



The US is pledged to help Taiwan defend itself, but must walk a fine line.

Al Jazeera photo

The US, Taiwan, and China's Long Shadow

By Richard Halloran

FOR about 15 years after the US canceled its security treaty with Taiwan and withdrew a military advisory group from Taipei, relative quiet prevailed across the 100-mile-wide Taiwan Strait, separating the island from China's mainland. Then, in 1995, the People's Republic of China fired missiles into waters near Taiwan to warn President Lee Teng-hui to cease seeking international recognition for Taiwan.

A year later, the PRC fired another barrage of missiles in an attempt to influence an election in Taiwan.

With President Clinton's approval, Adm. Joseph W. Prueher, then commander of US Pacific Command, deployed two aircraft carrier battle

USAF photo by SrA. Tracie Forte



groups—*Independence* and *Nimitz*—to the waters east of Taiwan. The Chinese backed off, but the experience kicked plans to modernize the People’s Liberation Army, which comprises all of China’s forces, into high gear. The communist leadership used funds from economic reforms started 20 years earlier to pay for the military expansion.

On the US side, PACOM officers got to work rewriting war plans, and annual arms sales to Taiwan jumped from \$153 million in 1990 to \$1.87 billion in 2000 and \$6.49 billion in 2010. The most recent package, worth \$5.85 billion, was announced in September 2011.

“The United States has long had a strong and effective military relationship with Taiwan’s defense forces that involves training and high-level meetings, as well as consultations on key security issues,” Kurt M. Campbell, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said in written testimony for the House Foreign Affairs Committee in October.

Thanks to that US assistance, Taiwan “can ensure that it develops a well-trained, motivated, effectively equipped, and modernized fighting force that will contribute to the maintenance of peace and to a durable deterrent” enabling it “to resist intimidation and coercion and engage with the mainland with continued confidence,” Campbell said.

But if an increasingly aggressive China attacks the self-governing island, the Taiwanese will inevitably look to the US for help. “We need to strengthen our defenses to hold off an invader long enough to make it easier for the Americans to come in,” a former Taiwanese diplomat said.

The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979 governs US dealings with Taiwan. The act was passed by Congress after President Jimmy Carter switched US diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC and abrogated the security treaty with Taiwan. The TRA requires the US to “make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services” needed to “maintain a sufficient self-defense capability.”

The President and Congress will determine whether “threats to Taiwan or dangers to United States interests”

Above left: A Taiwan Air Force F-16 takes off from Chiayi Air Base. The US has sold 150 of the fighters to the island nation. Left: Lt. Col. TaiCheng Chang, a 21st FS instructor pilot, fields questions about the Taiwanese Air Force while at Luke AFB, Ariz.



USAF photo by Osakabe Yasuo

CMSAF James Roy addresses airmen at Yokota AB, Japan. Roy has briefed Taiwanese officials several times on how the US nurtures a professional noncommissioned officer corps.

warrant US intervention “in accordance with constitutional processes,” states the TRA.

Despite this act, the US does not have normal diplomatic relations with Taiwan. US interests are represented in Taipei by the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), a quasi-embassy staffed by some 500 State Department diplomats and employees who are given nondiplomatic titles, such as director instead of ambassador. In comparison, the US has 950 diplomats and employees in its embassy in Beijing.

Powerful Army

The US also lacks a security treaty with Taiwan such as those underlying military exchanges with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia.

To avoid provoking Chinese propagandists, US diplomats and officers prefer to keep a low profile on issues involving Taiwan.

Military attaches posted to AIT wear civilian clothes and have innocuous titles. One point of contention with some visiting Americans is that unlike US embassies everywhere else, AIT does not fly an American flag.

When CMSAF James A. Roy was the senior enlisted leader at US Pacific Command in Hawaii, he flew to Taiwan three times between 2007 and 2009 to brief senior Taiwanese officials on how the US nurtures a professional noncommissioned officer corps. Roy—now Chief Master Sergeant of the Air

Force—also explained how American forces recruit young men and women, which was intended to help Taiwan’s transition from a conscripted to a volunteer force by 2015.

In 2009, retired Adm. Timothy J. Keating flew to Taiwan, shortly after completing assignment as PACOM commander, for a full week of discussions with President Ma Ying-jeou, senior officials in the Ministry of National Defense, and top officers of Taiwan’s services. He traveled around Taiwan inspecting command centers, ships, airfields, and training sites, then reported back to his successor at Pacific Command, Adm. Robert F. Willard. “Taiwan has a lot of old weapons and equipment, but they do well with what they’ve got,” Keating told PACOM staff officers.

Last summer, a US Marine Corps team of marksmen with one officer and five enlisted men fresh from Afghanistan went from a Scout Sniper Platoon at Camp Pendleton, Calif., to Taiwan for three weeks to work with Taiwanese marines, special operations troops, and police teams. The marines urged the Taiwanese marksmen to expand their operations to include reconnaissance and adjusting artillery fire. The marines also demonstrated how marksmen fight in urban terrain.

The US Army’s contacts with Taiwan’s Army fall largely under a program called Lu Wei, which means “Powerful Army.” The Army’s Pacific commander, Lt. Gen. Francis J. Wiercinski, like other American general and flag offi-



In 2008, US Army Maj. Gen. James Barclay speaks with Taiwan Army Lt. Gen. Tieh-Ming Liao at Fort Rucker, Ala., about training for Taiwanese helicopter pilots.

cers on active duty, is restricted by the State Department from visiting Taiwan, so senior Taiwanese officers travel to his headquarters in Honolulu. In turn, Wiercinski sends colonels to Taiwan each year to plan the Lu Wei agenda. “We discuss what professional armies do,” Wiercinski said.

