POLICY UNIT: WEAPONS PROLIFERATION

- Should the United States continue negotiations with Iran about its nuclear ambitions?

- Should the United States continue to include military equipment and technology in its foreign aid packages?

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the end of World War II, the world has witnessed the widespread proliferation of new weapons and military technology. As the world’s leading military and economic power, the United States is in a unique position to help create policies that control just how far these weapons can spread. In this chapter, we will consider several enduring tensions in American policy regarding the proliferation of nuclear and non-nuclear arms, and examine two current controversial issues:

- Should the United States continue negotiations with Iran about its nuclear ambitions?
- Should the United States continue to include artillery and military technology in its foreign aid packages?

Why Is Weapons Proliferation Controversial? Over the course of the Cold War (1947–1991), the United States and the Soviet Union vastly expanded their stockpiles of both conventional and nuclear weapons. In the late 20th century, each superpower continuously sought to develop superior military technologies, and by the 1980s, both the United States and the Soviet Union possessed between 30,000 and 40,000 nuclear warheads apiece—enough to destroy the world hundreds of times over.1

Today, there are nine nations that possess nuclear weapons.2 Of these, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), while India, Israel, and Pakistan have not. North Korea, meanwhile, withdrew from the NPT in 2003, after it was confronted by the United States for operating a secret nuclear weapons program it had agreed to dismantle in 1994. The rapid spread of nuclear arms to new nations since the end of World War II included some nations in dangerous and unstable parts of the world. For this reason, the United States has made...
it a priority to prevent the spread of these weapons and materials to hostile actors, especially terrorist organizations.

**How many warheads does each nuclear country have?**

Conventional weapons—from rifles to fighter jets—have also become more common over the past several decades. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union vied for “spheres of influence” in the developing world, and covertly provided arms to various pro-Western or pro-Soviet governments and paramilitary groups. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russia and many other former Soviet bloc nations began to sell their extensive arsenals to help pay down their debts.

Although the Cold War has come to an end, the United States continues to provide military aid to many of the nations it supports, often in the form of grants to buy weapons from American manufacturers. While much of this aid has been used effectively to ensure regional stability and to protect American interests, some policymakers have criticized these arms packages for contributing to violence around the world.

Moving forward, American officials must weigh various competing interests and worldviews when crafting arms-related policies:

- **Competing National Interest Priorities.** The debate over whether or not to provide arms and military technology to foreign governments requires American leaders to prioritize and balance economic, ideological, and security interests. Is it better to maintain political and economic stability in fragile parts of the world, even if the leaders we support are undemocratic?

- **Competing Worldviews.** The debate over how to manage weapons proliferation is rooted in the ideology and philosophy of international relations. In crafting foreign policy, which is more important: maintaining fidelity to national values or responding to international realities and events in a practical and effective manner? Should nations act as if they are engaged in an international competition for power, or should they act cooperatively as members of a global community? Under what circumstances can and should the United States intervene in the affairs of other nations?
WHY IS NONPROLIFERATION POLICY SO COMPLICATED?

Weapons proliferation is perhaps the most serious foreign policy issue facing the United States, but the formation of nonproliferation policies is complicated by several factors.

**Classified Information.** Because most government programs related to nuclear weapons and military aid are classified, only a select few government officials understand the full scope of American policies.

**Long-Term Effects of Military Aid Packages.** Corruption is often an issue when the United States provides military technologies and arms to foreign governments. In the past, some recipient governments have attempted to turn profits by re-selling American weapons to the highest bidder; frequently, foreign leaders pocket the money made by selling these weapons. Furthermore, because many weapons are durable goods that can function for decades, the United States has little control over what happens to donated weapons once a conflict ends or a government no longer needs them. In the 1980s, for example, the United States covertly supplied weapons and ammunition to mujahideen militias fighting in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. Twenty years later, many of these fighters had joined the ranks of the Taliban, and were using the same weapons against American troops.

