra Stark, “Proposed UAE Arms Sale Raises National Security Concerns,” *Just Security* (blog), December 1, 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/73617/proposed-uae-arms-sale-raises-national-security-concerns/>; Alexia Fernández Campbell, “Trump Says Selling Weapons to Saudi Arabia Will Create a Lot of Jobs. That’s Not True.,” *Vox*, October 17, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/10/17/17967510/trump-saudi-arabia-arms-sales-khashoggi>; Spindel, “The Case for Suspending American Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia,” *War on the Rocks* (blog), May 14, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/the-case-for-suspending-american-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia/>.

In April 2019, President Trump used the veto – for only the second time during his term – to block legislation intended to stop U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia.¹⁷ Congress had wanted to halt arms sales after the murder of Khashoggi, who was murdered inside the Saudi embassy in Turkey in October 2018.¹⁸ Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman knew of and authorized the murder; stopping arms sales was one measure for the U.S. to express its outrage and displeasure.¹⁹ European states, which remained aware of the political signals sent by arms sales, enacted a ban on selling arms to Saudi Arabia. Germany, Finland, Switzerland, Norway and Denmark each instituted a ban on arms exports to Saudi Arabia, and the European Parliament voted for an EU-wide embargo against Saudi Arabia.²⁰

Although scholars have debated the overall effects of arms embargoes, there is no doubt that even a temporary pause or halt to arms sales sends a political signal.²¹ As Lawrence Freedman observed in 1978, “*refusing to sell* arms is a major political act. It appears as a calculated insult, reflecting on the stability, trust, and credit-worthiness, or technical competence of the would-be recipient.”²² In announcing Germany’s ban on arms sales, Chancellor Angela Merkel articulated this logic, saying that “we are far from this [the Khashoggi incident] having been cleared up and those responsible held to account.”²³

The steps taken by the European states stand in stark contrast to U.S. behavior. When asked about the murder of Khashoggi and whether the U.S. planned to stop arms sales, Trump said that Saudi Arabia had pledged to spend billions on arms, which “means something to me.”²⁴ Displeased with the attempt by Congress to halt arms sales, Trump said that an embargo would “weaken America’s global

¹⁷ Mark Landler and Peter Baker, “Trump Vetoes Measure to Force End to U.S. Involvement in Yemen War,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2019, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/16/us/politics/trump-veto-yemen.html>.

¹⁸ “Jamal Khashoggi: All You Need to Know about Saudi Journalist’s Death,” *BBC News*, February 24, 2021, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45812399>.

¹⁹ Shane Harris, Greg Miller, and Josh Dawsey, “CIA Concludes Saudi Crown Prince Ordered Jamal Khashoggi’s Assassination,” *Washington Post*, 16 November 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-concludes-saudi-crown-prince-ordered-jamal-khashoggis-assassination/2018/11/16/98c89fe6-e9b2-11e8-a939-9469f1166f9d_story.html; Dierdre Sheesgreen, “Saudi Crown Prince ‘Complicit’ in Jamal Khashoggi’s Murder, Key GOP Senator Says after CIA Briefing,” *USA TODAY*, December 4, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/12/04/sen-lindsey-graham-says-saudi-prince-complicit-jamal-khashoggi-murder-senate-trump-administration/2199104002/>.

²⁰ Rick Noack, “Germany Halts Arms Deals with Saudi Arabia, Encourages Allies to Do the Same,” *Washington Post*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/10/22/germany-its-allies-well-halt-future-arms-sales-saudi-arabia-until-we-have-clarity-khashoggi-so-should-you/>; Derek Bisaccio, “Germany Extends Arms Embargo on Saudi Arabia,” *Defense Security Monitor* (blog), March 24, 2020, <https://dsm.forecastinternational.com/wordpress/2020/03/24/germany-extends-arms-embargo-on-saudi-arabia/>; Jon Stone, “The European Parliament Has Voted for an EU-Wide Arms Export Embargo against Saudi Arabia,” *The Independent*, February 25, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/saudi-arabia-arms-export-embargo-european-parliament-eu-wide-arms-export-embargo-uk-a6895226.html>.

²¹ Spindel, “The Case for Suspending American Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia,” *War on the Rocks* (blog), May 14, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/the-case-for-suspending-american-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia/>; Andrew Miller and Seth Binder, “The Case for Arms Embargoes Against Uncooperative Partners,” *War on the Rocks* (blog), May 10, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/the-case-for-arms-embargoes-against-uncooperative-partners/>; For an alternate view, see Ray Rounds, “The Case Against Arms Embargos, Even for Saudi Arabia,” *War on the Rocks* (blog), April 16, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/the-case-against-arms-embargos-even-for-saudi-arabia/>.

