



# U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan

## Domestic Pressures on U.S.-China Relations

By Sangsoo Lee

*The United States Department of Defense announced on January 6 the approval for a new agreement to sell arms to Taiwan including missiles and submarines. In response, on January 30 China suspended military exchanges with the U.S. and subsequently threatened with unprecedented sanctions against American defense companies. The relations between the U.S. and China is rapidly increasing at a time when China and the U.S. need to share broad common interests over international issues. These issues, among others, climate change, the financial crisis and nuclear standoffs with Iran and North Korea. Therefore, the worsening of their relationship, exacerbated by U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, could seriously damage their further partnerships as well as peace and stability, both regionally and globally.*

### U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan

Despite objections from China about selling arms to Taiwan, the U.S. awarded US \$ 6.4 billion arms sale package that included helicopters, defense missiles, and submarines to Taiwan. Specific items of the arms package, submitted to the U.S. Congress for approval on 29 January, include 114 Patriot anti-missile missiles, 60 Blackhawk helicopters and two minesweepers. However, the F-16 jet fighter was excluded from the list of items on this occasion. Most arms in the package had already been approved for sale by the Bush presidency in April 2001, but due to domestic political reasons, the Taiwanese government took a long time in assembling the financing.

Larger questions remain about this decision and how come it was made only one month after U.S. President Barack Obama, who hoped to improve military trust with Beijing, visited China last November. Furthermore, it is clear that Obama perceives the arms sale to Taiwan as the most sensitive issue in regards to Sino-U.S. relations and China's core interests. This is especially so the moment when the cross-Straits relations have embarked on a path of positive development. Why then, did the U.S. take a direct strike at the most sensitive diplomatic issue between the two countries?

It seems that there are U.S. legal, strategic and domestic issues involved in this decision.

Firstly, the U.S. government stated that this sale is consistent with Public Law 96-8 under the terms of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979. This law was passed after the United States established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. The TRA specifies a congressional role in decision-making on security assistance for Taiwan. Arguably then, security assistance for Taiwan, by supporting advanced arms acquirement, is a long-term policy of the U.S. Accordingly, the U.S. government is committed to providing military assistance to ensure Taiwan's security, while at the same time acknowledging Beijing's claims that there is only one China.

Secondly, the U.S. acted out of necessity to boost regional and U.S. national security. This proposed sale can serve U.S. national, economic, and security interests by supporting Taiwan's continuing efforts to modernize its armed forces and enhance its defensive capability. The U.S. also stated that the proposed sale will help improve the security of Taiwan and assist in maintaining political stability, military balance, and economic progress in the region. Furthermore, through arms sales to Taiwan, the United States can send a message to allies in Asia- that the U.S. is still willing to get involved in Asian regional



security. This involvement would deal with China's rising military power, regarded as a threat by many China's neighbors. In fact, China has the world's largest regular army and its recent military expansion and modernization effects redefining power relations in East Asia, in particular between China and the United States.

Thirdly, coupled with the decision on the arms sale to Taiwan, the Obama administration seems to have gone in the opposite direction compared to the first year of his presidency. As the U.S. mid-term election is approaching, Obama is under domestic pressure in relation to China-related affairs, such as the U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and a potential increase in trade protectionism. There is some criticism in Congress about Obama's weak position toward China. Obama might have perceived that the U.S. electorate does not want to see the U.S. appear weak in relation to China, especially at present when people are depressed by an economic recession. Arguably, Obama has responded to pressure from the domestic atmosphere by announcing the arms sale to Taiwan.

Fourthly, Obama himself is also likely to have realized that approaching China in a soft way did not work when trying to convince the country to take more responsibility for a number of important international issues. Indeed, Obama considered China to be good partner, as evident by requests from Washington for Chinese help on a range of issues, including global finance, climate change and nuclear proliferation. Instead, China has adopted an increasingly muscular position toward the U.S., berating the United States for the global financial crisis, criticizing the Copenhagen climate change agreements and refusing the U.S. demand for new Security Council sanctions against Iran. In light of this, the arms sale to Taiwan might be part of Obama's a new tough policy toward China.

### How China Reacts?

The announcement of the U.S. arms sale to Taiwan has sparked repeated complaints from Beijing. China has strongly warned that it might respond in several ways to the announced sales, including freezing of Sino-U.S. military relations. The Chinese government also stated that the U.S. must abide by three joint communiqués – particularly the principles of the communiqué to stop sales of weapons to Taiwan, which Beijing considers as

part of its territory. Meanwhile, on January 12, 2010, China conducted a missile interception test, which came after China had made strong official statements warning the Obama administration against selling weapons to Taiwan. On January 30, the Chinese government, eventually, announced that China suspended military exchanges with the U.S. and the vice ministerial-level talks on arms control were postponed. Furthermore, China imposed sanctions on Lockheed, Raytheon, and other American companies involved in this arms sale. This is a tough blow to these American companies as they not only sell weapons to Taiwan but also market or sell aircrafts and other goods to China.

Overall, China's reaction to the sale of arms indicates that it plans to put up a greater challenge than usual, as it deals with the most sensitive topic in U.S.-China relations. However, China is very confident these days, encouraging the government to act strongly against the U.S. arms sale. China's strong reaction was also necessary to satisfy the domestic nationalism reflecting intense emotions over the arms sales. The Chinese people does not want the government to continue behaving vaguely vis-à-vis the United States as it has in the past, for example, after the U.S. fired wrong missiles to the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia. Events related to nationalism are carried out in China as Internet users vent their anger, calling for boycott against U.S. companies and signing petitions against the U.S. arms sale.

### Broader Risk for Sino-US Relations

Since the turn of the year, tensions in Sino-U.S. relations have escalated over the U.S. plan for an arms sale to Taiwan. The relationship seems likely to remain strained until both sides seek a breakthrough. Indeed, arms sales to Taiwan have been a source of contention between the U.S. and China, as most previous U.S. arms sales to Taiwan have had an impact on Sino-U.S. relations. The friction this time would be even more biting due to strong domestic support in both countries and the veiled power game between old and rising powers, as the balance of power in the region is shifting. Obama seems to be becoming tougher towards China as he needs to consider domestic pressures when dealing with China, especially with mid-term elections approaching. Meanwhile, China also has no room either for compromise on the Taiwan



issue, which it consistently refers to as a sovereignty issue.

This recent raw atmosphere may spell trouble for the relationship over the course of this year, with other sensitive issues still to be dealt with. The bilateral ties might become tense again when President Obama meets the Dalai Lama later this month. Similarly, the relations are likely to further worsen when President Ma Ying-jeou of Taiwan is to visit the U.S. What is more, discord over Iran's nuclear issue may increase and it may also have a negative effect on the U.S.-China partnership on other global issues.

Nevertheless, it will be too costly for the two sides if prolonged tension goes on for too long. At a time when the international environment is undergoing complex changes, a negative relationship will be a burdensome obstacle when dealing with global issues, ranging from the Middle East to East Asia and from the global economic recovery to climate change, for their common interests in the future.

*Sangsoo Lee is a Research Fellow with the Institute for Security and Development Policy.*

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## The Institute for Security & Development Policy

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Västra Finnbodavägen 2, SE-13130 Stockholm - Nacka  
E-mail: [info@isdpeu](mailto:info@isdpeu) / Tel: +46(0)8-41056953  
Website: [www.isdp.eu](http://www.isdp.eu)

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