**Rise of Non-State Actors.** As non-state actors outside the authority of a formal government play a more prominent role in international relations, many governments fear nuclear materials could soon fall into the hands of terrorist organizations. For this reason, American and other Western leaders have a vital interest in controlling the supply of nuclear materials and technologies, as well as which nations have access to them.

**Moral and Ethical Questions.** There is an ongoing debate over the responsibility of the United States when it comes to the development of nuclear weapons and technology. Some people believe the United States lacks the authority to dictate which countries should or should not obtain nuclear weapons, and have criticized Americans for imposing harsh restrictions on Iran while allowing the covert Israeli nuclear program to go forward. Others believe that as the only nation to have used atomic bombs in warfare, the United States has a moral obligation to do all it can to prevent nuclear proliferation and to reduce the global supply of nuclear arms.

**Domestic Politics.** The sale of arms and ammunition is a multibillion-dollar industry, and changes in military aid policies have a profound impact on American manufacturing. Defense contractors who produce weapons and military equipment provide thousands of jobs and are highly influential in Washington, D.C., meaning any official decision regarding weapons and military technology also significantly affects domestic politics.
THE ONGOING DEBATE

How should the United States deal with Iran’s nuclear ambitions?

Ever since the Islamic Revolution took hold of Iran in 1979, the United States has made it a priority to confront the perceived threat Iran poses to American interests. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Iranian support for militant and terrorist groups in the Middle East was seen as the most significant threat to American interests—and by the early 2000s, concerns arose over a clandestine Iranian nuclear program. If Iran becomes a nuclear power, many American and regional officials fear it would exert a far more assertive role in the Middle East, while providing greater support for governments and organizations that threaten the United States. Some Americans argue that Iranian nuclear ambitions could produce a nuclear arms race in one of the most volatile regions of the world, and many Israelis in particular view an Iranian nuclear weapon as a threat to their very existence. Other leaders worry Iran may transfer nuclear technology to extremist groups or rogue nations.

But Iranian leaders deny they are trying to achieve nuclear weapons capability and assert that Iran’s nuclear program is purely for medical and energy-related usage. They argue that uranium enrichment is Iran’s “right” as a party to the NPT. Some Iranian leaders have also stated that nuclear weapons are inconsistent with their ideology, citing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s 2003 fatwa—or religious ruling—that nuclear weapons are un-Islamic.

Yet since the late 1990s, the United States has led a broad coalition of Western powers to place economic pressure—largely in the form of sanctions—on Iran to stop its support of terrorist organizations and to prevent it from advancing its nuclear program.
AMERICAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS: A BRIEF TIMELINE

1953: Prime Minister Ousted in Coup
The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) backs a plan, coordinated with British intelligence, to overthrow Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh due to concerns over petroleum exports and Mossadegh’s relationship with the Soviet Union. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi becomes the U.S.-backed authoritarian monarch.

January 1979: The Shah Flees Iran
The U.S.-backed shah is forced to flee Iran following demonstrations against his increasingly authoritarian and secular rule by religious opponents. Within months, the exiled cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who referred to the United States as the “Great Satan,” becomes supreme leader of the new Islamic Republic of Iran.

November 1979: The Iran Hostage Crisis
After President Jimmy Carter allows the shah into the United States for cancer treatment, a group of Iranian revolutionaries occupy the American embassy in Tehran and take 52 Americans hostage for 444 days. In April 1980, a failed rescue attempt results in the deaths of eight American servicemen, and shortly after, the United States severs diplomatic relations with Iran. The hostage crisis ends with the signing of the Algiers Accords in Algeria on January 19, 1981.

1983: Hezbollah Bombings in Beirut
Hezbollah—a terrorist organization backed by Iran—is implicated in the bombing of the American embassy in Lebanon, killing 17 Americans, and the bombing of a Marine compound, killing 241 American servicemen.

1986: Iran-Contra Affair
It is revealed that the United States covertly provided weapons to Iran to fund anti-communist forces in Nicaragua and to help free American hostages held by Hezbollah. President Ronald Reagan confirms the weapons sale but denies it was part of an exchange for hostages.

