

## **Debunking Myths about US Arms Sales to Taiwan**

by Bonnie S. Glaser

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In recent weeks Chinese newspapers and television interview shows have been replete with condemnations of the sale of a \$6.4 billion package of arms sales to Taiwan by the Obama administration. Chinese scholars and pundits have attributed numerous motivations to the United States for this sale, most of which are inaccurate. Understanding the reasons for the US sale of weapons to Taiwan may not diminish China's opposition to them, but it is nevertheless important for assessing the broader US-China relationship and predicting future US policy decisions.

*Myth Number 1: The United States opposes the warming trend in cross-Strait relations and is seeking to inject new tensions between Taiwan and mainland China by selling arms to Taipei.*

US officials have repeatedly stated support for the improvement in cross-Strait relations. The easing of tensions between Taiwan and mainland China reduces the risk of a military conflict between them in which the United States would likely become involved. In an appearance before the press along with Chinese President Hu Jintao last November, President Obama stated that the US "applauded the steps that the People's Republic of China and Taiwan have already taken to relax tensions and build ties across the Taiwan Strait. Our own policy, based on the three US-China communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act, supports the further development of these ties – ties that are in the interest of both sides, as well as the broader region and the United States." Long-standing US policy encourages the peaceful resolution of differences between the two sides of the Strait.

*Myth Number 2: The United States views Taiwan as its most effective political tool for containing China's development.*

Taiwan is not a card that the United States plays against China. The US has an important relationship with Taipei that in many respects is separate from its relations with Beijing. More importantly, the United States does not seek to contain China's development. Containment was a strategy that the US pursued against the former Soviet Union and China many decades ago when its highest foreign policy priority was to stop the spread of Communism. Today, containing China's reemergence as a great power would be impossible to achieve if the US attempted it, in part because no other country would join in the effort. Moreover, decades ago the US consciously rejected a containment strategy against China, having concluded that such a strategy would not serve US interests.

Rather, the US opted for a strategy of engaging China to influence and shape its policies and behavior. The United States has a robust trade and economic relationship with China and strongly backed China's bid to join the World Trade Organization. The US also conducts exchanges with China's military and seeks to expand those ties. There are robust links between the US and Chinese people, including cultural exchanges and students studying in each other's country. Recent US presidents, including President Obama, have voiced support for a strong and prosperous China.

*Myth Number 3: The Obama administration is dissatisfied with the overall development of China-US relations in the past year.*

Beijing and Washington worked closely in the past year to break the past pattern of bilateral relations experiencing friction at the outset of a new US administration. In their first bilateral meeting, Chinese and US leaders agreed to pursue a "positive, cooperative, and comprehensive" relationship; the two countries held a successful first round of a newly established Strategic and Economic Dialogue; and President Obama's November visit to China produced a joint statement that highlights both countries' commitments to the bilateral relationship and underscores the depth and breadth of those ties. The two countries have also worked together to encourage North Korea to return to the Six-Party Talks. In addition, the agreement reached at the meeting on climate change in Copenhagen was due in no small part to US and Chinese collaboration. US and Chinese interests do not converge on every issue, but where there is overlap, cooperation has been successful. The Obama administration hopes to continue to work with China on a rich agenda of bilateral, regional, and global issues. Selling arms to Taiwan was not intended to punish Beijing for its failure to respond to US requests to modify specific policies.

*Myth Number 4: Obama's support rate has dropped and selling arms to Taiwan will shore up his domestic political base and win support from the military industrial complex and labor unions.*

The timing of this weapons sale to Taiwan had little to do with US domestic politics. President Obama's political problems are mostly related to domestic issues like US military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, not China or Taiwan. The president is unlikely to gain any ground by selling arms to Taiwan. Due to China's opposition to US arms sales to Taiwan, there is never a "good" time to approve a weapons sale to Taiwan. In fact, the US made this arms sale decision at a time that it hoped would minimize Chinese reaction. The Obama administration decided to not approve any new weapons sales in the months leading up to the president's trip to China. After his return, a reasonable interval was allowed to pass before the notifications were sent

to Congress. Regardless of President Obama's support rate, this arms package would have proceeded. China overestimates the influence of the military industrial complex on US decision making vis-à-vis Taiwan.

