

OPINION:
TAIWAN ARMS SALES: TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

Commentary by Rupert Hammond-Chambers

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On 16 December 2015 the United States announced a new arms sales package for Taiwan after an unprecedented four-year delay since the last such sale. While the new package is welcome, the modest contents – along with the long delay in even considering several of Taiwan's requests for security assistance – raise significant concerns. If the cross-strait military balance continues to shift in China's favour, then another foreign policy crisis may be added to the next US president's long to-do list.

On 16 January Taiwan will elect a new president, likely to be opposition leader Dr Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The timing of this announcement is therefore useful as a modest signal to China that the US has equities in the peaceful transition of power on the island and supports Taiwan's democratic system rather than one candidate or party.

US support for Taiwan remains an essential aspect of its national security posture in Asia. The island's location offers security for north-south trade routes and ensures that China's military power projection ends in the Taiwan Strait and not at Guam and Hawaii. As one of Asia's most vibrant free-market democracies Taiwan also stands 90 miles off China's shores as a beacon reflecting American values, respectful of global security and economic rules of engagement. Arms sales are therefore critical, both as a signal of US intentions toward the island and in support of US efforts to deter coercion and help provide for Taiwan's self-determination.

Growing threat

The US knows that China represents a growing threat to Taiwan and remains committed to seizing it – whether peacefully or by force. According to the US Department of Defense in its 2015 report on China's military, "*There have been no signs that China's military posture opposite Taiwan has changed significantly. The PLA [People's Liberation Army] has developed and deployed military capabilities to coerce Taiwan or to attempt an invasion, if necessary. These improvements pose major challenges to Taiwan's security.*"

The Taiwan Relations Act specifically states that the US needs to provide Taiwan with arms of sufficient quantity and quality to provide for its own self-defence. Given the current threat it is therefore perplexing the Obama Administration took an extraordinary amount of time to amass a package that basically contains just the transfer of second-hand equipment and the topping-up of munitions supplies. This was a tardy and underwhelming response to the changing threat picture emerging with China's rapid military modernisation and barely meets the expectations embedded in the law.

It is clear that China policy considerations have once again trumped US obligations to Taiwan and that the tyranny of the US-China calendar undermines US efforts and interest in Taiwan. For example, the release of this arms sales package was apparently delayed at the 11th hour by the Paris climate change conference, held in early December, over misguided concerns that the sale would disrupt Chinese support for the US climate agenda.

Power shift

In response to the December announcements China will once again brush off and brandish its well-worn statements of alarm and outrage. And yet this time such statements ring even hollower, given that US-China policy priorities and related



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scheduling had an outsized influence over the process. The US has not offered Taiwan any new or meaningful capabilities to meet some of China's more recent deployments and the balance of power is further tipping in China's favour, which is inherently destabilising. Rather than deterring China, such actions also appear to embolden it.

The next US administration will need to take a close look at Taiwan's current military power, hopefully engaging with Taiwan in the first meaningful assessment of priorities since 2001. It will need to demand that Taiwan significantly raises its defence spending. Such an assessment could produce a list of capabilities that both sides can process in a timely and regular fashion. The US has a Foreign Military Sales system that works for other security partners; it can work for Taiwan too. Ideally, the two would move to a process with the assessment year-on-year of what Taiwan needs to combat China's aggressive force posture.

This brings us back to Dr Tsai and her likely victory in the upcoming presidential election. She has carefully calibrated her policies on China towards retaining some manoeuvring room, while also distancing herself from the more toxic statements made during the DPP's last stint in the presidential office. Dr Tsai may get every nuance right in the run-up and post-election period, and China will still likely reject her efforts to engage on a stable footing – spiking tensions to keep Taipei and Washington on the defensive.

If the US is unprepared to re-calibrate its arms sale efforts in the face of growing tensions and a yawning imbalance in cross-strait military power, it will move closer to what it fears most: being drawn into a conflict over Taiwan's future.

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About the US-Taiwan Business Council:

The US-Taiwan Business Council (www.us-taiwan.org) is a membership-based non-profit association, founded in 1976 to foster trade and business relations between the United States and Taiwan. The Council provides its members with business intelligence, offers access to an extensive network of relationships, and serves as a vital and effective representative in dealing with business, trade, and investment matters.

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