²² Lawrence Freedman, “Britain and the Arms Trade,” *International Affairs*, 1978, 377–92.

²³ Noack, “Germany Halts Arms Deals with Saudi Arabia, Encourages Allies to Do the Same,” *Washington Post*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/10/22/germany-its-allies-well-halt-future-arms-sales-saudi-arabia-until-we-have-clarity-khashoggi-so-should-you/>.

²⁴ Darlene Superville, “Trump Puts Saudi Arms Sales above Inquiry into Khashoggi Killing,” *PBS NewsHour*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/trump-puts-saudi-arms-sales-above-inquiry-into-khashoggi-killing>.

competitiveness,” again revealing his belief that the arms trade was all about making money.²⁵ As one scholar noted, continued U.S. arms sales essentially told “the Saudis that the US is firmly in their concern...the Trump administration more or less supports you to the hills [sic].”²⁶

Emboldened by the continued support of the United States, Saudi Arabia pushed ahead with its brutal policies. There was no internal reckoning after the murder of Khashoggi and multiple reports about the direct involvement of the Crown Prince, nor was there any change in Saudi Arabia’s approach to the war in Yemen, for which it has also been criticized. The United Nations labeled Yemen the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, and the U.S. faced domestic and foreign criticism of its materiel support for Saudi Arabia’s war efforts.²⁷ Trump sold nearly \$7 billion in precision-guided munitions to Saudi Arabia, despite concerns that these weapons would be used against civilian populations in Yemen.²⁸ The State Department’s Inspector General determined that the issue of civilian casualties was not fully assessed in these transfer decisions.²⁹ The continued flow of arms, and implied U.S. approval of Saudi military action, contributed to an increase in civilian casualties in Yemen. In late January 2021, newly elected President Biden announced an end to U.S. support for Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen and a hold on some arms sales – including precision-guided bombs – a sharp break from U.S. policy under the Trump administration.³⁰ Importantly, in announcing these changes, Biden linked them to “re-forming the habits of cooperation and rebuilding the muscles of democratic alliances that have atrophied over the past few years of neglect.”³¹ One of the first leaders Biden spoke to was Merkel, a proponent of a continued arms embargo against Saudi Arabia.³²

Tangling with Taiwan and China

The Trump administration’s economic view of arms sales did not simply affect U.S.-Saudi relations. China, which views Taiwan as a renegade province, sees U.S. arms sales to Taiwan as a violation of the “one China” policy.³³ Although the U.S. officially recognized mainland China in 1979, it has continued to sell arms to Taiwan; each sale has been taken by China as a sign that U.S.-Taiwan relations

²⁵ “Trump Uses Veto to Unblock \$8bn Weapons Sale to Saudi Arabia,” *BBC News*, July 25, 2019, sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49106989>.

²⁶ Quoted in Marcia Robiou, “What You Need to Know about Trump’s \$8 Billion Saudi Arms Deal,” *PBS Frontline* (blog), July 16, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/saudi-arabia-arms-deal-trump-what-to-know/>.

²⁷ Jeannie Sowers and Ericka Weinthal, “The Biden Administration Should Prevent an ‘Atrocity Famine’ in Yemen,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), February 10, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/10/biden-administration-should-prevent-atrocity-famine-yemen-conflict/>; Mark Landler and Peter Baker, “Trump Vetoes Measure to Force End to U.S. Involvement in Yemen War,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2019, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/16/us/politics/trump-veto-yemen.html>.

²⁸ Stone and Spanelnick, “Exclusive.”

²⁹ Dan De Luce, “Watchdog Report Says Trump Admin Ignored Risk to Civilians in Saudi Arms Deal,” *NBC News*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/trump-admin-failed-assess-risk-civilians-saudi-arms-deal-government-n1236457>.

³⁰ Anne Gearan, John Hudson, and Missy Ryan, “Biden Recommits U.S. to Global Alliances, Ends Support for Saudi-Led War in Yemen in First Major Foreign Policy Speech,” *Washington Post*, February 4, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-yemen-saudi-war-support/2021/02/04/ac61c14a-670d-11eb-8468-21bc48f07fe5_story.html.

³¹ Anne Gearan, John Hudson, and Missy Ryan, “Biden Recommits U.S. to Global Alliances, Ends Support for Saudi-Led War in Yemen in First Major Foreign Policy Speech,” *Washington Post*, February 4, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-yemen-saudi-war-support/2021/02/04/ac61c14a-670d-11eb-8468-21bc48f07fe5_story.html.

