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Guns for Peace

by Doug Bandow

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The Obama administration is preparing a new arms package for Taiwan. Ironically, selling weapons to Taipei may be the best way for Washington to get out from the middle of one of the world's potentially most volatile relationships, between China and Taiwan.

The Taiwan Strait is at peace and relations between China and Taiwan are improving. Yet the former continues to point more than 1,300 missiles across the Taiwan Strait. The threat of military force remains as an uneasy backdrop to expanding economic and tourist contacts between the People's Republic of China and Republic of China.

The United States finds itself positioned uneasily between the two Chinas. Formally committed to the principle of one China as a matter of policy and providing weapons to Taiwan for its defense as a matter of law, Washington cannot easily square the circle. As the PRC grows in economic strength and international influence, pressure will grow on America's relationship with Taipei.

The PRC and ROC became implacable enemies after Mao Zedong's communists ousted the nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek, who fled to the island of Taiwan, regained from Japan only at the end of World War II. For much of the Cold War the U.S. military acted as the final guarantor of Chiang's rump state. Jimmy Carter finished the geopolitical move initiated by Richard Nixon, ending Washington's recognition of the ROC as ruling all China; Congress then approved the Taiwan Relations Act, preserving an informal relationship with Taiwan.

Today the ROC is recognized by 23 small countries, concentrated in Latin America. There no longer is any pretense that Taiwan represents the mainland. In fact, most Taiwanese would choose an independent Taiwan given their druthers. But their druthers are constrained by Beijing, which has not dropped its claim over the island. A formal declaration of independence might cause the PRC to loose some of those missiles aimed at Taiwan.

Taipei's precarious situation was demonstrated by the transformation of Bush administration policy. President George W. Bush began his term promising that the U.S. would come to Taiwan's aid in the event of an attack by China. At the end of his term President Bush was attending the Olympics in Beijing, holding back arms from Taiwan, and limiting transit by Taiwan's president across American territory—as had Bill Clinton.

U.S. policy in part reflected personal animus from President Bush, who famously based policy decisions on personal assessments, toward Taiwan's Chen Shui-bian. And Washington still insisted that cross-strait differences be decided peacefully. Nevertheless, the PRC's gravitational pull obviously was hard to resist, even by the hawkish Bush administration.

The election of Ma Ying-jeou as Taiwan's president in March 2008 was greeted with relief in Beijing and Washington. Ma, though in persistent political difficulties at home, most recently over U.S. beef imports, has downplayed Taiwan's quest for a separate international identity and promoted ties with

China. Most notable was Taipei's support for initiating direct flights with China, permitting direct Chinese investment in Taiwan, and allowing an influx of Chinese tourists. Despite concerns over lost jobs and increased Chinese influence, the Ma government is pushing for further economic integration through the Economic Co-operation Framework Agreement. Yet the PRC's retreat from confrontation reflects a change in tactics, not objectives. While we all should hope that the new China-Taiwan relationship presages a peaceful settlement of their dispute over the island's status, Taiwan's newly restrained attitude has only delayed rather than eliminated the threat of conflict with China.

The atmospherics are good, but the underlying substantive issues remain unchanged. The PRC sees only one outcome, whether the result of negotiation or ultimatum: Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan. As Beijing's ambassador to the United States, Zhou Wenzhong, explained a couple of years ago, everything could be discussed "as long as they agree to the one-China principle."

In contrast, President Ma, no less than his predecessor, opposes submitting Taiwan to rule, however loose and genteel, by the PRC. The Taiwanese public feels the same way. Thousands of demonstrators typically greet visiting envoys from Beijing. A recent Rand Corporation report observed: "the changes in the political, social, and cultural identity of the island's population are genuine, significant, and enduring, and these realities strongly suggest that even the most flexible Taipei government will reach its limits of possible accommodation well short of Beijing's desired position." At some point China's patience is likely to fade. What happens if Ma's more cooperative policy has only put off the day of reckoning, delaying rather than forestalling a Chinese ultimatum?

Continuing arms sales may be the best hope of turning delayed into forestalled.

During the Cold War no one doubted Washington's will and ability to prevent the PRC from attempting to conquer or intimidate Taiwan. Neither is certain any longer.

Threatening war with xenophobic, impoverished Maoist China in the midst of the Cold War was one thing. Contemplating war with increasingly capitalist and modern China, economically dominant in East Asia, tied by trade to most industrialized states, and deploying increasing economic and diplomatic resources throughout the Third World, is a very different matter. Pull that trigger and the twenty-first century looks a lot uglier, even if the United States handily wins round one.

