

Tightrope Diplomacy: U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan

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U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan have long been an irritant in Sino-American relations. Chinese leaders believe that Washington continues to renege on a promise that President Ronald Reagan made in the 1982 Joint Communiqué to reduce and eventually phase-out those sales. U.S. leaders respond that Reagan's commitment was based on the assumption that Taiwan's status would be determined solely by peaceful means, and that China would not threaten or intimidate the recalcitrant island. They argue that various actions by Beijing, most notably the dramatic buildup of missiles across the strait from Taiwan, justify continuing to supply Taipei with modern weapons.

Washington is trying to execute an increasingly delicate diplomatic tightrope act. U.S. officials hope that Taiwan is able to maintain its de facto independence rather than being absorbed by the People's Republic. At the same time, Washington has a stake in not unduly irritating Beijing, especially given the growing importance of the bilateral economic relationship. China is also seen as a crucial player regarding several key U.S. foreign policy objectives, especially the North Korean and Iranian nuclear issues.

U.S. leaders also have the delicate task of satisfying Taipei. The resurgence of the Kuomintang Party with the election of Ma Ying-jeou as president in 2008 (and his re-election in 2012) was greeted with sighs of relief in Washington. U.S. policy makers were weary of being blindsided by Ma's predecessor, Chen Shui-bian of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, who was fond of engaging in provocative gestures toward Beijing. But Ma's more pragmatic, conciliatory position regarding the mainland remains controversial among voters. Significant U.S. arms sales to Taiwan have been important to Ma's domestic political credibility.

Consequently, the Obama administration has attempted to adopt a "Goldilocks" approach to arms sales—neither too much, which would infuriate Beijing, nor too little, which might undermine Ma and the KMT as well as make Taiwanese believe that reunification with the mainland cannot be avoided. The \$12 billion weapons sale in late 2011 reflected that Goldilocks strategy. Ma's government wished to purchase advanced C and D models of the F-16 fighter, but China was vehemently opposed to the sale of any F-16s, let alone the most modern ones. So Obama administration officials tried to split the difference. Washington agreed to upgrade Taiwan's existing, less-capable A and B models, but declined to sell the more advanced versions—which would have expanded both the size and capability of Taiwan's air force. Beijing protested that transaction (as it does with all arms sales to Taiwan) but the expressions of anger were relatively restrained.

Recent developments suggest that maintaining such a balanced approach is becoming exceedingly difficult for Washington. Congressional pressure (especially from the Republican-controlled House of Representatives) is mounting on the Obama administration to sell Taiwan more advanced weaponry. House members inserted an amendment in the 2013 National Defense Authorization Act urging President Obama to sell Taipei the F-16 C and D models. Reports circulated in Taiwan that a senior Republican, Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma, assured Taiwanese officials during a visit to the island earlier this year that the United States would approve the sale of Apache attack helicopters in 2014 and Patriot missiles in 2015.

While that report agitated China and gratified pro-defense circles in Taiwan, other reports upset the Taiwanese. One was that the Obama administration now insists that Taipei must get Washington's permission even to request specific weapons systems in arms purchase proposals. Although Ma's government denied that report, DPP supporters are convinced that it is yet more evidence that Ma is "soft" on maintaining a strong defense. Uneasiness in Taiwan increased when another report surfaced in August that Washington had reacted favorably when Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan proposed setting up a bilateral working group to discuss future U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

Adding to the mix is a passage in the official statement of national defense policy that Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense released in early October. That passage stated that the Chinese People's Liberation Army would have "the comprehensive military capability to deter any foreign aid that comes to Taiwan's defense by 2020." In other words, Beijing would be able to deter or repel a U.S. military intervention in response to an armed conflict between Taiwan and the mainland. The accuracy of that prediction is open to question, but it is placing additional pressure on the Obama administration both to implement more seriously the so-called U.S. strategic pivot to East Asia, and to beef-up arms sales to Taiwan so that the island can better deter any Chinese military bullying.

All of these developments suggest that the issue of weapons sales to Taiwan is coming to a head. If Washington decides to sell Apache helicopters and Patriot missiles to Taipei, as Senator Inhofe reportedly stated, Beijing's reaction will be anything but mild. The Chinese regard those systems with only a little less hostility than they do the possible sale of advanced F-16's. However, congressional pressure continues to mount on the Obama administration to intensify its military support for Taiwan—both by a more extensive transfer of arms to Taipei and by re-emphasizing the U.S. security commitment to Taiwan, backed up by larger air and naval deployments in the western Pacific. Balancing on the diplomatic tightrope may be reaching the point of impossibility.