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## Varying Taipei defence for less offence

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THE cross-strait situation may have stabilised in the past year or two as a result of Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou's China-friendly policies. But Beijing's strident response to Washington's announcement of a new arms sales package to Taipei shows that the Taiwan Strait remains a hot spot. And Taiwan's display of anxiety despite having just secured some advanced weapons from the United States is further evidence that the surface calm should not be taken for granted.

A Taiwanese reserve air force lieutenant-general, in an article in the Apple Daily, noted that though the weapons on offer would have an insignificant effect on Taiwan's defence capability, Beijing was putting immense pressure on Washington through its posturing. He worried that this would make it difficult for Taiwan to buy substantial weapons in the future.

China has condemned the US \$6.4 billion (S \$9 billion) arms package and cancelled some military exchanges with the US. For the first time, it has also publicly threatened sanctions against American companies that sold arms to Taiwan.

Even the Beijing-friendly China Times pointed out in an editorial that while China has shown goodwill to Taiwan on the economic front, it has not given way in the area of security, with no sign of reduction in the number of missiles it points at the island. It added that Beijing's opposition to the arms sales only caused Taiwanese to worry that China wanted to 'coerce Taiwan into signing a peace treaty'.

The responses from both sides of the Taiwan Strait showed all too clearly that the substantive issues dividing them remain unchanged. On the one hand, China sees only one possible outcome, whether through negotiation or not, which is mainland China regaining sovereignty over Taiwan. On the other, Mr Ma opposes submitting the island to rule by China.

But what Taiwan fears most is that the US is selling it weapons because it is no longer willing to come to its aid if China were to attack the island. A pessimistic Apple Daily editorial quoted Mr Doug Bandow of the **Cato Institute** as saying that the US 'should not be expected to risk major war with nuclear powers to protect other states, however friendly or democratic'.

While the editorial ended morosely with the prediction that all arms sales would be halted eventually, Mr Bandow in his article said otherwise. He had in fact suggested that arms sales are necessary to maintain a robust Taiwanese defence capability so as to ensure a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue.

'Taiwanese weakness can be dangerous. Should China grow impatient - and believe that victory would be swift and bloodless - the temptation to act could prove overwhelming,' he wrote.

The problem is that China's growing military might is tilting the military balance in the strait in its favour. As noted by the Taiwanese lieutenant-general, the 500 very expensive PAC-3 missiles that Taiwan might possess cannot remove the deadly threat of the 1,500 missiles China has aimed at the island.

Indeed, US Naval War College associate research professor William Murray wrote in 2008 that what Taipei needed was a new, asymmetrical defence strategy. Taiwan, he noted, can no longer counter Chinese military strength in a symmetrical manner. He suggested that Taiwan should not waste money on costly weapons systems such as the PAC-3 missile systems, F-16 fighters (the sale of which the US has yet to approve) and submarines (the viability of which the Taiwanese are studying).

Instead, it should take advantage of more affordable, more effective and less destabilising means of defence against precision bombardment, invasion and blockade. This means hardening key facilities and building redundancies into critical infrastructure and processes so Taiwan 'could absorb and survive a long- range precision bombardment'.

It should also build a professional standing army better-suited to high technology combat instead of the current conscript-based force. This would be better than relying on a navy and air force to destroy an invasion force.

To withstand a prolonged blockade, he suggested that Taiwan stockpile critical supplies and build infrastructure that would allow it to attend to the needs of its people unassisted for an extended period of time.

Such a 'porcupine' strategy, he said, would offer Taiwan a way to resist Chinese military coercion for weeks or months. It would also be less provocative to Beijing than the current offensive defence policy. Most importantly, he said, it would give the US time to 'deliberate whether intervention was warranted'.

His suggestion of an all-volunteer force has been taken up by Taiwan, which announced last year in its first quadrennial defence review that it would phase in such a force by 2014.

Last December, a US think-tank, the Centre for a New American Security, suggested that Washington and Taipei set up a joint analysis group to plan for Taiwan's defence based on achieving asymmetric capabilities.

If such a strategy will bring stability to the region by deterring war in a manner that is non-provocative, then it is one that should be encouraged by all.

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