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Security Assistance and U.S. Competitive Strategy: Improving Our Game

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Security Assistance and U.S. Competitive Strategy: Improving Our Game

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In this third issue of the T paper series, Assistant Secretary Ford outlines the ways in which the State Department applies U.S. arms transfers to enhance the capabilities of allies and partners in support of U.S. competitive strategy vis-à-vis state-level competitors.

Coming to my current role performing the duties of the Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security from two years at the helm of the Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation (ISN), most of my discussions of U.S. competitive strategy in this current era of great power competition address such questions through an ISN prism — such as the challenges of dealing with technology-transfer threats.

This paper, however, will take a broader perspective, exploring how we in the so-called "T" family of bureaus — and, in particular, the Political-Military Affairs (PM) Bureau — are also using arms transfers to foreign partners as a tool of U.S. competitive strategy. Such transfers have always been an important foreign policy and national security tool, of course. Nonetheless, it is too little understood how much focus we in this Administration have put on such transfers, and how this revised and expanded effort is contributing to meeting the challenges set for us by our senior leaders in documents such as the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Defense Strategy.

I. NSPM-10 and the CAT Policy

One of the cornerstones of our current approach is National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM) 10, which was signed by the President on April 19, 2018, just a few months after I left the National Security Council staff to come to the State Department. NSPM-10 forms the backbone of our new Conventional Arms Transfer (CAT) policy.

But it's worth backing up for a moment. The NSS makes clear the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security today is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition with revisionist powers, namely the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia. It also makes clear that economic security is a critical part of national security. These strategies recognize the primacy of our security relationships in order to magnify American power, and the influence these security relationships provide to protect our shared interests.

[1] *Dr. Ford serves as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, and is additionally performing the Duties of the Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security. He previously served as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Weapons of Mass Destruction and Counterproliferation on the U.S. National Security Council staff.*

Against the backdrop of a competitive environment for security partnerships, our PM Bureau leads efforts to make the United States the global security partner of choice and to maintain America's status as the preeminent global defense exporter. Arms transfers are a key tool for doing this, and this is where the CAT policy comes in. The CAT policy focuses first and foremost upon protecting and promoting the U.S. Defense Industrial Base (DIB), and it approaches arms transfers from the perspective of "better aligning our policy regarding conventional arms transfers with our national and economic security interests." It is our objective to build up the DIB – "maintain[ing] technological advantages of the United States military" and "increasing trade opportunities for United States companies" – thereby directly enhancing U.S. capabilities and improving our ability to protect and advance the interests and security of the American people. All of this serves the purpose not just of supporting American prosperity and jobs, but also ensuring that we can compete with the global revisionists of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia in the future, no matter what their *own* DIBs try to throw at us.

Critically, however, the CAT policy is not just about *our* capabilities. Our transfer policy is also about those who *receive* such transfers, and NSPM-10 directs us to focus also upon how to "better equip our allies and partners to contribute to shared security objectives and to enhance global deterrence." This piece is the key to understanding our efforts systematically to use arms transfers – as well as training and military capacity-building more broadly, though I won't dwell too much on those aspects here – as a means for enhancing partner capabilities in ways that support U.S. competitive strategy and interfere with our *adversaries'* strategies.

II. Two Lines of Competitive Effort

The way I look at things, one can break our T-family approach to competitive strategy into two major prongs:

1. First, we do what we can to help the United States itself "run faster" in strategic competitive terms. Most of this figurative "running" depends upon things outside the T family's purview, such as the raw dynamism and creativity of American enterprise. That said, we do as much as we can to help. This includes, for example, our efforts to promote foreign sales of United States nuclear reactor technology through so-called "123 agreements" in support of that critical sector of our economy, our work to build better partnerships for U.S. industry, laboratories, and researchers through the negotiation of Nuclear Cooperation Memoranda of Understanding, and our work to reform the Missile Technology Control Regime in order to permit reasonable flexibility in being able to sell certain categories of unmanned aerial systems.

2. Second, we work to make our strategic *competitors* "run more slowly" as *they* try to compete with *us*. This includes such things as combating the PRC's systematic effort to acquire foreign technology – including nuclear technology – and divert it to military applications, implementing and reforming U.S. national security export controls and screening visa applications to deny our competitors sensitive dual-use technology, and building multilateral "coalitions of caution" informed by awareness of the threats presented by PRC's strategy of "Military-Civil Fusion." It also includes our diplomacy implementing the CAATSA sanctions legislation in order to deny Russia the revenues and manipulative strategic relationships it seeks from foreign arms sales, and to warn the rest of the world of the dangers of allowing Chinese technology companies such as Huawei to build and control next-generation telecommunications networks.

