



# Trump Set to Reinterpret Arms Treaty to Unlock Drone Sales

President Donald Trump plans to reinterpret a 38-year-old arms control treaty to help the U.S. military industry push drone sales — starting with Saudi Arabia’s request for more than 100 MQ-9 Reapers.

Reuters reported on Friday:

The reinterpretation would unlock the sale of more than 100 MQ-9 drones to Saudi Arabia, which the kingdom requested in the spring of this year and could be part of a \$142 billion arms deal announced in May.



AP Images

Donald Trump and the MQ-9 Reaper drone

For anyone hoping Trump might confront the military-industrial complex, or rein in America’s dependence on militarism, the news will sound bitterly ironic. Under the new plan, unmanned war machines become commerce, not restraint.

## The Treaty

The [Missile Technology Control Regime](#) (MTCR) was created in 1987 as a voluntary pact among 35 countries to curb the spread of delivery systems for weapons of mass destruction (WMD). It targeted missiles, rockets, and other unmanned systems.

The Guidelines divide systems into two categories:

- Category I: complete missiles or unmanned delivery vehicles able to carry 500 kilograms (or about 1,102 pounds) for more than 300 kilometers (over 186 miles), along with major subsystems and production facilities. These exports face a “strong presumption of denial.”
- Category II: shorter-range systems and dual-use components, which can be exported under licensing and case-by-case review.

In the 1990s, as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) became larger and more capable, MTCR members began treating them as falling under Category I. Long-range drones like the MQ-9 Reaper easily meet the technical thresholds. That interpretation sharply restricted U.S. sales abroad.

Trump’s administration now seeks to reclassify drones as “aircraft” rather than missile systems. This semantic shift would transfer them into the [Foreign Military Sales](#) process, the same channel used for fighter jets. It would streamline approvals, bypass MTCR’s strictest controls, and unlock deals stalled by treaty guidelines.

U.S. officials reportedly describe the move as a way to boost industry and counter rivals such as China,



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Israel, and Turkey, whose drone exports are not constrained by MTCR rules. The framing makes clear that the Trump administration is comfortable treating drones not as restricted instruments of war, but as commodities in a competitive marketplace.

## How FMS Works

[Foreign Military Sales](#) (FMS) is a government-to-government system run by the State Department and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. A foreign government requests weapons through a Letter of Request. If approved, the U.S. responds with a Letter of Offer and Acceptance. Once signed, the Pentagon handles the contract with the U.S. manufacturer. The buyer pays all costs, including U.S. administrative fees.

In practice, this makes Washington the broker. It vets, prices, and delivers the weapons, turning arms exports into state-backed transactions rather than private deals.

## Drone Technology

The proposed reinterpretation matters because of what these drones actually do.

The MQ-9 Reaper isn't a simple surveillance tool. It's a heavily armed, long-range unmanned combat aerial vehicle. According to the U.S. Air Force [fact sheet](#), the Reaper can carry up to 3,750 pounds (1,701 kg) of payload and has a range of about 1,150 miles (1,000 nautical miles).

Its lethality lies in its endurance and armament. The Reaper can stay aloft for over 20 hours, reaching altitudes up to 50,000 feet, and its modular external hardpoints carry weapons like AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, GBU-12 Paveway II, and GBU-38 JDAMs (precision-guided bombs).

This is not "merely" an aircraft — it's a persistent strike platform with overwhelming reach and firepower. Its ability to loiter silently over a target and deliver deadly force makes it uniquely potent and precisely the type of drone the MTCR regards as proliferation-critical.

## Companies Set to Profit

The clearest beneficiary of Trump's reinterpretation is General Atomics, builder of the MQ-9 Reaper. This drone is firmly a Category I system under the MTCR, and until now its export has faced a "strong presumption of denial." According to the U.S. Air Force, a full Reaper system - including four aircraft, sensors, a ground control station, and a satellite link — costs \$56.5 million. Standalone airframes are valued in the \$14-20 million range, while procurement contracts that include training and support average closer to \$30-40 million per unit. A Saudi order for more than 100 Reapers could exceed \$5 billion, before factoring in maintenance and life-cycle costs. Reuters [reported](#) that the request is part of a \$142 billion arms package, with drones included as one component.

Reports also name drone-makers Kratos and Anduril as likely beneficiaries, even though they operate mainly in the Category II space. Their drones fall below the MTCR's 500-kilogram payload threshold and therefore already face less-restrictive licensing rules. Kratos' [XQ-58A Valkyrie](#), a jet-powered "loyal wingman" drone, carries about 600 pounds of payload. It has an estimated cost of \$4-6 million per unit, with a design goal of driving that down to around \$2 million. Anduril's [Altius-600](#) loitering munition weighs under 30 pounds. It carries small payloads, and costs in the hundreds of thousands of dollars per unit.

For these firms, the reinterpretation of the treaty may signal a broader shift in U.S. export policy. A



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government more willing to prioritize market share over restraint could ease approval timelines and expand opportunities for Category II systems as well. In practice, this means General Atomics is the immediate winner. But an overall loosening of U.S. drone export policy also positions Kratos, Anduril, and other drone-makers to benefit.

## Trump's Orders

In June, Trump [signed](#) three executive orders to fast-track drone development and aviation innovation. They direct the FAA to loosen rules for beyond-visual-line-of-sight drone flights, set up test corridors for electric vertical take-off and landing (eVTOL) — or “flying cars” — and push research into supersonic aviation. All of it is framed as a bid to restore U.S. aerospace dominance.

The White House calls this clearing away “regulatory gridlock” to “give America’s innovators greater ability to test, develop, and commercialize cutting-edge aircraft.”

The reality is sharper. This isn’t deregulation, but state-sponsored acceleration. The government steps into the role of salesman and broker. It promotes a corporate vision where autonomy, speed, and mass production define the battlefield. Evidently, it is intervention no less than prohibition, only now tilted toward the mass export of war machines. The result is not a freer market or a more peaceful, secure world. It is a state-corporate alignment that normalizes weapons as commodities and advances a dystopian future of war.

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