



Obama Continues Bush Policy — Refuses Taiwan New F-16s | Print |

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The White House announced that once again, the United States would be reevaluating its defense partnership with the Republic of China on Taiwan. The administration decided last month that the arms package it would be selling to Taipei would be sorely reduced; the Pentagon has chosen not to sell Taiwan 66 late-model F-16 aircraft, a deal potentially valued at over \$8 billion, after years of debate over whether to supply the free Chinese island with advanced strike aircraft to upgrade its aging air force. Instead, administration and congressional officials said the new arms package will include weapons and equipment to upgrade its existing F-16 jets, worth about \$4.2 billion.

The Obama administration turned down the request from both Taipei and congressional Republicans; supporters of the sale say that the new F-16s, produced by Lockheed Martin, are needed to bolster Taiwan's defenses against communist China's growing air power and to produce jobs for the U.S. aerospace industry (a blatant example of Military Keynesianism at play — the belief that government-manufactured and taxpayer-funded defense commodities are somehow a feasible, economically-sound, and constitutional means of creating and sustaining jobs).

Red China and the Obama Administration

Experts believe that the primary reason why the Obama administration refused to sell Taiwan the new F-16s is its desire to improve relations with communist China. Rather than viewing China's growth as a threat to American interests, Obama stated on January 19, 2011 (at a White House press conference with Chinese President Hu Jintao), "We welcome China's rise. I absolutely believe that China's peaceful rise is good for the world, and it's good for America," arguing that the country's economic progress benefits the United States and opens the door to greater international stability and humanitarian progress.

The Obama administration has made its policy of seeking closer military ties with China a high priority. Such ties have improved dramatically between the United States and Red

China in the past two years, with the two sides engaging on a wide array of issues in several different forums, such as June's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Chinese Defense Minister Gen. Liang Guanglie both delivered speeches at the event, during which they expressed satisfaction with the resumption of high-level Sino-American military relations. Liang's appearance marked the first time that a Chinese Defense Minister had attended the annual International Institute for Strategic Studies Asia Security Summit. The two Defense Ministers also convened a special bilateral session on the conference's sidelines, where they continued a dialogue they had started last January when Gates visited Beijing.

Following Gates's China trip, the U.S. and Chinese governments initiated a Strategic Security Dialogue, the first session of which addressed cyber and maritime issues. Future sessions will cover nuclear issues, missile defense, and outer space security. Gen. Chen Bingde, chief of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff, also recently led a senior-level PLA delegation on a week-long site visit to numerous military installations in the United States. During his keynote speech at the National Defense University in Washington, Chen emphasized that the PLA wasn't a threat, since it lagged far behind the U.S. armed forces. Gates left the Defense Department having forged improved military relations with China — a policy trajectory being perpetuated by the current Defense Secretary, Leon Panetta, who embarked yesterday on a week-long tour of Asia amid a broad effort by the Obama administration to shift more of its national security focus toward Asia.

The decision to not sell F-16s to Taiwan represents an effort on behalf of the administration to rectify the breach created in Sino-American relations when, in response to the Obama administration's signing off on the sale of \$6.4 billion of military equipment to Taiwan, China cut off most of its military contacts with the U.S. last year. China's U.S. debt holdings also likely influenced the decision. In February 2010, Chinese military leaders demanded that the United States be punished for arms sales to Taiwan by calling in some of the \$1.1 trillion in China's Treasury debt holdings.

In August, Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas) held up the nomination of William Burns to be Deputy Secretary of State over the jet sale. Cornyn released the hold after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton promised that a decision on the next Taiwan arms package would be made by October 1; this has yet to come to fruition.

In addition, the Pentagon is expected to release a long-delayed study on the air power balance across the 100-mile Taiwan Strait. The study is said by officials to show that Taiwan's air force urgently needs modernization, especially as China has been building up its air forces along the coast opposite Taiwan with more advanced warplanes, including Russian-made Su-27s, Su-30s and Chinese J-10 fighters. Taiwan's air force is facing serious shortcomings in its fleet, which includes 145 F-16 A/B jets, F-4s, French-made Mirage-2000 jets and domestic fighters.

A congressional assessment supporting the sale of new F-16s stated:

The U.S. government paralysis over sales of these aircraft since 2006 has given China time to develop more advanced capabilities — such as its fifth-generation J-20 — and evaluate capabilities to defeat even more advanced U.S. tactical aircraft such as the F-22, which may be sold to other U.S. allies in the region, such as Japan, in the future.

A Continuation of Bush's China Policy

Obama's anti-Taiwan position represents a continuation of former President George W. Bush's China policy, particularly in terms of economic engagement. In April 2009, Obama's Treasury Department declined to name China a "currency manipulator," using arguments similar to those advanced previously by the Bush administration. "There's more continuity than discontinuity," said Nicholas Lardy, a China expert at the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

Bush, like Obama, opposed efforts for Taiwanese independence, saying the U.S. government holds a one-China policy based on the three China-U.S. joint communiques and the Taiwan Relations Act. Former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabo expressed his appreciation for Bush's commitment to the joint communiques and the one-China policy. "In particular, we very much appreciate the position adopted by President Bush towards the latest moves and developments in Taiwan, that is, the attempt to resort to referenda of various kinds as an excuse to pursue Taiwan independence," said Wen, referring to Taiwan's proposed national security referendum in 2003, which Bush opposed. This policy dates back to 1972, when then-President Richard Nixon formally recognized Beijing as the legitimate Chinese government, resulting in the United States and the communist state becoming increasingly economically intertwined.

Furthermore, as noted by the Cato Institute's Ted Galen Carpenter, the Bush administration opposed Taiwanese sovereignty; U.S. leaders considered then-President Chen Shui Bian a disruptive figure and hoped he would not be reelected:

What was surprising and distressing was the Bush administration's response to China's pressure. How much the administration was willing to accommodate Beijing became evident in December 2003 during a visit by Chinese premier Wen Jiabao. President Bush publicly scolded "Taiwan's leader" for seeking to change the political status of the island unilaterally and emphasized Washington's opposition to any unilateral actions. Chen's principal offense was his proposal to hold the March referendum.

That is no way for Washington to treat another democracy. It is unsavory for the United States to criticize a democratic polity for choosing to hold a referendum on a policy issue — however sensitive that issue might be. It is even worse to criticize such a basic exercise of democracy, as Bush did, while saying nothing about the PRC's destabilizing and provocative deployment of missiles across the Taiwan Strait.

Similarly, the Obama administration's decision to not sell Taiwan the new F-16s represents the continued favoring of communist China; just as the Bush administration meddled against Chen, the Financial Times reports that an unnamed White House source said that the administration hopes Tsai Ing-Wen (an ardent Taiwanese nationalist) loses the presidential election. Likewise, neither the Bush-initiated 2010 arms package, nor Obama's 2011 F-16-upgrade deal gives Taiwan what it needs to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability as required by the Taiwan Relations Act. The efficacy of that act is being undercut daily, as the Obama administration pursues a defense policy that bolsters Red Chinese interests at the expense of our ally, Taiwan.

Historical footnote: This week is the 40th anniversary of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758 of October 25, 1971, which recognized the representatives of the communist People's Republic of China (PRC) as "the only legitimate representative of China to the United Nations" and expelled the legitimate government of the Republic of China on Taiwan, headed by Chiang Kai-shek, "from the place which they unlawfully [sic] occupy at the United Nations."