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Taiwan Arms Sales: Less Than Meets the Eye

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After more than seven years of waiting, there is reason to celebrate the final approval of a \$6.4 billion U.S. arms sale to Taiwan. Unfortunately, there is less to this package than meets the eye. Rather than addressing Taipei's deteriorating military balance against China's rapidly modernizing and expanding forces, these approvals provide gasps of new oxygen to Taiwan's aging defenses, which were starved of air initially by domestic politics and then, for the last year, by Washington's concern about Beijing's ire.

Indeed, for the most part, the sales seem to be designed around a new standard: providing no capability that Taiwan does not already have and about which Chinese protests will be perfunctory. For instance, the sale provides upgrades and repairs of existing systems and gives Taiwan new weapons to use against Chinese ground forces in the unlikely event that the People's Liberation Army decides to invade by way of Taiwan's beaches.

The White House also pointedly turned down requests to provide the two systems that Taiwan really needs to dissuade Chinese forces from an attack: upgraded F-16C/D fighter aircraft to maintain the air balance and design work on modern diesel-electric submarines that can challenge Chinese surface invaders.

PAC-3 Missile Defense. The sale does, however, provide one breakthrough: The Bush Administration's approval of 330 Patriot "Advanced Capability" missiles known as the PAC-3s. These missiles give Taiwan its first true defense against China's swelling

short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) fleets—1,400 at last count—arrayed against Taiwan.¹

Yet, even here, the Bush White House directed that Taiwan's initial request of 384 missiles be cut by 15 percent—for no military reason. Pentagon war-planners currently calculate the "kill rate for PAC-3s against incoming Chinese Dongfeng SRBMs at about nine-in-10. They have also modulated operational doctrine from the older firing of two missile rounds at an incoming attack missile ("shoot-shoot-look") to a "shoot-look-shoot" tactic (fire one round at the incoming, check to see if the trajectory predicts a hit, and, if not, shoot the second round). This still means that the new Taiwanese PAC-3s can defend the island against only about one-fifth of a full Chinese attacking force at most.

War gamers also worry that Chinese sea-launched SRBMs attacking from Taiwan's Pacific Ocean side would still need a two-to-one PAC-3 defense ratio.²

With China's SRBM deployments expanding at a predictable 100-200 missiles each year (as they have since 1999), Taiwan's new Patriot ABM system is barely sufficient to defend one high-value Taiwan target. The rest of Taiwan remains absolutely vulner-

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able to Chinese missile attack. This is not even a minimal deterrent; it positively invites China to contemplate threatening massive missile bombardment of Taiwan as a cost-free tool of political coercion.

U.S.–China Partnership—at Taiwan’s Expense.

Taiwan is slowly being decoupled from America’s network of security alignments in the western Pacific—partially because the Bush Administration has come to see China more as a security partner than as a competitor.³ A case in point is the administration’s promotion of the “North East Asia Peace and Security Mechanism,”⁴ a continuation and broadening of a U.S.–China partnership on the Korean peninsula that has proven ineffective at enforcing the denuclearization of North Korea.

Of course, China is also seen as a partner in managing the global financial meltdown: There is no doubt the Bush Administration has a pronounced interest in further investment of Chinese massive foreign exchange reserves in the presently fragile U.S. financial system. Subsequently, during a warm telephone call to Chinese President Hu Jintao on September 22, President Bush “briefed” Mr. Hu on the financial “turmoil” and assured him that the “U.S. government took note of the seriousness of the issue.” The Chinese president praised “positive trends in China–U.S. relations” and pledged “to continue our common efforts... particularly on the Taiwan issue, to promote

cooperative constructive relations.”⁵ The implicit *quid pro quo* offer of China’s financial cooperation in return for U.S. cooperation on Taiwan was hard to ignore.

For an Administration that has insisted on “maintaining the status quo” in the Taiwan Strait, it is astonishing that the Bush national security apparatus has apparently determined that Taiwan can maintain such military “status quo” without major upgrades in capability.

While protesting the current offer, Beijing will take these latest White House decisions on Taiwan arms as the baseline for China’s approach to the next Administration, demanding that the capability offered by future arms sales not go beyond that contained in the present package. Taiwan is the canary in the mineshaft: As it slowly decouples from the U.S. security network in the Pacific, we must expect that the rest of Asia will begin to question the value of American security guarantees and reexamine their own options.

The U.S. has a unique security relationship with Taiwan. Thirty years ago, fearing that executive branch diplomacy with Communist China would leverage a future president into abandoning Taiwan, Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which provides for arms sales to Taiwan, mandating that those decisions “shall” be “based solely upon...the needs of Taiwan.”⁶ President Ronald

1. See “Taiwanese Study Details China Missile Threat,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, April 15, 2008. “By November 2007, the PLA had deployed between 990 and 1,070 CSS-6 and CSS-7 short-range ballistic missiles” against Taiwan. U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, Military Power of the People’s Republic of China 2008*, March 3, 2008, p. 2, at http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/China_Military_Report_08.pdf (October 8, 2008). The number of Chinese missiles deployed against Taiwan (and Okinawa) has increased by 100–200 each year since the Pentagon reports were first published in 2001. For earlier reports, see <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/china.html>.
2. This information came in e-mail conversations with a PAC-3 specialist, dated July 5, 2008.
3. Victor Cha, “Winning Asia, Washington’s Untold Success Story,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/ December 2007, pp. 98–113, especially p. 108.
4. Christopher R. Hill, Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “Afternoon Walk-Through at Six-Party Talks,” transcripts from remarks given at the China World Hotel, Beijing, China, July 12, 2008, at <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2008/07/106959.htm> (October 8, 2008). See also “Press Communiqué of the Heads of Delegation Meeting of The Sixth Round of the Six-Party Talks,” July 12, 2008, at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/2649/t456096.htm> (October 8, 2008).
5. “Hu Jintao zhuxi tong Meiguo zongtong Bushi tong dianhua, shuangfang jiu zhongmei guanxi ji Meiguo jingji jinrong xingshi deng wenti jiaohuan yijian,” *Renmin Ribao*, September 23, 2008, p. 1, at http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2008-09/23/content_107475.htm (October 8, 2008). See also “Chinese, U.S. Presidents Talk over Phone about Ties, U.S. Financial Turmoil,” *Xinhua* (Beijing), September 22, 2008, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-09/22/content_10091587.htm (October 8, 2008).

Reagan also pledged that the U.S. would not consult with China on Taiwan's defenses.⁷

Congress assumed a major role in the shaping of America's strategy in Asia by passing the TRA. It--and the next American Administration--should strive to give full effect to those guarantees. Any-

thing less will constitute an abandonment of American leadership that will not be lost on our friends and allies in the region.

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6. Taiwan Relations Act Section 3302, United States Code Title 22 Chapter 48 Sections 3301–3316 (April 10, 1979).

7. For a comprehensive look at President Reagan's policies, see Larry Wortzel, "Why the Administration Should Reaffirm the 'Six Assurances' to Taiwan," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 1352, March 16, 2000, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/BG1352.cfm>.