

# THE | DIPLOMAT

## With New Offensive Weapons Package, Trump Administration Goes All-in for Taiwan

*The sale of new missile systems stretches the concept of “defensive” weaponry to its limit.*

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In September 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping saw aerospace giant Boeing as so important to his country’s development that he visited the company’s factory in Everett, Washington on the first leg of his first state visit to the United States. During that week-long trip to the United States, likely no one would have guessed that just five years later Xi would impose sanctions on Boeing, which has over the last 45 years grown into the single most influential partner responsible for the growth and modernization of China’s aviation sector.

However, the Trump administration’s recent announcements of four large packages of both offensive and defensive weapons sales to Taiwan have resulted in Chinese sanctions on Boeing, highlighting how much the U.S.-China relationship has changed over the course of the last four years.

Boeing’s sanction-drawing offense comes from its role as the principal contractor for a proposed \$1.008 billion sale to Taiwan of 135 AGM-84H Standoff Land Attack Missile Expanded Response (SLAM-ER) Missiles. Included as well are four Telemetry and 12 Captive Air Training Missiles (CATM), along with related equipment, support, and training, according to the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA).

Boeing also draws China’s ire for its production of “up to 100 Harpoon Coastal Defense Systems (HCDS) and related equipment, for an estimated cost of \$2.37 billion,” another offer to Taiwan that the DSCA announced on October 26, five days after SLAM-ER and two other weapons packages were published.

Those packages include the \$436 million sale of 11 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) M142 launchers and related equipment. Lockheed Martin, the prime contractor for the project, also came in for sanctions from Beijing.

The fourth package of military equipment is made up of six MS-110 Recce Pods and related equipment and support at an estimated cost of \$367.2 million. Defpost describes the MS-110 as a Multispectral Airborne Reconnaissance System that “will improve Taiwan’s capability to meet current and future threats by providing timely Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), capabilities for its security and defense.” It’s compatible with both manned and unmanned aircraft.

All of these weapons and equipment, of course, are intended to help Taiwan counter a potential invasion attempt from China, the possibility of which has been hanging over the island nation's head since Communist forces took over China in 1949, and defeated Nationalist forces took refuge in Taiwan.

U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan, as always, fall under the policy outlined in the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which governs U.S. policy toward Taiwan as a whole. The Act says that "It is the policy of the United States... to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character."

The Act goes on to say that "the United States will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability."

However, in selling the Boeing SLAM-ERs and the Lockheed Martin HIMARS to Taiwan, the definition of "defensive" has been masterfully massaged. SLAM-ERs and their predecessors, SLAMs, have been used offensively in both Iraq and the Balkans. "With a maximum range of around 270km (145 nautical miles), the SLAM-ER gives the ROCAF (Republic of China Air Force) improved stand-off capabilities, and could potentially strike targets across the Taiwan Strait, even at its widest point, without the jets having to leave Taiwanese airspace," [according to AIN Online](#).

The very nature of stand-off land attack missiles implies their offensive nature. They allow missiles to be launched from a distance outside of the range that their targets can reply defensively, allowing attackers to "stand off" from the consequences of their attack.

Functionally, therefore, the new arms sales to Taiwan extend the defensive perimeter of Taiwan's national interests.

With the SLAM-ER, Taiwan has a "long-range, air-launched, precision land and sea attack cruise missile," according to the U.S. Navy's description. With its roots in the original Harpoon missiles of the 1970s, SLAM-ER relies on GPS and automatic target acquisition, among other technologies, to give "over-the-horizon" capability "for pre-planned and target of opportunity missions against land and sea targets," the navy says.

Plainly put, these cruise missiles give Taiwan the ability to make surgically-precise attacks on crucial Chinese air and amphibious assets in the event of an imminent attack. For example, a build-up of maritime forces deployed along the southeastern coast of Fujian province would be well within the missile's range if Taiwan has the inclination to use it.

As for the HIMARS, it is "based on the need for a lighter weight, more deployable MLRS that can be sent anywhere in the world to provide the maneuver commander lethal, long range fires at the very beginning of a conflict," writes the Federation of American Scientists [on its website](#). That would make HIMARS also fall into the category of what is traditionally called an offensive weapon.

The sale of offensive weapons to provide Taiwan with an advance defense capability highlights the change in circumstances between 40 years ago and today. Defending Taiwan from China in

1979 was a very different calculation from defending it today. As the Cato Institute put it in September, the obligation to provide Taiwan with the means with which to defend itself “may have made at least modest strategic sense when China was weak militarily. But with the substantial growth of the PRC’s military power over the past two decades, the risk-benefit calculation for the United States has shifted dramatically toward the former.”

But no one can argue that Taiwan is not being provoked.

The South China Morning Post (SCMP) reported on October 18 that the Chinese military is beefing up its coastal forces “as it prepares for possible invasion of Taiwan.”

The SCMP also reports that China’s “missile bases have been upgraded and equipped with the most advanced hypersonic missile, the DF-17.”

And it is harassing Taiwan from the air. Taiwan’s defense ministry reported in late September that “China has threatened or entered into Taiwan’s airspace 46 times in the past nine days.”

Meanwhile, back at Boeing, management should prepare for the backlash.

Although the Chinese specifically limited their sanctions announcement to Boeing’s defense business unit, Boeing’s aircraft business may take incoming fire, as well. As those who have worked in China know well, the official displeasure of the Chinese Communist Party is often delivered in subtle but substantive ways on the ground in China.