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US arms sales crucial for Taiwan

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 — the one between China and Taiwan.

Relations between the two are improving, yet the former continues to point more than 1,300 missiles at the latter. The threat of military force remains a backdrop to expanding economic and tourist contacts across the Taiwan Strait.

The US is positioned uneasily between them. Formally committed to the principle of one China and providing weapons to Taiwan for its defense, Washington cannot easily square the circle. As the People's Republic of China (PRC) grows in economic strength and international influence, pressure will grow on the US' relationship with Taipei.

Taiwan's precarious situation was demonstrated by the transformation of Bush administration policy. By the end of his term former US president George W. Bush was holding back arms from Taiwan and limiting transit by Taiwan's president across US territory — as had Bill Clinton.

The election of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) in March 2008 was greeted with relief in Beijing and Washington. Ma has downplayed Taiwan's quest for a separate international identity and promoted ties with China.

Yet the underlying substantive issues remain unchanged. The PRC sees only one outcome, whether the result of negotiation or ultimatum: Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan.

In contrast, Ma, no less than his predecessor, opposes submitting Taiwan to rule by the PRC.

At some point China's patience is likely to fade. Continuing arms sales may be the best hope of forestalling conflict.

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

Go to war with China and the 21st century looks a lot uglier, even if the US handily wins round one. And round

one no longer would be a slam-dunk.

While the PRC cannot, at least for the foreseeable future, match US military power, it can create a substantial deterrent capability, sharply raising the potential cost of US intervention. Beijing's increasing ability to sink US carriers with submarines and missiles alone would force any president to hesitate sending the Seventh Fleet into the strait for battle.

As protecting Taiwan goes from being a guaranteed freebie to a potential catastrophe, Taipei will no longer be able to rely upon the US. Taiwan has been a good friend for many years, but few US presidents would decide to protect Taipei if doing so put Los Angeles and New York at risk.

Arms sales offer the best path out of the Taiwan thicket.

In 2001 the Bush administration offered Taiwan a US\$12 billion weapons package. For political purposes, the then opposition-dominated legislature blocked the purchases.

Then the Bush administration showed its pique with former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) by freezing arms sales to Taipei. The result was to accelerate the already disturbing erosion of Taiwan's defensive capabilities.

Taiwanese weakness could be dangerous. Should the PRC grow impatient — and believe that victory would be swift and bloodless — the temptation to act could prove overwhelming.

Of course, even fulfilling Taiwan's "wish list" would not enable it 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.

Before leaving office the Bush administration resumed arms sales. Now a new deal is in the works. The PRC responded that the US "should respect China's core interests."

Nevertheless, there should be no US retreat from the principle of selling Taipei the weapons that it needs for its defense. Taiwanese have built a free and democratic society. They deserve access to the tools that 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. Selling arms is a far better option than intervening militarily in any conflict.

To presume that China, with far more at stake than the US, will forever back down would be a wild gamble. Whether Chinese concerns are driven more by nationalist passions or geostrategic concerns, the more direct Washington's involvement, the more dangerous Beijing's likely response. And there would be no greater calamity than a war between the US and China.

The US should not be expected to risk major war with nuclear powers to protect other states, however friendly or democratic. But Washington can help other nations defend themselves. Selling weapons to Taiwan would

empower it without inserting the US into any cross-strait crossfire.

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