

Congressional Report: US is top purveyor of high-tech weapons

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US is top purveyor on weapons sales list

Shipments grow to unstable areas

By Bryan Bender, Globe Staff | November 13, 2006

WASHINGTON — The United States last year provided nearly half of the weapons sold to militaries in the developing world, as major arms sales to the most unstable regions — many already engaged in conflict — grew to the highest level in eight years, new US government figures show.

According to the annual assessment, the United States supplied \$8.1 billion worth of weapons to developing countries in 2005 — 45.8 percent of the total and far more than second-ranked Russia with 15 percent and Britain with a little more than 13 percent.

Arms control specialists said the figures underscore how the largely unchecked arms trade to the developing world has become a major staple of the American weapons industry, even though introducing many of the weapons risks fueling conflicts rather than aiding long-term US interests.

The report was compiled by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service.

“We are at a point in history where many of these sales are not essential for the self-defense of these countries and the arms being sold continue to fuel conflicts and tensions in unstable areas,” said Daryl G. Kimball, executive director of the nonpartisan Arms Control Association in Washington. “It doesn’t make much sense over the long term.”

The United States, for instance, also signed an estimated \$6.2 billion worth of new deals last year to sell attack helicopters, missiles, and other armaments to developing nations such as the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, India, Israel, Egypt, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Developing nations are designated as all those except in North America, Western Europe, Russia, Australia, and New Zealand.

In addition to weapons already delivered, new contracts for future weapons deliveries topped \$44 billion last year — the highest overall since 1998, according to the report. Nearly 70 percent of them were designated for developing nations.

Many of the US sales are justified by American officials as critical to the war on terrorism or other foreign policy goals such as checking an emerging China. One such example is the recent decision to sell F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan.

The United States has long relied on arms sales to prop up allies or enhance collective defense arrangements.

“For decades, during the height of the Cold War, providing conventional weapons to friendly states was an instrument of foreign policy utilized by the United States and its allies,” according to the report, titled “Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations.”

“This was equally true for the Soviet Union and its allies,” the report said.

Yet there is growing evidence that the sales are increasingly more about dollars and cents for the US military-industrial complex and other major military economies. The trend began after the end of the Cold War, when American, European, Russian, and other defense industries were forced to consolidate and competition for foreign sales heated up.

“Where before the principal motivation for arms sales by foreign suppliers might have been to support a foreign policy objective, today that motivation may be based as much on economic considerations as those of foreign policy or national security policy,” said the congressional report, which detailed both arms deliveries, or weapons actually delivered to customers, and arms agreements, or contracts signed for future deliveries.

Washington’s desire to maintain the status quo was on display at a meeting at the United Nations on Oct. 26, when a UN panel voted to study whether a new treaty might be possible to regulate the sale of conventional arms. The United States was the only country out of 166 to vote no, though China and Russia were among a handful of countries to abstain.

With that lone dissent, the UN’s Disarmament and International Security Committee approved a British proposal to draw up uniform standards that might block arms sales considered destabilizing, including those that might fuel ongoing conflicts, violate embargoes, undermine democratic institutions, or contribute to human rights abuses. A UN task force is set to make its recommendations to the General Assembly next year.

But powerful interests in the global arms industry have long stood in the way of controlling the arms flow to the developing world.

After the 1991 Persian Gulf War, for example, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council — the United States, Russia, France, Britain, and China — pledged to limit the sale of arms to the volatile Middle East, attributing the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to the region having been awash in high-tech arsenals.

More than a decade later, those pledges have gone unfulfilled. The United States is not the only culprit.

For the first time in eight years, Russia outpaced the United States last year in the value of new arms transfer agreements reached with developing nations, according to the Congressional Research Service report, authored by Richard F. Grimmett .

Moscow inked major deals to sell missiles, warships, and other hardware to such potential trouble spots as Iran and China, according to the report, which is considered the most authoritative breakdown of the global arms trade. China also agreed to provide weapons to trouble spots such as Iran and North Korea, while major Western European suppliers, such as Britain and France, also concluded large orders with developing countries.

But it is the United States that by far remains the top purveyor of high-tech arms to areas where analysts believe the likelihood of armed conflict remains highest. A study last year by the progressive World Policy Institute found that the United States transferred weaponry to 18 of the 25 countries involved in an ongoing war.

“From Angola, Chad, and Ethiopia, to Colombia, Pakistan, and the Philippines, transfers through the two largest US arms sales programs [Foreign Military sales and Commercial Sales] to these conflict nations totaled nearly \$1 billion in 2003,” the report found.

Meanwhile, more than half of the countries buying US arms — 13 of the 25 — were defined as undemocratic by the State Department’s annual Human Rights Report, including top recipients Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Uzbekistan.

The agreement last year to sell F-16s to Pakistan underscores the larger trend, according to Wade Bouse , research director at the Arms Control Association.

“F-16s with advanced medium-range air-to-air missiles are not for fighting Al Qaeda,” Bouse said. “They are for fighting India.”

And India, which has fought three wars with Pakistan, is considering a US offer to sell the country F-16s. “We are creating our own market by selling to both sides of regional conflicts,” Bouse said.

With more such lucrative deals in the offing, there is little sign that the United States — or other major suppliers — wants a treaty to control the sales.

“The US would be significantly affected if there was an arms treaty that took into account human rights abuses and conflict areas,” added William Hartung , director of the Arms Trade Resource Center at the World Policy Institute in New York. “The US government still wants to be able to do covert and semi-covert arms transfers. And a certain amount of it is simply keeping factories running in certain congressional districts.”

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