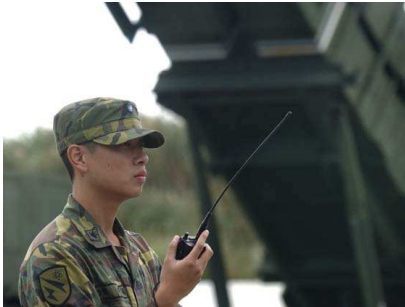


THE ORANGE COUNTY BETA
REGISTER

Ted Galen Carpenter: U.S.-China tensions rising

By [TED GALEN CARPENTER](#)

2010-02-05 12:56:50



A nasty spat has erupted between Washington and Beijing over the Obama administration's new arms sale to Taiwan. As soon as the administration made the official announcement Jan. 29 of the \$6.4 billion package, the Chinese government responded with both harsh words and retaliatory measures. Vice Foreign Minister He Yafei called in U.S. Ambassador Jon Huntsman for a dressing-down. Beijing also suspended scheduled military exchange programs and threatened to impose sanctions against any U.S. company involved in the production or distribution of weapons destined for Taiwan.

The conventional wisdom in the United States is that this episode is no big deal. Those who take a relaxed view contend that China's reaction is in line with its response to previous arms sales. The new brouhaha, the reasoning goes, will subside, and relations will soon return to normal.

Perhaps. But this confrontation is just the latest in a series of incidents stoking tensions between China and the United States. Those tensions encompass economic, diplomatic, and security disputes.

Even before Obama took office, U.S. officials complained about a variety of practices that they believed gave China an unfair advantage in the global economic arena. Those practices ranged from an undervalued currency to import dumping to arbitrary exclusion of U.S. products from Chinese market. President Obama's decision last summer to impose punitive tariffs on imported Chinese tires was a signal that U.S. patience was wearing thin.

The annoyance is not confined to trade matters. Washington long has prodded Beijing to take a firmer stance against the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs, and, especially, to show a willingness to back more robust economic sanctions against those two countries.

Administration leaders hoped that the president's meetings with Hu Jintao during Obama's visit to China would lead to progress on Washington's grievances. But not only did Chinese leaders largely rebuff the president's requests for policy changes, but there was a widespread perception in the United States that the Chinese treated Obama with a dismissive attitude that bordered on disdain.

That treatment created a propaganda bonanza for the president's domestic political opponents. Critics excoriated him for "kowtowing" to the Chinese and argued that the China summit confirmed that Obama is a diplomatic lightweight. Most telling, the president's staunch defenders were few and far between.

China's unwillingness to back serious carbon-emissions reduction measures at the Copenhagen climate change summit in December did not help relations with Washington. Once again, the Chinese seemed to defy the Obama administration on a high-priority U.S. goal.

Beijing has its own grievances with the United States. Chinese officials have expressed both veiled and explicit complaints about the huge and growing U.S. federal budget deficits. In their view, Washington's profligate fiscal practices threaten to trigger an inflationary spiral that would undermine the value of China's vast dollar holdings.

Chinese leaders also grow weary of Washington's lectures about the need to get tough with North Korea and Iran. In Beijing's view, America's stubborn unwillingness to address the wider security concerns of those countries is at least as responsible as the recalcitrant attitude of the two regimes for the lack of progress on the nuclear issue. Moreover, officials in the People's Republic believe that China is being asked to take measures that would undermine vital Chinese interests. They regard North Korea as an important security buffer and Iran as a crucial energy supplier and, therefore, remain extremely reluctant to antagonize either regime.

The announcement of the Taiwan arms sale, following Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's harsh comment the same day that China risked "isolation" within the international community if it did not endorse more robust sanctions against Iran, may have been the last straw for Beijing. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the foreign ministry's response to the arms sale contained one element that departed from previous reactions. China had never before sought to sanction American firms for such transactions. That threat was a significant escalation.

One can hope that the conventional wisdom is right, and that the latest dispute will soon fade. But the bulk of the evidence suggests that storm clouds are building in the U.S.-China relationship. The two countries are not likely to become overt adversaries anytime soon, but there is a noticeable chill in the air.

WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the Editor: E-mail to letters@ocregister.com. Please provide your name and telephone number (telephone numbers will not be published). Letters of about 200 words will be given preference. Letters will be edited for length, grammar and clarity.

© Copyright 2010 Freedom Communications. All Rights Reserved.
[Privacy Policy](#) | [User Agreement](#) | [Site Map](#)