³² Michael Fischer, “German Arms Export Ban on Saudi Arabia Extended by One Year,” *Dpa International*, December 10, 2020, <http://www.dpa-international.com/article/urn:newsml:dpa.com:20090101:201210-99-637185>; Derek Bisaccio, “Germany Extends Arms Embargo on Saudi Arabia,” *Defense Security Monitor* (blog), March 24, 2020, <https://dsm.forecastinternational.com/wordpress/2020/03/24/germany-extends-arms-embargo-on-saudi-arabia/>.

³³ Bonnie S. Glaser and Michael J. Green, “What is the U.S. ‘One China’ Policy and Why Does it Matter?” *CSIS*, 13 January 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-us-one-china-policy-and-why-does-it-matter>.

were improving, or that the U.S. wanted to slight China.³⁴ However, Trump's transactional approach overlooked this contentious history, and throughout his term he approved and encouraged the sale of weapons to Taiwan. Trump did not understand that providing arms to Taiwan was a strong signal of U.S. support, which would anger China and contribute to the deterioration of U.S.-China relations.

In June 2017, the U.S. announced arms sales to Taiwan that included torpedoes, air-to-ground missiles, and early-warning radar equipment.³⁵ China objected to this \$1.4 billion sale: a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said that the deal would hurt China and ran counter to Washington's commitment to the "one China" policy.³⁶ Although the Obama administration had considered arms sales to Taiwan, the Trump administration made the decision to go ahead, and that choice was taken as a sign of closeness between the US and Taiwan.³⁷ This deal, which followed an announcement of new sanctions against China, increased the perception that the U.S. was interested in exploring new relations with Taiwan.³⁸ The Chinese embassy in Washington reacted with "outrage" and said that the arms sale undermined the consensus that Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping had reached at Trump's private club, Mar-a-Lago, a few months prior.³⁹

The process was repeated in August 2019, when the U.S. announced \$8 billion in F-16 fighter jet sales, which was the largest single arms transaction between the U.S. and Taiwan.⁴⁰ A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said that the United States was violating Chinese sovereignty and interfering in China's internal affairs.⁴¹ Unwilling or unable to see the political consequences of the decisions to sell arms, the Trump administration announced an additional \$5.1 billion in arms sales to Taiwan in 2020 alone, including aerial drones, missile defense systems, and rocket launchers.⁴²

U.S. arms sales to Taiwan negatively affected U.S.-China relations, not because the arms sales changed the balance of power in the Taiwan Strait, but because China saw the sales as an unacceptable signal of political support for Taiwan. As a Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman said in October 2020, the arms sales, "send a seriously wrong signal to Taiwan independence forces, and severely damage China-US relations and peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait."⁴³ Fearful the U.S. sales would bolster Taiwanese independence efforts,

³⁴ John Pomfret, "US sells weapons to Taiwan, angering China," *Washington Post*, 30 January 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/30/AR2010013000508.html>; Thomas L. Friedman, "China Warns U.S. on Taiwan Jet Deal," *The New York Times*, 4 September 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/04/world/china-warns-us-on-taiwan-jet-deal.html>.

³⁵ Reuters, "US Plans to Sell Taiwan about \$1.42 Billion in Arms Could Test China Ties," *CNBC*, June 30, 2017, sec. Asia News, <https://www.cnb.com/2017/06/29/china-reacts-angrily-as-us-plans-to-sell-taiwan-about-1-point-42-billion-in-arms.html>.

³⁶ Ralph Jennings, "China Demands That U.S. Arms Deal with Taiwan Be Cancelled," *Los Angeles Times*, June 30, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-china-us-taiwan-arms-deal-20170630-story.html>.

³⁷ Joseph Trevithick, "Here's What Taiwan Would Get In \$1.3B Arms Deal With U.S.," *The Drive*, June 30, 2017, <http://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/12051/heres-what-taiwan-would-get-in-1-3b-arms-deal-with-u-s>.

³⁸ Trevithick, "Here's What Taiwan Would Get In \$1.3B Arms Deal With U.S."

³⁹ Reuters, "China 'outraged' by \$1.42 Billion Planned U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan," *Reuters*, June 30, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-taiwan-arms-china-idUSKBN19L0N4>.

⁴⁰ Edward Wong, "Trump Administration Approves F-16 Fighter Jet Sales to Taiwan," *The New York Times*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/16/world/asia/taiwan-f16.html>.

⁴¹ Wong, "Trump Administration Approves F-16 Fighter Jet Sales to Taiwan"

⁴² "Timeline: U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan in 2020 Total \$5 Billion amid China Tensions," *Reuters*, December 8, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-security-usa-timeline-idUSKBN28I0BE>.

⁴³ "China Threatens Retaliation after New U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan," *NBC News*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-threatens-retaliation-after-new-u-s-arms-sales-taiwan-n1244242>.