I will likely have more to say on this broad framing of competitive strategy in a future paper, but it is worth emphasizing here that our CAT policy supports both of these prongs. It contributes to the first line of effort by using arms transfers to promote the health and resilience of our defense industrial base, as well as to improve the capabilities of our foreign partners, their contributions to burden-sharing, and the interoperability their forces with those of the United States – especially for those allies alongside whom we might have to fight if deterrence were to fail. The policy also aims to ensure "appropriate protections on the transfer of United States military technologies" in ways that we hope will help preserve our own military advantages. Additionally, the CAT policy requires "restraint in transfers that may be destabilizing," such as U.S. sales that might allow recipients to threaten other friends; this is the basis of the U.S. commitment to preserving Israel's Qualitative Military Edge.

The CAT policy also contributes to the second line of effort, however – the "slow the other side down" prong – through its focus upon building arms transfer partners into better *obstacles to adversary strategy*. As officials from the State Department and the White House explained publicly in August 2018 after we rolled out the new CAT policy, we

are "trying to take a more proactive approach to arms transfers" and "prioritizing strategic competition." This policy was explicitly "designed in response to a shifting strategic landscape that's increasingly characterized by great-power competition across the political, economic, and military spheres," and it "prioritizes staying ahead of this competition by responding proactively instead of reactively to the defense needs of allies and partners."[2]

This competitive focus upon partner capacity-building is intended to allow them to stand up for their own interests (and thereby also contribute to our common interests) more effectively in regions of the world menaced by revisionist intimidation and aggression from those who wish all of us ill. Such capacity-building is increasingly important in an era in which Beijing and Moscow have become conspicuous as geopolitical revanchists on a global scale, seeking not merely to expand their national power at others' expense, but in fact to obtain hegemony over their neighbors and reshape international order around themselves. (Nor is this just about "spheres of influence." The PRC has actually been seizing maritime areas claimed by its neighbors, while Russia now occupies parts of the sovereign territory of two of its European neighbors, resurrecting invasion and territorial seizure as a grim fact of life on the European continent to the first time since the defeat of Nazi Germany.) At the regional level, Iran also uses force and subversion in support of its own dreams of hegemony, while the DPRK openly threatens its neighbors with weapons of mass destruction and still mutters periodically about "reunification" of the entire Korean Peninsula (*i.e.*, presumably through absorbing our military ally, South Korea).

Not for nothing, therefore, do this Administration's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy call out countering Chinese, Russian, Iranian, and North Korean depredations as being the central focus of United States planning. In the face of the threats those regimes present, other countries have a right to protect themselves, and to the degree that we can help them defend themselves against such intimidation and aggression, we should do so. Notably, this is what we are trying to do under the CAT policy as we work to build up partners and friends to stand as roadblocks to those countries' own strategies. (To the extent that our own transfers can displace or substitute for some of the arms transfers that both Russia and China use to raise revenues for their respective military machines and build client relationships that they can thereafter manipulate for strategic benefit, moreover, all the better.)

III. Strengthening Partners Around the World

To give you a flavor for what we have set in motion since January 2017 when this administration came into office, an overview of our security partnership activities is in order.

In using the various arms transfer and security partnership assistance tools available to us, our first priority is to support the defense needs of our allies and partners. Precisely because and to the degree that those allies and partners do in fact face threats from the states called out in the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy as our state-level competitors, however, this focus upon supporting our partners' security needs also has the important effect of problematizing the self-aggrandizing revisionism of those state competitors. By helping our friends be more secure, in other words, we also help counter the threatening aspects of our competitors' own strategies and contribute to deterring revisionist aggression.

We are providing various European and Eastern European partners – who face a modernizing Russian military that periodically exercises itself near their borders in ways designed to alarm and intimidate decision-makers – with a range of missile and rocket systems, and maritime patrol assets, and are moving steadily forward in the multi-national F-35 Lightning II next-generation stealth combat aircraft program, which will provide many of our partners with state-of-the-art combat air power for years to come. We have also lifted the previous U.S. administration's ban on lethal assistance to Ukraine as it suffers Russian invasion and partial occupation, for instance, by transferring Javelin anti-tank missiles and sniper rifles – both good things to have when engaged in a protracted war of attrition against Moscow-supported proxy forces and Russian soldiers on clandestine assignment as "little green men" killing your citizens and occupying your homeland.

[2] *We are doing this while continuing to uphold respect for human rights and U.S. nonproliferation objectives. Yet we are also being more aggressive than ever in our diplomatic engagements to ensure that the current multilateral institutions and organizations designed to uphold these values are not used as foils against us as we try to advance our competitive strategy.*

All of these various capabilities will contribute in vital ways to making Europe stronger and more secure, including against Russian threats. If you were in the Kremlin and sought to intimidate Eastern European countries that used to be part of the Soviet Empire and NATO partners who stand in the way of your dreams of relitigating the eroded hegemony of your "near abroad," I expect that you would find it very problematic how such transfers are today helping buttress the security of the free and democratic states you seek to bully.

