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U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan: A Delicate Tightrope

By [Ted Galen Carpenter](#)

The Taiwanese government and its political allies in the United States are conducting a full-court press to get the Obama administration to sell newer, more advanced F-16 fighters to Taipei. Conflicting diplomatic pressures are making this a difficult decision. When Washington approved a more limited arms sale package in 2010, the Chinese government reacted with unexpected vehemence. Among other actions, Beijing suspended military-to-military ties with the United States.

Administration leaders don't want to cause a new round of animosity, and the sale of advanced F-16s is an especially sensitive matter for the Chinese. Taipei suggested such an upgrade to its air force as far back as 2006, during the administration of President Chen Shui-bian, leader of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party. Although George W. Bush was unwilling to provoke China by taking that step, the issue never went away, and now it's back on the front burner.

The need to avoid infuriating Beijing is a major consideration for U.S. policymakers, but it is only one factor in a complex diplomatic matrix. Washington is wary of taking any action that might inadvertently re-ignite tensions in the Taiwan Strait, which have receded since the election of Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou in 2008. That situation is a refreshing contrast to the periodic crises during the administrations of Ma's two predecessors.

U.S. leaders appreciate Ma's more conciliatory strategy for dealing with Beijing. But that approach remains controversial in Taiwan, and Ma is under pressure to show that he is prepared to defend Taiwan's sovereignty against Beijing's efforts to compel the island's eventual political re-unification with the mainland. The centerpiece of Ma's effort to bolster his defense credentials is to gain Washington's approval for the sale of the advanced F-16s. U.S. leaders, in turn, are anxious not to undercut Ma's domestic political position, lest another pro-independence DPP leader win the upcoming presidential election in 2012.

These conflicting pressures require the Obama administration to execute a delicate tightrope act, trying to satisfy Ma's request without excessively antagonizing Beijing. It would be a challenge for even the best high-wire acrobat.

As if the diplomatic crosswinds coming from Taipei and Beijing weren't enough to create a dilemma for the Obama administration, domestic political factors have now intruded. Forty-seven senators, led by Texas Republican John Cornyn, signed a letter to President Obama last month urging him to approve the F-16 sale. Their position probably reflects genuine worries about Taiwan's security. Nearly 70 percent of the island's fighter fleet is scheduled to be retired over the next decade. The military balance in the Taiwan Strait, already tilting in Beijing's favor, could become dire for Taipei without the new F-16s.

But there are also more mundane political and economic motives. The F-16s are built in Texas, and the

manufacturer, Lockheed Martin, warns that it may have to shut down the aircraft's production line within the next few years unless the Taiwan sale and other export deals are finalized. Such a warning from a large employer impacts not only the Texas economy but the economies of other states.

This episode is a textbook example of what happens when the U.S. makes a security commitment to a weak, vulnerable client state. And in this case, Washington is trying to fulfill such a commitment while placating a country that is both a major U.S. economic partner and a key regional power. The effort to satisfy both parties is extremely difficult and will likely fail.

As we see the Obama administration slowly twisting in the wind regarding the Taiwan arms sale issue, we need to remind ourselves that security commitments often entail multiple problems and headaches. They should never be undertaken lightly, and U.S. leaders always need to apply a sober cost-benefit calculation. As much as the Obama administration might wish to avoid that unpleasant task in this case, it needs to do so soon.

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