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TAIWAN ARMS: 2 STEPS BACK, 1 STEP FORWARD

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When the U.S. State Department notified Congress Oct. 3 of a proposed \$6.4 billion arms package offering a range of defensive weaponry to Taiwan, the sheer scope and cost of the package caught everyone's attention.

Yet the package has a history dating back to 2001, and these notifications were both incomplete and well past due. The U.S. administration has drifted away from long-established policy in dealing with Taiwan during this time, and it only undercuts American interests in Asia.

U.S. President George W. Bush released a number of items for sale to Taiwan in April 2001 that were seen as crucial to Taiwan's military modernization, thus fulfilling an important role in U.S. obligations to provide for Taiwan's self-defense under the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). That decision was based on counsel from all parties in the U.S. interagency process, as well as on Taiwan's own assessment of its defense needs.

Taiwan bears equal responsibility for the seven-year impasse over arms sales, given its domestic political wrangling over the arms budget. Nevertheless, the budgets for these systems were passed in Taiwan in 2007, with eight pending congressional notifications starting to roll into the State Department from the Defense Department in early 2008.

While the notification package sent to Capitol Hill was welcome as a positive step in an otherwise troubled relationship, it omitted Black Hawk utility helicopters for logistics and humanitarian support, well as some of the requested Patriot anti-missile systems and a submarine design program.

It also took more than seven months for the notifications to accumulate - an unprecedented action irrespective of Bush administration claims that this was part of "a normal interagency process." There is simply no existing example of notifications being stacked at the State Department in such a manner.

This is not the only instance of irregular behavior in U.S.-Taiwan security relations. The Bush administration has refused to even accept a letter of request (LoR) for 66 F-16 C/Ds fighters on three separate occasions: July 2006, February 2007 and June 2007. The acceptance of an LoR is not an agreement to sell F-16s to Taiwan, but would simply start the interagency process to determine whether the sale should proceed, allowing for the release of price and availability data to Taiwan for budgetary and planning purposes.

The non-acceptance of an LoR from a non-NATO ally is an unprecedented action, and runs contrary to stated U.S. policy on Taiwan arms sales that assured Taipei it would be treated equitably.

Why will the Bush administration not allow an interagency discussion on Taiwan's legitimate Air Force modernization needs? Why is Taiwan being penalized in this way? U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, a U.S.-Taiwan Business Council Honorary co-chairman, has two letters outstanding to National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley on exactly this subject (the first written on Oct. 12, 2007), and both remain unanswered.



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It always bears repeating that U.S. policy is supposed to be guided by the TRA, which specifically states that "The President and the Congress shall determine the nature and quantity of ... defense articles and services [sold to Taiwan] based solely upon their judgment of the needs of Taiwan."

The approach of the past several years - rejecting the LoR, stacking the notifications at State, the perplexing cuts made in the final package - leads the Council to believe that the driving force in determining which programs went ahead and which did not was the perception in Beijing, not Taiwan's legitimate defense needs. By reducing the overall size of the package, the Bush administration hoped to placate the Chinese. It appears that the only guiding principle here was to halve the value of the original \$13 billion package.

Arms sales to Taiwan should be an ongoing process as requests are received - or not - based on the developing threat assessment in the Taiwan Strait. There is no right time to undertake actions such as a public notification to Congress, and China opposes all arms sales to Taiwan without exception.

As we have witnessed these past seven months, attempts to game the system only result in the U.S. negotiating with itself. It is essential that the next U.S. administration returns to a transparent and consistent policy on accepting LoRs, on reviewing and processing requests, and on sending these requests to Congress as they are ready. We extract nothing in return for attempting to "soften the blow" on China.

As for China's response, it is noteworthy that they chose to cancel military-to-military cooperation. Not because they place great equity on such links, but because we do. The Chinese have always been lukewarm about military-to-military relations, and canceling such engagements does not impact their core interests.

The fact is the Chinese expect us to act in our own interest. When we attempt to empathize with theirs, it only results in our core interests being marginalized, which is a Chinese goal. Their response has been modest because they want us to know that if we curb our support for Taiwan they'll moderate their reaction. It empowers them in our decision-making calculation, thereby undermining our commitment to Taiwan.

If America is to manage its long-term equities and interests with Taiwan and China, it must stick to its established framework for dealing with Taiwan. When it deviates from legacy policy or the TRA, as has been the case these past several years, we undermine our interests in Asia as well as the interests of the government in Taiwan.

America is the pre-eminent Pacific power, and we should do everything we can to remain so. That requires us to be consistent in meeting our security obligations to our friends. ■

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