1988: Iranian Airbus Shot Down
The USS Vincennes shoots down an Iranian commercial airliner, killing 290 civilians from six nations. The United States says the Airbus A300 was mistaken for a fighter jet outside the civilian air corridor.

1995: Clinton Administration Embargo
President Bill Clinton imposes a total embargo on dealings with Iran by American companies.
2002: “Axis of Evil”
President George W. Bush describes Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an “axis of evil” in his State of the Union address.

2002: Nuclear Program Revealed
An Iranian opposition group reveals secret nuclear facilities in the country, including a uranium enrichment plant and a heavy water reactor. The United States accuses Iran of developing a clandestine nuclear weapons program, which Iran denies.  

2005: Ahmadinejad Calls for Destruction of Israel
Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad repeats a quote from Ayatollah Khomeini that Israel “must be wiped out from the map of the world.” He says, “And God willing, with the force of God behind it, we shall soon experience a world without the United States and Zionism.”

2006: Uranium Enrichment
Ahmadinejad announces that Iran has enriched uranium for the first time. The United Nations (UN) Security Council unanimously imposes sanctions on Iran and broadens them in 2008.

2010: Sanctions Expanded Again
Ahmadinejad announces Iran has produced uranium enriched to 20 percent purity—a short step from bomb-grade material. The United States, the European Union (EU), and the UN expand sanctions.

2013: IAEA Reports on Enriched Uranium
After several years of dead-end international negotiations to end the Iranian nuclear program, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) concludes that Iran has roughly 410 pounds of uranium enriched to 20 percent purity.
THE CURRENT CONTROVERSY

Should the United States continue negotiations with Iran about its nuclear ambitions?

For years, nuclear negotiations between Iran and Western powers ended in disagreement and frustration. But in 2013, the more moderate President Hassan Rouhani was elected to replace Ahmadinejad. And although Rouhani asserted that Iran would maintain its nuclear program, the diplomatic tone largely changed. President Barack Obama even telephoned Rouhani on September 27, 2013, marking the highest-level contact between the United States and Iran since 1979.¹⁵

What are the sanctions against Iran and how effective have they been?

The Obama administration has imposed sanctions on Iran, but in 2009, the administration announced it would also fully participate in talks between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1)—a change from its previous policy requiring Iran to meet UN demands first. On November 24, 2013, Iran and the P5+1 nations reached a temporary nuclear agreement that halted the expansion of the Iranian nuclear program in exchange for modest sanctions relief. And by April

Iranians celebrate the tentative agreement on nuclear arms reached between the P5+1 and Iran in April 2015.
2015, negotiators announced a tentative framework for a permanent agreement to cut and monitor the Iranian nuclear program and gradually lift sanctions. But policymakers remained deeply divided over the wisdom of seeking a final deal with Iran.¹⁶

Supporters claim a comprehensive agreement could significantly improve relations between the United States and Iran, while ensuring that Iranians are unable to develop a nuclear weapon. But many opponents in the Persian Gulf, Israel, and elsewhere in the Middle East worry that easing sanctions on Iran will only enhance its capacity to support terrorist groups and regimes that oppose American interests. Furthermore, some critics—most notably Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—have taken issue with the preliminary terms of the proposed agreement, which would possibly allow Iran to continue developing uranium in the future if certain conditions are met.¹⁷
Should the United States continue negotiations with Iran about its nuclear ambitions?

YES: We are closer than ever to achieving a peaceful resolution to our nuclear disputes.

The United States cannot achieve international peace by isolating and undermining opposing nations with the hope that they will eventually change their policies. Our troubled history with Iran cannot and should not prevent us from sitting down with Iranian leaders to try to reach a compromise over their nuclear program. The global stakes are simply too high.