*Myth Number 5: In geostrategic terms, the United States views Taiwan as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" and treats Taiwan as an important strategic anchor located near the Chinese mainland in the Pacific Ocean that will help enhance its influence in the Pacific region.*

Taiwan's geostrategic importance to the United States is marginal. The US has no plans to use Taiwan as a base for conducting military operations against the mainland in the event of a cross-Strait war. US strategic influence in the Pacific region is promoted through a wide variety of means, including its alliances and partnerships with many regional nations. Taiwan does not figure in this network of relationships.

If the above explanations do not correctly elucidate the reasons for the US weapons sale to Taiwan, then how should this decision be understood? What were US intentions and objectives in selling these weapons at this particular juncture?

First, although the threat of Taiwan independence has receded since Ma Ying-jeou became the island's president in May 2008, China has continued its relentless military buildup opposite Taiwan. A notable component of that buildup is the deployment of short-range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles, which President Ma has repeatedly stated pose an obstacle to the negotiation of a cross-Strait peace accord. The sale of weapons to Taiwan can no longer sustain a military balance between the two sides of the Strait. But they can prevent the imbalance from tilting excessively in China's favor, which could tempt Beijing to employ coercive means to compel the people of Taiwan to agree to an outcome that they do not support. In this regard, US arms sales to Taiwan are part of a broader US policy designed to ensure that differences between the two sides of the Strait are resolved peacefully and in a manner that is acceptable to the people of Taiwan and does not hurt their interests.

Second, US national law in the form of the Taiwan Relations Act, along with the strategic interests of the United States, requires provision of defensive capabilities to Taiwan as well as the maintenance of capabilities by the US in the Western Pacific to deal with any challenges to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. As a US official stated on background in announcing this arms sale decision, "we take that responsibility very seriously."

Third, US weapons are not foisted on Taiwan by greedy arms manufacturers; they are sold in response to requests made by Taiwan, which are based on the assessment of the island's security needs by its civilian and military leaders. That assessment in turn is based on the threats that Taiwan faces. If US defense companies had as much clout as many Chinese believe, the *F-16 C/D* fighter jets that Taiwan under both President Ma and President Chen Shui-bian have said are a high priority for its defense would have been approved long ago. The recent package of notifications to Congress in fact only responded to a portion of Taiwan's requests. In addition to excluding the advanced fighters, it did not include

submarines, which were approved for sale by President George W. Bush in 2001.

Fourth, the US believes that provision of defensive arms to Taiwan at this time is necessary to provide the Taiwan leadership with a signal that the United States remains a critical backer of Taiwan's security, which will boost Taipei's confidence and willingness to sustain negotiations with Mainland counterparts. This is vitally important as Taiwan weighs whether to embark upon discussions with Beijing on sensitive political and military issues. A Taiwan government that feels insecure and vulnerable to pressure from China is more likely to halt cross-Strait dialogue than accommodate to Beijing. Ma Ying-jeou himself told the Wall Street Journal that "The relaxed tensions across the Strait depend very much on the continued supply of arms from the United States."

Finally, the decision to sell arms to Taiwan sends a message to the rest of the region that the United States stands by its commitments and that others that depend on Washington for the maintenance of peace and stability can be reassured that US support is reliable and unwavering.

The Obama administration continues to attach great importance to relations with China and looks forward to further cooperation in areas where American and Chinese interests coincide. The challenges of achieving a sustainable economic recovery, combating global warming, preventing further proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and fighting terrorism all require closer coordination between Washington and Beijing. On areas where the two countries disagree, including Taiwan, more dialogue, understanding and patience are needed.