

Time to Rethink Arms Sales to Taiwan

Once, they might have tilted the military balance. Now they just destabilize the region.

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Even if Joe Biden wins the election, don't expect the U.S. to stop selling arms to Taiwan anytime soon. For its part, the Trump administration has gone all in on arming the self-governing island. On Oct. 26, the Trump administration notified Congress of plans for a \$2.37 billion sale of Harpoon missiles to Taiwan, which followed an August sale of 66 F-16 fighter jets and U.S. approval to pursue purchases of missiles, rocket artillery, and aerial reconnaissance sensors worth some \$1.8 billion. And these are just the latest in a longer trend. Before this year, the Trump administration previously notified Congress of over \$12 billion in weapons deals that will eventually deliver those F-16s plus Stinger missiles and 108 M1A2 Abrams tanks to Taiwan.

On the surface, selling arms to Taiwan makes sense. Taipei has been an American ally for many decades and the United States has promised to help the island defend itself against China. Advocates of the most recent deal argue that the Harpoon missiles will improve Taiwan's ability to defend itself from a Chinese attack without direct U.S. involvement.

The reality, however, is that there is no way for Taiwan to defend itself against a concerted assault by China without American assistance. A few more missiles or fighter jets won't move the needle much. Given this, arms sales to Taiwan increase tensions with Beijing and generate additional risk without providing any significant benefits to the United States. Unfortunately, given Biden's recent statements, there is little reason to expect a change of course even if the White House changes hands.

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Few people think the weapons will make a meaningful dent in the existing balance of power. China has a massive military advantage. China can launch a devastating first strike against Taiwan with missile, air, and cyber capabilities, then blockade the island nation with its navy and anti-access/area denial weapons. Its air force would eventually weaken Taiwan's resistance, and its amphibious force would then invade. Taiwan could certainly bloody China's nose with American weapons, but it could not prevent an invasion without external intervention. Padding its inventory with a few dozen more jets, tanks, and missiles won't change things.

On the other hand, the observation that arms sales to Taiwan increase tensions with China should be an uncontroversial one. China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, said that these sales "seriously damage China's sovereignty and security interests, send a seriously wrong signal to Taiwan independence forces, and severely damage China-U.S. relations and peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait." Zhao added that China will make a "legitimate and necessary response" because of the sales.

Beijing's reasons for being concerned should not be a surprise. Taiwan's leaders are not really buying missiles or planes or tanks; they are buying signals of American commitment to Taiwan's independence. For China, this means another great power has influence with a nearby, rival neighbor. Both Beijing and Taipei know that anti-tank missiles will not change the regional balance of power. Instead, these sales signal that the U.S. wants to maintain its own influence in the region and to deny China regional primacy.

Selling arms to Taiwan also creates a moral hazard that could make things even worse. By giving Taiwan's leaders greater confidence in American support, arms sales may encourage them to engage in provocative behavior that aggravates China and in turn, encourages Beijing to act more aggressively. The greater the chances for conflict between Taiwan and China, the greater the prospects that the United States winds up in a shooting war with a nuclear-armed adversary.

Nor do arms sales to Taiwan promise much in the way of economic gain, advocates' claims to the contrary. Though Trump loves to crow about making big deals, when it comes to Taiwan, arms sales aren't paying off. In response to continued arms sales to Taiwan, China hit Boeing, Lockheed Martin, and Raytheon with sanctions. None of those companies sells weapons to China, of course, but they do operate businesses there. The announcement caused Boeing's stock price to fall 4.4 percent; Raytheon's, 4.3 percent; and Lockheed Martin's, 3.2 percent. More broadly, the sales-and-sanctions spiral will only extend the already costly U.S.-China trade war. Any profits from arms sales pale in comparison to the \$46 billion in tariffs and 300,000 lost jobs the trade war has cost the American economy.

A Biden victory is unlikely to change U.S. arms sales policy. The Obama administration, after all, began the pivot to Asia as part of a more aggressive approach towards a rising China. Over eight years, the Obama administration notified Congress of \$14 billion in potential arms sales to Taiwan. Throughout his campaign, Biden has talked tough about China, made loud noises about reinvigorating America's global leadership, and in a recent op-ed argued that his plans would include "deepening our ties with Taiwan." All indications suggest that Biden will continue providing Taiwan with advanced American weapons.

Washington has long viewed arms sales as a cheap and low-risk strategy for supporting allies and deterring adversaries. And when China was a much weaker nation, this argument had merit. In decades past, China's economic and military inferiority was such that American arms transfers to Taiwan may well have increased regional stability. In light of China's massive growth in economic and military power, however, this logic no longer holds. Today, selling American weapons to Taiwan has a destabilizing effect and the United States cannot ensure Taiwan's independence at a reasonable cost should war come. New conditions require a new arms sales strategy for Taiwan.

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