The current round of P5+1 negotiations is significant not only because of how close the United States is to securing an equitable nuclear agreement, but also because of the broad coalition involved—including Russia and China, two of Iran’s strongest allies. “These six nations came together in 2006 to address Iran’s nuclear program and to work as a unified front to try to resolve with diplomacy the concerns that Iran’s nuclear program is aimed at developing nuclear weapons,” said Shlomo Brom, a fellow at the Center for American Progress. This coalition was not assembled overnight, and if the current negotiations fail, it may take years or even decades to bring these nations back together. For this reason, policymakers should think carefully about the long-term consequences of their opposition to P5+1 negotiations.

Ultimately, there are only two ways to stop Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon: negotiation or military action. “The alternative to not having a deal is losing inspections, and an Iran ever closer to having the fissile material to manufacture a weapon,” a senior White House official said. And at a time when the United States is still reeling politically and financially from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, any sort of military strike against Iran could be extremely costly. Iran, unlike many of the United States’ recent military opponents, has a large, well-trained, and well-equipped military with the capability to retaliate against American regional interests and allies. The rise of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has shown us what can happen in the aftermath of war in the Middle East; therefore, can we really afford to fan the flames in a region already wracked by conflict and extremism?

The United States will never be able to transform Iran into an open and free democracy; only the Iranian people can do that. Average Iranian citizens harbor no ill will toward the people of the United States, and in fact, many are eager to interact with Americans and to build better relations between our two nations. This nuclear agreement is not the end of tension between the United States and Iran, but it will be an important first step toward greater cooperation and peace.

President Obama announces a deal to curb Iran’s nuclear program in July 2015.
NO: Iran is simply buying time and will never agree to an equitable resolution.

A nuclear-armed Iran is, in the minds of most American foreign policy experts, the greatest potential threat to our national security. Since 1979, Iran has held our diplomats hostage, covertly attacked our assets overseas, and collaborated with terrorists who are bent on our destruction. Under the current circumstances, there is no good reason why the United States should sit down with Iran to negotiate in good faith.

It is no secret that Iran has a history of collaboration with terrorist groups, most notably Hezbollah in Lebanon. “Iran has been the country that has been in many ways a kind of central banker for terrorism in important regions like Lebanon through Hezbollah in the Middle East, in the Palestinian Territories, and we have deep concerns about what Iran is doing in the south of Iraq,” said former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Why should the United States negotiate with a known state sponsor of terrorism, especially when any agreement would most likely boost Iran’s economy and allow the government to allocate more resources toward the covert funding of terror?

The harsh sanctions put in place against Iran by the United States, the EU, and the UN have been working. Iran’s economy is weak, and the resulting domestic political backlash has placed great pressure on its political leaders. “The problem with this deal … is that the sanctions are working. They’re doing exactly what we wanted them to do,” said former Senator Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga. “The problem is we have given the Iranians relief from sanctions and, in doing that, we got nothing basically in return.”

Rouhani has been described by some as a reformer and a moderate, but let us be clear: he harbors many of the same sentiments about the United States and our allies as his predecessors. Under Rouhani’s “reformist” administration, Iran has continued to harass and imprison dissenters, homosexuals, and religious minorities. Hardliners continue to cry “Death to America” in public forums, and many are still firm in their commitment to the destruction of Israel. In reality, Rouhani is only a puppet of Iran’s supreme leader—an unelected religious authoritarian figure.

“I don’t believe that Iran’s radical regime will change for the better after this deal,” Netanyahu told Congress in 2015. “This regime has been in power for 36 years, and its voracious appetite for aggression grows with each passing year. This deal would only whet Iran’s appetite for more.”

Netanyahu criticizes the Iran nuclear deal as “dangerous.”
THE ONGOING DEBATE

What are the costs and benefits of providing weapons to foreign governments?

Throughout American history, the United States has often sought to advance its national interests abroad by providing military aid, military technology, and weapons to foreign governments. Under the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961, the president and Congress have the authority to provide financial aid, usually in the form of grants or loans, to foreign governments to purchase American arms. In general, the United States provides this type of financing only to close, long-standing military allies or to governments fighting the production and trafficking of drugs intended for the American market. The FAA also allows the Department of Defense and the president to sell or give away stocks of surplus arms, while setting restrictions on the transfer of arms to governments that routinely violate international law.

