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Where are the Subs for Taiwan? by Thomas J. Hirschfeld

Saying he would do “whatever it takes” to defend Taiwan, President Bush in April 2001 announced he would provide Taiwan eight diesel submarines (at their expense). A surprise element in the arms package, the promise of these boats suggested a significant escalation of capabilities for Taiwan, and thus greater American determination to defend that island. Taiwan was eager to acquire subs; it only has four left with two reportedly in bad shape. There are reports that Taiwan offered to help build the fifth and sixth boat (assuming they could get to observe construction of the first four) and build the last two themselves. No one mentioned when or how the U.S. would deliver, or for that matter, what. No one in the White House apparently asked whether the U.S. could, in the apparent eagerness to signal a new policy that differentiated President Bush from his predecessor. So where is that promise?

The U.S. has neither designed nor built a non-nuclear submarine since the 1950s. The shipyards no longer have all the skills, personnel, or special equipment required. They would therefore either be built abroad, or designed largely from scratch; in either case, this would take years. We could buy the design and some of the engineering talent from other countries, and learn again how to build them here, assuming any of the countries who own the designs would want to offend China enough to participate. No one in the Bush White House (where were you, Dr. Rice?) seems to have thought this question through. Nor, apparently asked anyone who knew about submarines (or the policies of the submarine designing countries) in the Department of Defense or State, before the president announced that we would provide these boats.

A moment’s reflection should have revealed how unlikely foreign cooperation was. Subs for Taiwan has nothing to do with the terrorism war. Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, France, Russia, China, Japan, Italy and to a small extent, North Korea have diesel submarine design capabilities. Brazil and India are getting there, but are apparently thinking about nuclear-powered boats. Would any of them build for Taiwan, and thereby jeopardize their relations with China, for a single order, or just because we asked them to? What could we offer of comparable value in exchange?

This leaves very few options. There was press speculation last year about exploiting the U.S. Electric Boat Company’s intended purchase of 40 percent of the shares in Australian Submarine Corp. Australian Submarine builds modern Collins-class diesel boats. Actual manufacture in Australia on Taiwan’s behalf is doubtful (Australia would be reluctant, for the same reasons as other providers). The administration may have hoped that Electric Boat could arrange technology transfer for eventual U.S. manufacture. Unfortunately important elements of the Collins design are Swedish, and the

Swedes, like the U.S., have national export controls on industrial designs whose transfer could have security or foreign policy implications.

After two years of trying, no one has yet gotten the order to build the subs, although there are still rumors about who might. Actually, why bother? Subs are not the best anti-submarine warfare (ASW) weapons, if Taiwan worries about Chinese subs. They are also extraordinarily expensive to buy and maintain.

In short, the White House, which wanted to send China a message of American strength and determination in its first months of office, has no visible progress on this proposal, which has annoyed other countries, disappointed Taiwan, and embarrassed itself in the process. If the submarines ever get built, years will have gone by. By that time there will be another president, and in all likelihood different circumstances and policies toward China than those of April 2001, as is the case even now. All this could have been avoided, with a little research, a little forethought, and a little less hubris.

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