Similarly, we are providing various allies and partners in Asia and the Indo-Pacific with a range of first-rate systems – including anti-air and anti-ship capabilities, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets – that will help them better meet their own national defense requirements. In helping them meet their needs, we support the freedom and autonomy of the entire region. If you work in the Chinese Communist Party's leadership compound in Beijing and are building up your aerospace and naval power projection capabilities in order to displace regional U.S. alliances, conquer the thriving democracy of Taiwan, and re-establish what one might describe as neo-tributary relationships over the countries of East Asia, this is surely not good news. For our allies and partners in the region, however, it is good news indeed.

In the Middle East, where Iran seeks its own sort of regional hegemony, our partners are receiving a variety of systems that will better enable them to defend themselves. Particularly at a time when Iran's regional provocations have extended not just to expeditionary warfare using Qods force units and militia proxies but also to transferring missiles and missile technology to non-state actors in Lebanon and Yemen and even to direct missile and unmanned vehicle strikes upon its neighbors' critical infrastructure, helping our friends defend themselves also helps undermine Iran's belligerent regional revisionism.

To assist our allies and partners in taking such steps to defend themselves, the U.S. State Department has also strategically allocated Foreign Military Financing (FMF) monies to select partner countries for the purchase of U.S.-origin defense articles, training, and services. One key example is the European Recapitalization Initiative Program (ERIP), through which we assist European partners and allies as they transition away from Soviet-legacy and Russian-manufactured equipment, to reduce the Kremlin's influence over partner and Allied defense procurement. Through the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program, the United States also disposes of excess military equipment by providing it to Allied and friendly nations on a grant or sale basis.

Another important tool that increases our competitiveness, influence, and interoperability with foreign partners is the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program – a Title 22 global security assistance program of approximately $110 million annually, that provides leadership and professional development training to thousands of up-and-coming young and mid-grade officers as well as senior military leaders at the U.S. Defense Department's institutions of higher learning within the United States. I'll leave a detailed discussion of IMET partnerships for another day, but the program is an important tool for increasing the professionalism and military effectiveness of IMET partner countries against shared threats we face, and it is also a great way to build lasting relationships. (Notable IMET alumni include Jordan's King Abdullah and Nigerian President Buhari.)

IV. The Security Partner of Choice

With annual sales for Fiscal Year 2019 at more than $170 billion, it should be clear we provide an enormous amount of support to our various partners.

It is easy to see why our partners value this assistance, since U.S. industry produces the best defense equipment on the planet. And our partners don't just get the equipment itself. Unlike many other suppliers, we don't provide mere defense *articles*, but rather defense *capabilities* – including not only the training required to use, maintain, and integrate items into the recipient military's doctrine and operations, but also the parts and components required for long-term maintenance and support.

Moreover, compared to transfers from our major arms sale competitors in Moscow and Beijing, U.S. defense sales are managed through a process whose policies are clear and transparent. As the new CAT policy both demonstrates and models, U.S. policies are clear on the public record, and all transfers are vetted, including by conducting evaluations that account for potential harm to regional balances of power, contribution to proliferation, or harm to human rights. Unlike the arms merchants in Moscow and Beijing, we tolerate no bribes, no monkey business, and no shady and corrupt relationships that can – and will – later be used to manipulate and coerce.

All of this makes us, in effect, the perfect defense supplier for free sovereign peoples resisting threats and intimidation from authoritarian revisionist states – and we are happy to play that role.

V. Conclusion

I hope this gives you a feel for how we are trying to use transfers and other tools in a strategically-informed way as we reorganize ourselves for competitive strategy in the State Department, and in a fashion that not only produces benefits for our defense industrial base but will also help problematize what our *adversaries* are trying to accomplish with their own competitive strategies.

The details of our approach in this global effort are not fixed in stone, of course. Such efforts must always remain a work in progress – in the highest and best sense – for we seek to improve our game at every opportunity and to do better and better over time. This is also an iterated game with an active opponent, so we also need to ensure that U.S. efforts adjust appropriately in response to what our *competitors* are doing in reacting to such moves.

To help us improve how we do this, and to streamline our process of adaptation in the future, we are currently updating and revising our approaches to both Russia and the PRC on a T-family-wide basis. As I have said before, the West all but forgot about great power competition for far too long after the end of the Cold War, leaving our competitors free to take great strides while we were preoccupied with other things.

The State Department is back in the game now, however, and we are learning anew how to do this sort of thing better and better every day.

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