



Backgrounder

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THE DILEMMA OF U.S. ARMS SALES TO BEIJING

INTRODUCTION

Should the U.S. sell weapons and military equipment to the People's Republic of China (PRC)? It is a question that Washington is confronting with mounting seriousness and intensity. The Pentagon plans, for example, to sell naval weapons to Beijing. Whether such arms transfers are in U.S. national interests, however, is a matter of legitimate debate.

On the one hand, a stronger China is better able to deter Soviet threats to East Asia and to force Moscow to divert military resources from the European theater to the Asian. On the other hand, a China too strong could threaten such U.S. friends in Southeast Asia as Singapore and Indonesia, undermine the congressionally mandated U.S. commitment to the Republic of China on Taiwan, and worry U.S. allies like Japan and South Korea. Balancing these concerns is the challenge faced by U.S. officials setting the policy governing military transfers to the PRC.

A case in point is the agreement in principle for the U.S. to sell the PRC a multi-million dollar naval weapons package. Yet the sale may reflect mainly a premature effort by the Navy to get a piece of the action in Sino-American military cooperation. As such, the naval deal should be postponed and reconsidered. Its implications should receive greater attention within the Administration and Congress before a final decision is made.

THE WEAPONS PACKAGE

Reportedly included in the naval package are Mark 46 surface-launched anti-submarine torpedoes, the Phalanx anti-missile Gatling gun, modern towed sonars for locating submarines, and the General Electric LM2500 gas turbine engine used to power destroyer-sized warships. These systems all are currently used by the

U.S. Navy. Collectively, they would upgrade significantly the PRC's naval capabilities, particularly in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and fleet air defense missions. The gas turbine engine would greatly improve China's ability to project its naval presence beyond coastal waters. The Chinese have expressed an interest, moreover, in the U.S. Standard and Sparrow air-defense missile systems. Washington is reviewing this request.

Symbolizing the growing cooperation between Washington and Beijing is the scheduled port call in April of three U.S. destroyers at Shanghai. This will be the first call at a mainland Chinese port by a U.S. warship since 1949. The destroyers were chosen in part because they are powered by the LM2500 engine.

Arrangements for the port call were worked out during Navy Secretary John Lehman's visit to China last August. Follow-up visits in January 1985 by Melvyn Paisley, Assistant Secretary for the Navy for Research, Engineering and Systems, and Admiral Steven White, Chief of Naval Materiel, and scheduled visits by Admiral James Watkins, Chief of Naval Operations, and Marine Commandant General Paul Kelley may expand the growing Sino-American naval relationship. The visits of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger in September 1983 and the January 1985 visit of General John Vessey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, provide the framework of overall military cooperation in which the Navy plays a growing part.

Frequent too have been visits to the U.S. by top-ranking PRC defense officials. Defense Minister Zhang Aiping visited the U.S. in June 1984, and Chief of General Staff Yang Dezhi is due to arrive later this year. Several working-level naval delegations, meanwhile, have called on the Pentagon in recent months, including one last November headed by Admiral Chen Youming.

The style of Chinese arms shopping is changing dramatically. In the past, PRC officials would present their American counterparts with a "wish list" of various weapons and dual-use equipment and technology which bore little relation to what U.S. analysts perceived to be Beijing's military needs. Although the PRC continues to keep its own counsel as to how best to apply U.S. weapons to counter the Soviet threat, there is a growing tendency by the Chinese to work with American firms and Pentagon officials to target specific weapons systems or technology to perform specific missions.

This has major implications for future U.S. arms sales to China, because American expertise in solving specific technological problems or in identifying the proper weapon to employ in a given mission is one of the great U.S. strengths--and a great Chinese weakness.

The pending naval package sale and the pragmatic approach to identifying and solving specific Chinese needs thus signal a new phase in Sino-American military cooperation. As a result, Chinese naval capabilities can be expected to improve dramatically.

ARE U.S. INTERESTS SERVED?

The Reagan Administration stresses that U.S. security interests are served by the naval sale because enhanced PRC naval capabilities will help deter Soviet expansion in East Asia, but will not pose a threat to U.S. friends and allies in the region. If these objectives are met by the sale, then it would be in the U.S. interest. It seems, however, that the sale is likely to have the opposite effects. It will not deter the Soviets and will increase the threat to America's Asian friends and allies.

It further appears that the Navy has rushed to get involved in Sino-American military cooperation, dazzled perhaps by the prospect which has seduced (and disappointed) American salesmen for two centuries--penetrating the huge China market. As such, the Navy seems to have overlooked or inadequately addressed the key matter of matching U.S. interests with arms sales. This basic ends-means problem deserves closer examination. At minimum, the Navy should ponder two basic objections to its announced sale: 1) opposition based upon the general principle that it is not in the U.S. interest to assist substantially China's naval modernization; and 2) opposition to at least some of the specific systems included in the naval package.

GENERAL OBJECTIONS TO HELPING THE PRC NAVY

The sale to the PRC of advanced weapons and defense technology is opposed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) the Republic of China on Taiwan (ROC). It is viewed with great wariness by the Republic of Korea and Japan. The reason for this is understandable. China potentially is Asia's strongest regional power and it has a history of assertive suzerainty over countries near its borders. PRC leaders openly state that East and Southeast Asia are within China's sphere of influence. Indeed, the long-term objective of PRC foreign policy is to rid the region of both Soviet and American presences so that "the future of Asia can be determined by the Asians themselves." At the same time, Chinese officials say that the "views of the one billion Chinese people" deserve special consideration.

