

Beijing's Hard Line against US Arms Sales to Taiwan

by Alan D. Romberg

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On Jan. 29, the Obama administration announced plans to sell Taiwan approximately \$6.4 billion worth of arms. This rounds out much of the pending package the Bush administration did not act on when it sent the last notification of approximately the same value to Congress in October 2008. The new package includes 114 PAC-3 anti-missile missiles (\$2.8 billion), 60 heavy-lift *Black Hawk* helicopters (\$3.1 billion), some communications equipment and other systems. It still leaves unaddressed Taipei's long-standing request for a submarine feasibility study as well as the question of F-16 C/D fighter aircraft to replace aging planes in Taiwan's Air Force. The United States has not yet accepted a letter of request for the aircraft, but an internal US study of the island's needs is under way.

Despite the impressive improvement in overall China-US relations over the past year, in particular during President Obama's visit to China in November and including consolidation of a shared commitment to high-level military exchanges, Beijing has been warning for several weeks that its reaction to any new arms sales would be severe. Within hours of the US announcement, Beijing made a strong protest, noting that it was suspending some (but apparently not all) important military exchanges, that it will impose sanctions on US companies involved in the Taiwan arms sales, and that cooperation on important global and regional issues will "inevitably" be affected. It based this strong response on its charge that the announcement violates "solemn US commitments" in the three US-PRC joint communiqués (especially the Aug. 17, 1982 arms sales communiqué), represents "crude interference" in China's internal affairs, seriously endangers China's national security, and harms the "great cause" of "peaceful unification" with Taiwan.

It is easy enough to understand why, in principle, China must protest any sales; they have been a bone of contention and an area of explicit disagreement since the time of normalization of US-PRC relations in 1979. What is less clear is why Beijing has ratcheted up its reaction this time, and what it really expects to come from its actions.

Some mainland officials and experts say that all of the positive developments in relations in 2009, including the November joint statement, led many to believe that the United States would alter its position on arms sales. Thus, they say, there is a sense of having been deceived. The November statement read in part:

The two countries reiterated that the fundamental principle of respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity is at the core of the three US-China joint communiqués which guide US-China relations. Neither side supports any attempts by any force to undermine this principle. The two sides agreed that respecting each other's core interests is extremely important to ensure steady progress in US-China relations.

Now, the United States is not only proceeding with arms sales, but the president will receive the Dalai Lama, which will also, they say, directly harm China's core interests of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Moreover, Washington is in the process of adopting a series of what China sees as protectionist trade measures against the PRC.

Chinese dismiss counter-arguments that, while none of these sales can possibly rectify the growing military imbalance across the Strait – which PLA expansion and modernization is enlarging daily – they can bolster domestic confidence within Taiwan allowing President Ma Ying-jeou to make progress across the wide spectrum of cross-Strait interactions laid out by PRC leader Hu Jintao a year ago. Rather, the PRC protest turns these arguments on their head, saying the US action will disrupt cross-Strait progress: "The Chinese side cannot but ask: Does the United States really support cross-Strait relations and peaceful development? Does the American side want to create new instability in the Taiwan Strait?"

The Foreign Ministry protest says the US decision touches on Chinese "national sentiments," echoing a line heard in recent weeks about how, even if the leadership understood that further arms sales would be coming and that the president would see the Dalai Lama (because they were directly told these things), "public opinion" was caught unawares and is reacting strongly against these developments – and cannot be ignored.

There is a growing consensus among analysts that China thinks the United States now needs Chinese cooperation as never before on a range of issues from economic recovery to climate change, Iran to North Korea, and that this gives Beijing the opportunity to push back hard on some issues. There is no doubt about the first part of this assessment: the United States values China's constructive participation on such issues, and it will be especially difficult – perhaps impossible – to resolve many of them without active PRC involvement.

That said, Beijing may be miscalculating its leverage. Whether the more "assertive" Chinese attitude now being observed is due to the arrogance of a newly rising power, as some say, or to the insecurity of a regime fearful of instability, as others believe, it may backfire by failing to take adequate account of two facts: a) none of these issues is solely a matter of US interest, but rather all involve questions of great

importance to the world, including China; and b) it is not China alone that has a strategic national interest in “the Taiwan question.” On the first point, China’s failure to cooperate will hurt not only its own interests but its image. And on the second point, other nations, including the United States, may not have a role in determining the ultimate shape of relations between Taiwan and the mainland – that is up to the two sides. But they have a major stake in seeing that any resolution is not only peaceful but uncoerced. China’s argument that this is a “core issue” for itself but not for others may have a certain rhetorical resonance on the mainland, but it implicitly undervalues the genuine national security interests of others and does not contribute to constructive thinking about how to manage differences productively.

No one should sell short the importance of “the Taiwan issue” to the PRC. It is fundamental. But understanding that does not define the entirety of the issue or limit the legitimacy of the national interests of other players in maintaining peace and stability in the region. Nor does it really explain why, just at the time that China-US relations have expanded beyond the familiar, often stale agenda of bilateral questions to encompass matters of truly global importance, Beijing has decided to raise the stakes.

Whatever its motives, the retaliatory steps China has announced so far, including sanctions against US companies, are unfortunate but will not do lasting harm. Should Beijing go further in “teaching the United States a lesson,” however, the consequences could be far-reaching, indeed. While the Obama administration will not take gratuitous swipes back at the PRC to show it can also be tough, if China were really to get in the way of efforts to deal effectively with Iran’s nuclear program – or North Korea’s – or become obstructionist on measures to deal with the international economic crisis, climate change and energy security, then much of the sense of common purpose developed over the past year would likely evaporate. These extreme outcomes seem very unlikely. But keeping in mind that the “second shoe” is yet to drop – the Dalai Lama’s meeting with the president – we at least ought to be aware that getting past the arms sales issue is not the only challenge.