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The Arms Dealer

by Ted Galen Carpenter

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Raymond Burghardt, chairman of the American Institute in Taipei, Washington's de facto embassy in that capital, now confirms rumors that have been circulating for the past two weeks about an impending arms sale to Taiwan. The only remaining questions are when President Obama will officially inform Congress and what weapons will be in the package. The most sensitive point is whether the sale will include advanced versions of the F-16 fighter, a step that would especially rile Beijing.

There appear to be multiple motives for announcing an arms package now, including the mundane desire to give portions of the U.S. defense and aerospace industries a boost during tough economic times. But the primary motives seem to be diplomatic. An arms sale would be a reward to Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou for pursuing policies designed to reduce tensions in the Taiwan Strait and, equally important, for keeping Washington in the loop regarding any initiatives Taipei might take. That behavior comes as a great relief to U.S. officials, since it is in marked contrast to the conduct of Ma's predecessor, Chen Shui-bian, who seemed to delight in provoking Beijing and blind-siding Washington in the process.

But Ma is now under fire at home for being too soft toward China, and his political popularity has sagged badly over the past year for numerous reasons. Responding favorably to Taipei's long-standing request for additional weapon systems would help de-fuse the domestic opposition to Ma and strengthen the political standing of a cooperative leader Washington would like to see remain in power after Taiwan's next presidential election.

Even more important, the arms sale would convey a message to Beijing of Washington's growing annoyance regarding various issues. One grievance is China's failure to halt the deployment of missiles across the strait from Taiwan, despite Ma Ying-jeou's more conciliatory posture. Beijing's conduct could be seen as a deliberate challenge to Washington, since the missile deployments have long been the primary justification for previous U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. The Obama administration might well conclude that Chinese leaders would view Washington's continued inaction on Taipei's request as a sign of weakness.

Especially in light of the somewhat dismissive treatment that President Obama received during his recent trip to China, he might be especially keen to eliminate any impression that the United States is willing to appease Beijing regarding Taiwan's status. But beyond that specific issue, the president probably wants to convey a broader message to the Chinese.

Although the White House and some of its supporters have tried to spin Obama's East Asian trip as a success, it was far from that—especially the China leg. President Obama appeared to have three major policy goals during his meetings with Chinese president Hu Jintao. One was to prod Beijing to become more proactive in pressuring both North Korea and Iran regarding their nuclear programs. A second objective was to get a commitment from China to revalue its currency to reduce the artificial advantage that it currently gives to Chinese exports. And the third goal was to get serious concessions

on various non-tariff barriers that would open China's market to more U.S. products and services.

The harsh reality is that Obama received only tepid concessions on the first item and almost nothing at all on the other two. Not only was that rather humiliating treatment for the leader of the global superpower, but it was 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 who is incapable of defending important American interests. Most telling, the president's staunch defenders were few and far between regarding his performance in Beijing.

An arms sale to Taiwan would be at least a modest step in quieting some of the derision. It would also make it clear to China's leadership that there is a price to be paid for rebuffing the U.S. president. Beijing has always been upset about Washington's willingness to arm what the Chinese regard as an upstart secessionist province. Offering a weapons package so soon after the summit—and at a time when tensions between Taiwan and the mainland are lower than they have been for nearly two decades—would be especially unwelcome. And such a step could reignite some tensions in the Taiwan Strait. But it appears that President Obama may be willing to risk that outcome to show the Chinese that he will not be pushed around.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of eight books on international affairs, including *Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America* (2008). He is also a contributing editor to *The National Interest*.

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