What this means to other Asian peoples is that a more powerful China probably will pursue its traditional objective of political, economic, and cultural domination of the region. Some non-Asian observers may argue that such a doctrine does not apply to contemporary China. Nonetheless, the concerns of China's neighbors are deeply held and will not easily be dispelled.

U.S. efforts to strengthen the PRC's military capabilities are seen as hastening the day when China can pursue its traditional dominance of the region. Coupled with this perception is the fear that Washington, after strengthening the PRC, may reduce its military presence in East and Southeast Asia. For one thing,

the U.S. may perceive that China is strong enough to deter the Soviet Union in the region. For another, Washington may reduce its forces in the region to avoid a military confrontation with China.

Although the Reagan Administration has assured Asian rimland nations that the U.S. will remain in the region, history teaches a painful lesson to America's friends and allies. The reduction of U.S. forces under Presidents Nixon and Carter, the abandonment of South Vietnam, and the sudden derecognition of the Republic of China are cited as precedents by those who fear U.S. force withdrawal from individual Asian countries or the region as a whole.

Many Asians thus envision the worst of worlds resulting from U.S. military assistance to the PRC: a strengthened China seeking to reassert its traditional dominance of the region and an eventual withdrawal of the U.S. balancing presence. Some Asians even speculate that, under such circumstances, a Soviet presence would be welcomed as a counterweight to the Chinese.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIONS TO THE NAVAL PACKAGE

The anti-submarine warfare components of the arms sales package to the PRC pose little threat to U.S. friends in the region for they do not have a significant submarine force. Of concern, however, are the Phalanx anti-missile Gatling gun and the General Electric LM2500 gas turbine engine.

The ROC's defense is heavily dependent upon ship-to-ship missiles to break up a blockade or invasion attempt by the PRC. The Gabriel-type missile in Taipei's inventory would be neutralized by the Phalanx. Thus, the sale of the Gatling gun greatly complicates ROC defenses, already threatened by the PRC's large number of missile-equipped surface vessels capable of operating in the Taiwan Strait.

The G.E. turbine engine is of special concern to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) because it enables the PRC to build larger and more powerful warships. These ships would allow Beijing to enforce militarily its claim to the Spratlys and other South China Sea island groups currently also claimed by the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the ROC, and Vietnam. Since oil and other resources exist under the adjacent continental shelves, possession of the islands probably will have to be settled at least in part by military occupation or show of force. The sale of the G.E. engines by the U.S. gives the PRC a substantial advantage in this probable confrontation.

Reagan Administration aides have sought privately to dispel these concerns by pointing out that the naval weapons to be sold to the PRC are World War II-vintage equipment. They will not threaten, argue Administration aides, U.S. or allied interests. The problem is that World War II equipment does not threaten Soviet

interests either--the putative target of the U.S. policy to arm Beijing. In fact, World War II equipment can only be used effectively against countries also possessing World War II surplus equipment. In East Asia those countries are primarily ASEAN and the ROC.

It is further argued privately by Administration aides that the equipment is not designed to enhance China's blue-water naval capability, but rather is intended to improve the PRC's coastal defense forces. If so, the Soviets will not be deterred because its Pacific Fleet emphasizes long-range weapons such as cruise missiles launched by surface and submarine vessels and Backfire bombers. Thus while the arms to be sold to Beijing will do little to affect China's ability to counter the Soviet Union, they will boost significantly Beijing's potential threat to ASEAN and Taiwan.

To make matters worse, the proposed sale of U.S. naval equipment to the PRC was announced shortly after PRC leader Deng Xiaoping said that China may blockade the ROC to settle the issue of reuniting the mainland with Taiwan. At minimum, the sale of the equipment to Beijing will require a quantitative and qualitative improvement in arms sales to the ROC to maintain some military balance in the Taiwan Straits. The U.S. is obliged to do this under the terms of the Taiwan Relations Act.

CONCLUSION

It is doubtful that the Pentagon's proposed sale of naval systems to Beijing would enhance U.S. security and serve U.S. interests. Indeed, the likely effect of the sale will be to improve PRC naval capabilities, not against the Soviet Union, but against ASEAN and the ROC. This mismatch of U.S. interests and policy seems to indicate that the sale has not received adequate consideration by the Navy. Admittedly, there may be secret U.S.-PRC agreements to justify the sale. Perhaps Beijing is offering use of some of its ports to the U.S. Seventh Fleet. Perhaps the PRC has hinted to Washington that it will move its foreign policy closer to the U.S. It is even possible that Beijing has pledged not to use force against the ROC.

If so, then perhaps the sale does serve U.S. interests--despite the added threat to ASEAN and the ROC. But there has been neither public nor private communication to indicate any of these offsetting conditions. Rather it appears that once again a U.S. government agency is jumping on the Sino-American bandwagon to serve what may be that agency's own goals. The Navy should slow down and restrain its super salesmen. At stake is not simply emerging U.S. relations with its former foe the PRC. At stake too is the security of long-time U.S. allies and friends in East and Southeast Asia.

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