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Gates Calls for Easing Limits on Exports

By **ELISABETH BUMILLER**

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary **Robert M. Gates** called on Tuesday for an overhaul of the nation's export control system that he said would loosen sales of sensitive technology to American allies without letting up on restrictions over nations like Iran.

In a speech to military contractors, Mr. Gates said that the current system, much of which dates from the end of the cold war, undermined the nation's defense because it made it so difficult for the United States to supply weapons and equipment to friendly countries, including those with forces fighting alongside American troops in Afghanistan. He said his speech, which echoed one on the subject by **President Obama** last summer, was meant to offer "compelling security arguments" for the overhaul.

"America's decades-old, bureaucratically labyrinthine system does not serve our 21st-century security needs or our economic interests," Mr. Gates said. "It is clear that our current limitations in this area undermine America's ability to work with and through partners to confront shared threats and challenges, from terrorism to rogue states to rising powers."

As an example, Mr. Gates said that many parts and components of American combat vehicles and aircraft, like the F-16, required their own export licenses.

"It makes little sense to use the same lengthy process to control the export of every latch, wire and lug nut for a piece of equipment like the F-16 when we have already approved the export of the whole aircraft," he said.

In another example, Mr. Gates said that not long ago a British C-17 cargo plane "spent hours disabled on the ground in Australia — not because the needed part wasn't available, but because U.S. law required the Australians to seek U.S. permission before doing the repair." Mr. Gates added: "These are two of our very strongest allies, for God's sake."

The proposed overhaul, which was embraced by the military industry, is certain to face

skepticism among members of Congress who are concerned that loosening controls would allow sensitive technology to get into the wrong hands. Most recent administrations have sought to revise export control laws, with limited success, in part because the three main agencies that oversee the controls — the Commerce Department, the State Department and the Pentagon — could rarely agree on changes.

Military contractors and national security experts said it was significant that the defense secretary was the one who called for the overhaul — a reflection, they said, of his years in government.

In his remarks, Mr. Gates recalled that when he became deputy director for intelligence at the [C.I.A.](#) in 1982, one of his responsibilities included tracking prohibited transfers of United States technology. “It soon became clear that the length of the list of controlled technologies outstripped our finite intelligence monitoring capabilities and resources,” he said, then added, “We were wasting our time and resources tracking technologies you could buy at [RadioShack.](#)”

To overhaul the system, which would be done partly by executive order but also requires action by Congress, Mr. Gates proposed creating a single list and a single agency to make clear to American companies which items required export licenses.

When an audience member asked Mr. Gates if the proposed new system would make it easier for Iran to obtain components for a [nuclear weapons](#) program, Mr. Gates replied, “The likelihood of the Iranians’ being able to get any of that stuff from us is somewhere south of zero.”

David J. Berteau, a senior adviser at the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) and a defense management and acquisition expert, called Mr. Gates’s speech a “major breakthrough.” The speech recognized, Mr. Berteau said, that countries in Europe and Asia were developing their own military technology in part to get around the controls imposed by the United States, and that the United States could get locked out of that market.