In 1976, Congress passed the Arms Export Control Act (AECA), which stipulates that weapons may be transferred for self-defense, internal security, or UN operations only, and establishes a process by which the executive branch must give Congress advance notice of major sales. The State Department is responsible for setting regulations on which types of munitions are legal to export, as well as which countries are eligible to receive them.

Which countries purchase weapons from the United States, China, and Russia?

Foreign nations can receive American arms aid through a variety of programs, but the greatest sum of money is transferred through foreign military financing and the education and training of foreign military services. Since 1950, the United States has provided more than $91 billion in financing to the armed forces of countries around the world. The United States also provides assistance in counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and land mine removal programs in numerous countries, as well as substantial backing to UN peacekeeping operations.
Military aid has the potential to advance the national interest of the United States in a variety of ways. These weapons often serve to strengthen the power of allied governments in unstable regions of the world, ensuring that the United States does not have to shoulder the entire responsibility of maintaining international security. In cases where the United States is supporting another government’s efforts to fight drug cartels or terrorist groups, Americans are directly supporting their own security interests. These packages have even been used to secure peace agreements; the two largest recipients of American arms—Israel and Egypt—began receiving this support after they signed a peace treaty in 1979.31

Yet there is no guarantee foreign governments will use American military aid in the exact manner the United States specifies. American national interests are often vastly different from those of the nations the United States supports. In Pakistan, for example, the goals of the U.S. military and those of the Pakistani military are markedly dissimilar. “We are supporting the Pakistani military because we are interested in al-Qaeda,” said Marina Ottaway, director of the Middle East program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “Yet the Pakistani military wants the Pentagon’s training and funds to better defend against or attack India.”32
THE CURRENT CONTROVERSY

Should the United States continue to include military equipment and technology in its foreign aid packages?

The United States is in a unique position when it comes to the development and distribution of arms—it provided global military aid that totaled $14.5 billion in 2010. American defense industries are on the cutting edge of military technology and therefore, the United States has the ability to ensure its allies and partners have the resources they need to maintain modern and skilled military services. Supporters of these programs, such as the Department of Defense, believe military aid programs can provide a substantial return on American investments, both as a bulwark against terrorism and as a tool to convince foreign governments to support American interests. Furthermore, because these aid programs almost exclusively include the sale of American arms and military technologies, they also provide a substantial boost to the U.S. economy.
But there is also a great deal of controversy and criticism surrounding the nations the United States chooses to equip, as well as unintended consequences that come with arms assistance. Critics of American arms transfers have noted that weapons can fail to achieve their aims and often outlast the regimes they are intended to support. In the 1980s, for example, the United States provided weapons support and heavy artillery to Somali President Siad Barre in exchange for access to port facilities in the Gulf of Aden. But when civil war broke out in Somalia in 1991, those weapons were used against American forces during their 1993 humanitarian intervention. During the second half of the 20th century, the United States provided military aid to several Latin American dictatorships and paramilitary groups to prevent the spread of communism.34 And in the Middle East, the United States even supported dictators such as Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt because they kept more radical movements and terrorist groups in check.35 These cases demonstrate some of the key uncertainties that can arise when considering the costs and benefits of military aid.

Where does the United States send its foreign military aid?
Should the United States continue to include artillery and military technology in its foreign aid packages?

**YES: The United States has an obligation to maintain global security.**

The United States has a global advantage when it comes to the size, scope, and technological capabilities of its military. And Americans must recognize that the alternative to sharing these resources is for American troops to maintain a global presence at all times. We can either bankrupt our country by acting as the world’s police force, or we can provide friendly governments with the means to maintain their own security.

“The U.S. will ultimately be more secure if capable democratic countries take charge of problems in their own regions,” said Doug Bandow, a scholar at the Cato Institute. Would we rather our allies be underequipped and underprepared to face the security challenges of the modern world?

