

# National Security Before Arms Sales

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In his first address to Congress, President George W. Bush disappointed many in the defense industry by deciding to re-evaluate national security priorities before putting more weapons into the Pentagon's shopping cart.

But the defense industry need not worry. When it comes to selling weapons overseas, Bush, like recent administrations, is likely to favor the economic interests of the arms industry over protecting national security.

A consensus appears to be growing in favor of dismantling the U.S. arms export-control system. Ironically, the move comes at the same time the U.S. government is encouraging allies to adopt U.S. export practices.

Under President Bill Clinton, the arms industry convinced the administration to add domestic economic considerations to the list of criteria for approving weapon exports. Under the stewardship of John Hamre, Clinton's deputy defense secretary, a crusade to reform the arms export licensing system took shape. Over the strong objections of the State Department, Hamre helped push through the Defense Trade Security Initiative last spring, which dismantles many critical checks on arms and technology exports to U.S. allies.

Now heading the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a think tank, Hamre and a panel of consultants from defense industry and government are calling for a more ambitious overhaul of the export licensing system. If accepted, the proposals would reduce U.S. controls to a shell of the current system.

Relaxing arms export controls has been a tough sell to the State Department and national security advocates in Congress. CSIS, therefore, developed the ultimate in specious arguments: The current U.S. arms-export system is actually weakening U.S. defenses and should be replaced with an entirely new regime.

In a report released May 1, titled "Effective Export Controls for the 21st Century," CSIS argues that U.S. national security would be enhanced by sharply reducing the number of military items requiring an export license and allowing defense companies to self-police compliance with export regulations.

The gist of their argument is that the U.S. arms and technology transfer licensing regime is so long, burdensome and over-restrictive that U.S. allies are start-

ing to get fed up and shop elsewhere. CSIS argues that inflexible U.S. export controls have provoked an industry consolidation process in Europe, threatening to cut U.S. arms makers out of the European market and leave America hopelessly behind in technology development.

At the center of these concerns

is the view that U.S. security depends primarily on maintaining interoperability with allied forces. But in the twisted logic of U.S. arms acquisition, interoperability requires Europeans to buy from America, not the other way around.

The facts just don't add up. The U.S. arms industry maintains a

large market share in Europe. During the years 1996-99, the U.S. arms industry amassed \$9.5 billion worth of new government-to-government deals and received \$56.8 billion worth of licenses for commercial arms exports.

Far from falling behind technologically to Europeans, the Kosovo conflict demonstrated the superiority of U.S. capabilities. Further, the United States continues to far outspend Europe in research and development.

In addition, a U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report released last August revealed that DoD "has not clearly demonstrated" how changes to the export regime would affect interoperability.

In the last two years, efficiency improvements sharply have reduced the average license review time in the Pentagon, and the State Department doubled the amount of license officers. But

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industry still is not satisfied.

So what is the real goal of these reformers? Could it be to sell more weapons with less hassle? According to GAO, David Oliver, then-principal deputy undersecretary of defense for acquisition, technology and logistics, said defense firms primarily are disgruntled because sometimes their licensing requests are denied. CSIS determined that only a system that circumvents the licensing process altogether would solve this problem.

But all stakeholders may not be convinced. Arms exports often are used as a foreign policy tool — denied to states that will use them abusively against their own citizens or to threaten other states. CSIS dismisses such uses as "a sentimental wish to control the uncontrollable." But consideration of human rights and regional stability is an obligation of the world's remaining superpower and largest arms exporter.

The CSIS study claims the current system is broken. But rather than suggest targeted fixes to address specific problems, they propose doing away with the system altogether. Before the Bush administration accepts the CSIS position, officials should reflect on the fact that the U.S. government's first duty is to protect U.S. national-security and foreign-policy interests, not the arms industry's profit margins.

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