China announced sanctions against arms manufacturers Boeing, Raytheon, and Lockheed Martin, and additionally warned the U.S. against selling additional arms.⁴⁴

The Future of U.S. Arms Sales

The new Biden administration enacted an immediate pause and review of all pending arms sales. This allowed it to consider many of the key issues that were ignored under the Trump administration, including human rights violations.⁴⁵ Moving forward, the administration has an opportunity to correct course by aligning with American allies to use arms sales to achieve major foreign policy goals. What would an arms sale policy that accounts for politics and signaling look like?

Understanding the signaling function of arms sales could see the administration supporting Germany's extended ban on arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which is in place until the end of 2021. Joining the embargo would signal both U.S. alignment with Germany (a key European and NATO ally), as well as U.S. disapproval of Saudi actions in Yemen. Since Saudi Arabia received more than 60% of its arms over the past five years from the U.S., an embargo would both be a strong signal and be a factor to force change.⁴⁶ One former official who is familiar with Biden's approach to foreign policy, said that the president is looking for behavioral change from Saudi Arabia.⁴⁷ Whether and how that might happen is still unclear, especially since Biden declined to directly penalize the Crown Prince for his role in the murder of Khashoggi. The U.S. will not ban him from entering the country, nor will it seek criminal charges against him, despite calls to hold the Prince and Saudi Arabia accountable.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, an arms embargo would show that the U.S. does understand that arms sales are about more than making money.

A second concrete step could involve revising the Trump administration's national security presidential memorandum that emphasized economics over politics and human rights in arms sales. This would allow the U.S. to reprioritize – to some degree – human rights, and would demonstrate a renewed understanding of the political nuances of selling arms.⁴⁹

It seems as if the Biden administration is already attuned to the signals sent by arms sales. Despite promising talks with Indian officials in March of this year, the administration is still concerned about India purchasing arms from Russia. India's purchase of the S-400 missile defense system shows that Indian-U.S. relations are not fully in sync, and that the purchase from Russia indicates "lingering skepticism" about more closely aligning with the United States.⁵⁰ The specifics of this deal matter less than the fact that the policy discourse in the U.S. is now aware of the signals that arms sales send about political alignment.

⁴⁴ Iain Marlow and Samson Ellis, "Trump Arms Sales to Taiwan Boost Anti-China 'Hedgehog' Strategy," *Bloomberg.Com*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-27/trump-arms-sales-to-taiwan-boost-anti-china-hedgehog-strategy>.

⁴⁵ Matthew Beinart, "Biden Administration to Pause And Review Foreign Arms Sales Approved By Trump," *Defense Daily* (blog), January 27, 2021, <https://www.defensedaily.com/biden-administration-pause-review-foreign-arms-sales-approved-trump/international/>.

⁴⁶ Jonathan D. Caverley, "Want to Punish Saudi Arabia? Cut off Its Weapons Supply," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/12/opinion/saudi-arabia-arms-sales.html>.

⁴⁷ Natasha Turak, "Pentagon Is Scrambling as China 'Sells the Hell out of' Armed Drones to US Allies," *CNBC*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/21/pentagon-is-scrambling-as-china-sells-the-hell-out-of-armed-drones-to-americas-allies.html>.

⁴⁸ David E. Sanger, "Biden Won't Penalize Saudi Crown Prince Over Khashoggi's Killing, Fearing Relations Breach," *The New York Times*, February 26, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/us/politics/biden-mbs-khashoggi.html>; For a discussion of the difficulties of penalizing the Prince, see Fred Kaplan, "Why Biden Couldn't Punish the Saudi Crown Prince," *Slate Magazine*, March 2, 2021, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/03/mbs-khashoggi-biden-punishment.html>.

⁴⁹ Annie Shiel, Seth Binder, Jeff Abramson, William Hartung, Rachel Stohl, Diana Ohlbaum, Adam Isacson, Brittany Benowitz, and Daniel R. Mahanty, "Toward a More Responsible U.S. Arms Trade Policy: Recommendations for the Biden-Harris Administration," *Just Security* (blog), January 19, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/74254/toward-a-more-responsible-us-arms-trade-policy-recommendations-for-the-biden-harris-administration/>.

⁵⁰ Jack Detsch and Robbie Gramer, "Russian Arms Sale Clouds U.S.-India Ties," *Foreign Policy* (blog), March 19, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/19/russia-india-defense-secretary-loyd-austin-s-400-china-arms-sales/>.

Arms sales under the Trump administration largely represented a break from the more nuanced and politically-aware approach to arms sales under previous administrations. Addressing the consequences – from a deemphasis on human rights to sleights to allies and boosts to adversaries – will require slowing down the process and a deeper consideration of what signals are sent in selling arms. The Biden administration’s pause and review is one step in that direction and toward using arms as a tool of statecraft rather than merely economic transactions.

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