The threats facing the United States and its allies around the world are far too real, and American military aid packages have saved countless lives. Israel, for example, has long been one of the chief recipients of U.S. military aid, much of which has gone toward the development of its Iron Dome missile defense system. “Iron Dome has been a genuine life saver for Israelis enduring round-the-clock barrages of Hamas rockets and missiles from Gaza,” said David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee.

The reluctance of the United States to provide military aid packages to Ukraine in its fight against Russian-backed separatists has only emboldened Russia and encouraged President Vladimir Putin to view Americans as weak. If the United States and its allies fail to support Ukraine, Russia will only believe it can make similar acts of aggression elsewhere. Americans do not need to provide so much military aid that Ukraine has the ability to defeat a full-scale Russian attack—but they must give enough to force Russia to reconsider such an attack.

Military aid packages have also helped build popular support for the United States and its policies. Choosing to withhold military aid to countries such as Egypt or Pakistan could lead to a rise in anti-American sentiment, or to the belief that close ties with the United States are not necessary. And these unstable governments may choose to get their arms elsewhere—from Russia or China, for instance. “The United States needs an ally in the [the Middle East],” said David Francis of the Fiscal Times. “The United States has provided some $85 billion in aid to Egypt over the last three decades for this very reason: Egypt is a rent-an-ally.”

Policymakers should not rush to the conclusion that simply providing weapons will solve every security crisis but, when used appropriately, American military aid packages will ensure not only American national security—but global security as well.
NO: We cannot bring about peace by selling more weapons.

Over the course of the past century, the United States has, time and time again, provided weapons to governments and non-governmental groups across the globe, naively hoping Americans will somehow be safer as a result. Despite the fact that billions of dollars have been spent—and countless lives lost—because of these weapons packages, there is no evidence the United States has achieved its national security goals. And in fact, many would argue we are less safe as a result.

Throughout the Cold War, the United States took it upon itself to arm various governments and paramilitary groups with the hope they would help prevent the spread of communism. But looking back, these weapons packages did little to bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union or to promote democratic ideals in the places Americans were trying to defend. In central Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, many of the weapons Americans donated are still in circulation, and through their proliferation have been used to crush democratic dissent, overthrow governments, and fight against American soldiers.40

There is simply no way to know what will happen to the weapons Americans provide as “aid” in the long run. The government has limited stipulations on whether foreign governments may sell American arms once they no longer have a need for them or acquire newer models. American officials also have very little control over who foreign governments might sell these weapons to, and once the weapons are out of Americans hands, they are extremely difficult to track.41

“It’s difficult to produce a single example in modern history of a strategy of arming rebels actually succeeding,” said George Washington University professor Marc Lynch. “Meanwhile, there are plenty of examples of the overt or covert provision of arms to a rebel group prolonging and intensifying conflicts, and lots of cases of rebel groups happily taking our money and guns to ‘fight communists’ and then doing whatever they like with them.”42

The Syrian civil war, which erupted in 2011, demonstrates many of the potential problems that can arise from weapons transfers. For several years, the Obama administration has been debating whether to arm moderate Syrian rebels to assist in the fight against President Bashar al-Assad’s tyrannical regime and the spreading influence of ISIL militants. However, because the Syrian opposition comprises countless factions fighting for supremacy, it is nearly impossible to determine which groups could be considered “moderate.” It is also nearly impossible to prevent American arms from getting into the hands of extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda and ISIL, which are also seeking to overthrow Assad.

“The expectation has always been that countries that receive U.S. military aid and training will be bulwarks of stability and will further U.S. interests in a particular country or region,” said Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. “Those expectations have often proved excessive.”43

Is U.S. military assistance an unwise investment?
CONCLUSION

Nuclear negotiations with Iran and American military aid packages are only two examples of the debates Americans have engaged in for decades over the proliferation of nuclear and non-nuclear weapons. Although the fate of these negotiations and policies remain far from certain, American policymakers, military officials, and citizens will undoubtedly continue to debate the goals and priorities of our national security policies—and what our government can do to best ensure peace, security, and global stability.

9 Ibid.


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.


41 Ibid.
