

Behind the Taiwan Arms Sales

Adm. Robert F. Willard, the chief of United States Pacific Command, came to Congress on March 25 with a blunt warning: China's rapid military buildup is affecting the regional balance of power. "Of particular concern," he added, "is that elements of China's military modernization appear designed to challenge our freedom of action in the region."

The stakes in these "anti-access" moves are enormous. To no one's surprise, Pacific Command is working to upgrade equipment, harden bases, disperse forces, and create new concepts of operation to ensure US forces can defeat Chinese attempts at "lockout."

That is not all that is going on, however. Less frequently remarked has been Washington's effort to build up the self-defense capabilities of friendly nations on the Pacific rim. Case in point: Taiwan, where the US can strengthen its position even without any direct military presence.

In late January, the Obama Administration announced approval of an arms sale package to Taiwan worth some \$6.4 billion. The arms package comprised, in part, 114 Patriot air defense missiles worth \$3 billion, 60 Black Hawk utility helicopters worth \$3.1 billion, and communications gear needed to upgrade Taiwan's small fleet of F-16 fighters. Taiwan would also receive Harpoon anti-ship missiles and several mine-hunting ships.

It was the second significant bilateral arms transfer agreement in recent years. The Pentagon announced in October 2008, under the Bush Administration, that it was selling Taiwan \$6.6 billion worth of weapons.

Taiwan's original shopping list, first presented in the Bush years, included more F-16 fighters as well as submarines. Action on these was deferred by the Bush Administration. President Obama also has deferred a decision on F-16s.

While there was nothing particularly new about all this, China's regime expressed its standard outrage, lodging a formal protest. Put to use by capable troops, these purely defensive weapons could greatly complicate any future Chinese attempt to isolate or even occupy Taiwan.

Washington's willingness to move forward, even in the face of vehement Chinese protests, is seen by many as a clear signal that the US will support its interests in Asia and honor commitments to its allies.

The military balance in the Taiwan Strait favors Beijing, and democratic Taiwan's disadvantage has been quickly growing more severe.

Willard said China's "continued military advancements sustain a trend of shifting the cross-strait military balance in Beijing's favor." He noted that the Taiwan Relations Act pledges the US to supply Taiwan with defensive arms and maintain US ability to defend the island.

One of Taipei's defense problems is that Beijing has more—and better—combat aircraft positioned near the strait.

"Taiwan recognizes that it needs a sustainable replacement for obsolete and problematic aircraft platforms," notes a recent Defense Intelligence Agency assessment. Since 2006, Taiwan has sought 66 advanced F-16 fighters, but still has gotten no official response from Washington.

Taiwan has fewer than 400 combat aircraft. China has 490 within unrefueled range of the island. A Pentagon China report notes that "this number could be significantly increased through any combination of aircraft forward deployment, decreased ordnance loads, or altered mission profiles."

Even more troublesome is the state of the equipment that Taiwan does have. Its inventory includes 56 French-built Mirage 2000s that are so troublesome that Taiwan's military leadership wants to mothball them.

Taipei owns 60 US-supplied F-5s used primarily as trainers, but DIA says, "The number of operationally capable aircraft is likely much less, possibly in the low 30s," and they have "reached the end of their operational service life."

Taiwan also owns 126 indigenous F-CK-1 fighters with limited combat range and payload capacity. The fighter also "lacks the capability for sustained sorties"—restricting the F-CK-1's effectiveness in air-to-air combat, DIA asserts.

That leaves 146 older F-16A/B fighters Taiwan purchased from the US in 1992. Since that time, China has bought Su-27 and Su-30 fighters from Russia and fielded its indigenous J-10 fighter, all of which threaten Taiwan's ability to control the skies over the island.

Sixty-six F-16s would not alter the balance of power across the Taiwan Strait, but it would allow the nation to stand down its troublesome Mirages and F-5s, and would represent less than half of the number of F-16s that the Taiwan Air Force already flies.

China's actions threaten to seriously erode US ability to project its military power in the vital Far East, home of allies such as Japan and South Korea, as well as Taiwan. This concerns defense analyst Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., president of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in Washington, D.C.

In a recent paper, Krepinevich warned that China's anti-access effort now confronts US leaders with "a strategic choice of the first magnitude: Either acquiesce in the advent of a new world order in which the United States can no longer freely access areas crucial to its economic well-being, or effectively assist key allies and partners in those areas in defending themselves from aggression or coercion."

Yet to be seen is whether Washington will finally bite the bullet and make high-performance F-16s part of the equation. ■

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