And round one no longer would be a slam dunk. While the PRC cannot—in the foreseeable future, at least—match American military power, it can create a substantial deterrent capability, sharply raising the potential cost of U.S. intervention. Beijing's increasing ability to sink U.S. carriers with submarines and missiles alone would force any president to think very hard before sending the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait for battle. Nor can American air dominance be considered a given any longer. Warns the Rand corporation: Taiwan's proximity to China "combined with China's growing capabilities and the lack of basing options for U.S. forces in the vicinity of the strait, call into question Washington's ability to credibly serve as guarantor of Taiwan's security in the future."

As protecting Taiwan goes from being a guaranteed freebie to a potential catastrophe, Taipei will no longer be able to rely upon America. Taiwan has been a good friend for many years, but few presidents would decide to protect Taipei if doing so put Los Angeles and maybe New York at risk. Calls for increased military cooperation between Washington and Taipei by Taiwan's American friends can't change this underlying strategic reality. Arms sales offer the best path out of the Taiwan thicket.

In 2001 the Bush administration offered Taiwan a \$12 billion weapons package. Foolishly, the KMT-dominated legislature blocked the purchases as part of internecine political warfare against the Chen government. Then the Bush administration showed its pique with President Chen by apparently

freezing arms sales to Taipei. The result was to accelerate the already disturbing erosion of Taiwan's defensive capabilities against the PRC, which has invested in precisely the capabilities—amphibious, missile, and naval—that would be particularly useful in threatening Taiwan.

Taiwanese weakness could be dangerous. China's Deng Xiaoping talked about taking a century to resolve the Taiwan issue, but today's Chinese leadership has demonstrated its desire for a much quicker resolution. Should the PRC grow impatient—whether as a result of a perception of growing military prowess, grab for advantage as part of a struggle for power within Zhongnanhai, or feeling that the communist leadership had waited long enough—the regime might be tempted to strike. If Beijing believed that victory would be swift and bloodless, the temptation to act could prove overwhelming.

Of course, even fulfilling Taiwan's "wish list," which includes an advanced version of the F-16, would not enable the island state to defeat China in a full-scale war. But Taipei needs sufficiency rather than equality—a military capable of making any attempt at coercion more costly than the likely benefits of victory. So far China has been cautious and pragmatic in exercising its increased diplomatic influence and military power. Taiwan needs enough military force with enough capabilities to reinforce these good instincts.

Officials in the Ma government appear to realistically assess cross-strait politics. President Ma explained: "We simply want to maintain the military balance." Premier Wu Den-yih recently restated Taiwan's commitment to the peaceful progress of bilateral ties, but added: "Taiwan needs to ensure it has strong defense, so it is necessary to continue to procure weapons to achieve that goal." Taiwanese Lt. Gen. Chiu Kuo-cheng previously observed: With "more than a thousand Chinese missiles pointing at us, we need to be well-prepared to defend ourselves."

Nevertheless, Taipei needs to do much more if it is serious. Taiwan's first Quadrennial Defense Review, released last year, called for military spending of three percent of GDP. Even that level is anemic, however, lagging behind that of America even though the island state faces far more significant security threats.

Before leaving office the Bush administration resumed arms sales. Now Raymond Burghardt of the American Institute in Taipei, the de facto U.S. embassy, confirms that a deal is in the works. Only the (admittedly important) details—what weapons, when Congress will be notified—remain in question. Undoubtedly the PRC will be unhappy. Perhaps very unhappy. An unnamed Chinese diplomat told the *Washington Post*: "Selling the F-16s to Taiwan would be a big, big problem for us. Cooperation on other things would naturally be affected." Beijing has never been shy about expressing its irritation with any U.S. policy which in the slightest way treats Taiwan as an independent entity. Nevertheless, there should be no retreat from the principle of selling Taipei the weapons that it needs for its defense.

The Taiwanese have built a free and democratic society. They deserve access to the tools which will enable them to defend that society. Moreover, the best strategy for ensuring a peaceful resolution of Taipei's status is a robust Taiwanese defensive capability. As John Negroponte argued two years ago, selling arms "supports our belief that a Taiwan confident and capable of protecting itself will offer the best prospects for a peaceful resolution of cross-strait differences."

Selling needed arms also is a far better option than intervening militarily in any conflict. It will cost the PRC far less to build a deterrent capability than it will cost the United States to maintain sufficient forces to overwhelm Beijing. To simply presume that China, with far more at stake than America, will forever back down would be a wild and wildly dangerous gamble. Whether Chinese concerns are driven more by nationalist passions or geostrategic concerns, the more direct Washington's

involvement, the more determined Beijing's likely response. From the PRC's standpoint, arms sales, though undesirable, are less threatening than an alliance relationship, whether explicit or implicit.

America should not be expected to risk major war with nuclear powers to protect other states, however friendly or democratic. However, Washington can help other states defend themselves. Selling weapons to Taiwan will empower the island state without inserting the United States into any cross-strait crossfire.

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