



A decision on arms sales for Taiwan is needed by David G. Brown

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The delay in approving arms sales to Taiwan is undermining US interests. The US has not approved new arms for Taiwan since December 2015. The Obama administration was considering a modest package in late 2016. After Hillary Clinton lost the election, the administration chose not to go forward with the package, however. Despite early indications that the Trump administration was considering a more robust package of arms, no notification has been made to Congress.

As president-elect, Donald Trump conducted an unprecedented phone conversation with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen. Many interpreted this as an indication the new administration would pursue a friendlier approach toward Taipei. However, after Trump's Mar-a-Lago summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping, the administration's tone has changed. In an interview with Reuters, Trump was asked about another call with Tsai. Trump replied that he had "a very good relationship with President Xi...and would want to speak to him first." This indicated that relations with Taiwan would be constrained by Trump's hope for Chinese cooperation on North Korea. No previous administration had made such a tradeoff between our Taiwan and North Korean interests.

Recognizing how such a linkage damages US credibility, Secretary of Defense Mattis subsequently included in his address to the Shangri-la Dialogue a clear restatement of our commitment to supply Taiwan with defense articles in keeping with the Taiwan Relations Act. Secretary of State Tillerson has reassured the Congress that the US intends to keep its commitments to Taiwan.

There is no doubt that Taiwan requires additional defense articles. What should be sold is a matter of debate, but the fundamental fact is that the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) capabilities against Taiwan continue to expand. The PLA defense budget is now about 14 times larger than Taiwan's. The Department of Defense's 2017 report on security developments in the PRC concludes that, despite Taipei's defense improvements, the defensive advantages Taiwan has enjoyed are declining.

Delaying arms sales to Taiwan is one issue that is undermining regional confidence in the US. The delay is part of a pattern of actions or inactions by the Trump administration that has weakened US credibility in Asia. That

is why Secretary Mattis had to make so many specific reassuring statements in his address in Singapore. Nevertheless, there is uncertainty about whether those words will be implemented or overruled by the president, as has happened on other issues. Consequently, the notification to Congress of new arms sales is essential to putting these doubts to rest. In the meantime, inaction feeds uncertainty.

Since President Trump tweeted about "one China" last December, the Taiwan media has been full of commentary questioning whether the US is reliable. Not surprisingly, the pro-PRC media has argued that, since Trump will treat Taiwan as a bargaining chip, it is foolish for Taiwan to rely on the US and that greater accommodation with Beijing is required. Even some commentators well disposed toward the US have said that the more volatile environment under Trump is a new reality. The delay in announcing new arms sales has been cited as evidence of Washington's declining reliability. Taiwan's 2017 Ministry of Defense Quadrennial Defense Report released in May stated for the first time that US policy toward Taiwan "remains to be seen."

Trump's belief that his good relations with Xi require him to consult Beijing about Taiwan is based on a flawed understanding of China. China respects power and a consistent commitment to one's principles. Consequently, successive US administrations have sought to convince Beijing that the peaceful settlement of cross-strait differences is a matter of principle for the US. The tradeoff of one US interest for another will only lead Beijing to conclude that the Washington does not have any principles. By indicating that relations with Taiwan can be traded away for Beijing's support on North Korea, Trump has damaged the US interest with respect to maintaining peace in the Taiwan Strait.

The delays in arms sales decisions could be avoided if the US government adopted a practice of regularly approving sales rather than accumulating items into packages that are more politically sensitive to Beijing. Although the wisdom of this has been recognized both in and out of government for at least two decades, successive administrations have been unable to implement regular approvals.

Given the president's penchant for changing his views and given the uncertainty of who can speak with authority for his administration, it is truer than ever that action speaks louder than words. An early notification of new arms for Taiwan is necessary to put to rest doubts that are undermining the credibility of US support for Taiwan's security.

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