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TAKE CHINA OUT OF THE DRIVER'S SEAT ON TAIWAN

A U.S. policy meant to ease friction with Beijing only creates more incentives to raise a fuss with every new deal

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Editorial by Rupert Hammond-Chambers¹

America's defense relationship with Taiwan is again causing friction in Washington's dealings with Beijing. Earlier this month China rejected a request from U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates to visit the mainland, citing recent U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. He rightly noted the sales issue is "far from new in this relationship." But the fact is that the U.S.-Taiwan security relationship has never been more vulnerable, and the Chinese know it—and are taking advantage of the situation.

The key U.S.-Taiwan problem is that Washington has made changes in its process for selling arms to Taiwan that increase incentives for Beijing to raise a fuss. Traditionally, the U.S. had announced Taiwan weapons sales as the deals were completed, regardless of the condition of broader U.S.-China ties at that moment. Yet starting under the Bush administration in 2008, the State Department was allowed to sit on deals before announcing them to the Congress. State would wait for the "least worst time" to release the details; the yardstick for measuring "least worst time" would be the state of relations with China.

This change was part of an attempt to reduce Chinese objections to arms sales by announcing them only during periods of less intense bilateral U.S.-China activity—the idea being to avoid rocking the boat ahead of summits or amid negotiations where the U.S. hoped to cooperate on other, generally unrelated, issues with China. However, institutionalizing such concern over China's reaction to Taiwan arms sales has had the effect of giving the Chinese greater leverage over how the U.S. implements its security commitment to Taiwan. Meanwhile, as high-level bilateral exchanges continue to multiply the windows available for vital arms sales narrow. Arms sales effectively froze during part of 2008 and again in 2009.

Not surprisingly, Beijing is trying to take advantage of this new opportunity to shape events. The mere rumor of an impending package in early January of this year led to increasingly shrill rhetoric from China. When the package was finally released later in the month, China threatened unspecified penalties for U.S. companies involved in the sales, as well as damage to bilateral initiatives such as cooperation on Iran and climate change. Beijing has not backed up any of these threats with action, at least not yet. But the fact that threats were made at all shows that far from smoothing the water, Washington's new strategy creates incentives for Beijing to act out.

This might at first seem like a lot of bother about nothing. America has many pressing problems, and by all accounts Taiwan and China are getting along better than ever. But U.S. security support for Taiwan, including the material and political benefits of arms sales, underpin Taiwan's ability to engage with China in meaningful dialogue. The October 2008 and January 2010 arms packages did not disrupt Taiwan-China relations—they only affected ties between the U.S. and China.

If the U.S. chooses to downgrade its security commitment to Taiwan, then China's leverage with Taiwan will increase. This is especially so as China's own expansion and modernization of its military continue unabated and unexplained. Increased military inequity is likely to eventually result in coercion and a return to heightened tensions across the Taiwan Strait.

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<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703433704575303763445618780.html>



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Secretary Gates and his colleagues would do well to review the process that America now has in place for selling weapons to Taiwan, particularly as his political colleagues' appetite for U.S. security assistance to Taiwan seems to hover close to zero. Arms deals are again stacking up at the State Department, with three currently awaiting the notification to Congress that formally announces such agreements. It appears we are in for another long freeze.

Meanwhile, the biggest looming question is whether the U.S. is prepared in the face of increasing Chinese pressure to provide Taiwan more significant equipment such as the F-16 fighters it requires to replace its aging aircraft, and the submarines it requires to complicate China's blockade and invasion scenarios. China has every incentive to use its newfound leverage to delay or disrupt this sale.

This is no way to manage a critical global security commitment. By allowing Chinese considerations to affect U.S. decisions, America has opened the door to a growing wave of Chinese statements and actions through this year and into next—such as the recently denied visit for Mr. Gates—intended to pressure the Obama administration into doing much less for Taiwan.

Why should we care? Taiwan is simply the sharp end of the spear. China's "red lines" (hard policy stances they're willing to back up with force) on Taiwan today may be their "red lines" on Korea and Japan tomorrow. They want America out of their backyard, and the more Washington attempts to placate their core interests, the faster it will be shown the door.

Mr. Hammond-Chambers is president of the U.S.-Taiwan Business Council.