In those discussions, American and Taiwanese soldiers each describe how their army operates. American officers, for instance, have drawn on their experiences in Afghanistan to explain tactics for countering improvised explosive devices. Like Roy, they have sought to help Taiwan set up a recruiting service to support the planned volunteer force and have emphasized the merits of a strong NCO corps.

Overall, the Navy’s contacts with the small Taiwanese Navy seem limited. Even so, an American officer said: “These contacts go on all the time. At the top level, we have broad and deep discussions in a regular dialogue both here and in Taipei. There’s a whole lot more to this relationship than just arms sales.”

“None of this is covert,” said one officer, “but we do try to keep it discreet.” Because of those political sensitivities, many American and Taiwanese officers were reluctant to be identified when interviewed for this article. The Ministry of National Defense declined to make an official available for a background discussion but others were willing to meet privately.

Beijing officials often assert that American dealings with Taiwan are the biggest obstacle to good Sino-US rela-

tions. They object, sometimes harshly in public or in private meetings with American officials, to all US ties to Taiwan.

They consider Taiwan to be a province of China that should be incorporated into the PRC. The regime in Beijing, led by President Hu Jintao, rages against what it charges is foreign interference in the domestic affairs of China—overlooking the preference of large majorities in Taiwan that have repeatedly told pollsters they wish to remain separate from the PRC.

PLA leaders, who have recently tended to ignore guidance from China’s political leaders, have been especially vehement on the question of Taiwan’s future. They have said repeatedly that

China will use force if necessary to prevent Taiwan from declaring outright independence.

Many of today’s US-Taiwan programs were started in the 1990s and 2000s. Taiwan’s F-16 pilots began training at Luke AFB, Ariz., in 1997, an arrangement that was extended for five years in 2011. Helicopter pilots are trained at Fort Rucker, Ala.

Officers from Taiwan attend the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force war colleges, as well as the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu. Younger personnel go to US artillery, armor, and signal schools.

Taiwanese and American units don’t train together but “observers” from Taiwan watch US exercises in the states. Retired American senior officers and serving middle grade officers do the same in Taiwan, particularly in a large annual exercise known as Han Kuang, which consists of command post exercises for leaders and field training exercises for troops.

Pentagon officials began annual meetings in 1997 with representatives from the MND at Monterey, Calif.; that gathering has gotten so large that at least one participant suggested it be limited.

The US-Taiwan Business Council continues to promote arms sales. A hotline was set up between the Pentagon and the MND in 2002, according to the Congressional Research Service. Whenever an American company sells weapons or equipment, technicians go to Taiwan to train the Taiwanese to maintain those products. “They need to know more than how the on-off switch works,” said a US official.



Col. Igor Gardner (l), 17th Training Group commander, and TSgt. Dean Minett, an international-student instructor, cut the ribbon on a new classroom in 2005 at Goodfellow AFB, Tex., as students from Taiwan, Kuwait, and Lithuania look on.



USN photo by Photographer's Ann. Dennis Cantrell

In March 1996, a CH-46 helicopter conducts replenishment operations with USS Independence near Taiwan. The carrier was part of a show of force in the waters there after China fired missiles into the Taiwan Strait.

On the other hand, political sensitivities have led to several restrictions, mainly at the insistence of the State Department. US officers visiting Taiwan from PACOM or Washington must travel in civilian clothes and carry civilian, rather than government, passports.

In public, American officials are required to subscribe to a “one China policy” even though no one knows quite what that means. American warships do not make port calls in Taiwan and military aircraft do not land there except on humanitarian missions. US and Taiwanese officers do not discuss operational plans for meeting a contingency initiated by China. Sometimes, American military people must scramble to make sure visitors from Taiwan and China don’t bump into each other when they are in Honolulu at the same time.

Still, Americans are not satisfied with certain aspects of Taiwan’s defenses. The armed forces are handicapped by lack of room to maneuver on their crowded island. Their leaders show little flexibility in operations, the military not having been in the field since Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek was driven off the mainland in 1949. And some Americans doubt that Taiwan will set up a volunteer force on schedule.

Perhaps most important, American officials worry that whatever they tell Taiwan’s MND will leak to Beijing. “We’re just never sure how good their security is,” said an official who has dealt with the ministry.

Some also question whether the Taiwanese are willing to do what is necessary to defend themselves. US officials point to President Ma’s mili-

tary budget, which has hovered just above two percent of gross national product despite his promise to raise it to three percent. The US, in comparison, spends about four percent of GNP on military power.

Taiwan’s Defense Ministry also is seen as stodgy, hidebound, and politicized.

On the equipment side, however, the quality of weapons and equipment sold to Taiwan has improved. Many items sent to the island are the same as those used by the US, including 150 F-16 fighters; four old but serviceable destroyers; 1,800 Stinger missiles; 30 Apache and 60 Black Hawk helicopters; and 444 Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC-3) anti-missile defense systems.

Between 2000 and 2010, Taiwan was among the top recipients of US arms sales along with Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, according to CRS. As one officer said: “The F-16s get all the public attention, but it’s not just airplanes we send them.”

Some of that attention has been controversial. Taiwan, which has bought F-16A/Bs, asked for more advanced F-16C/D models in the 2011 package.

The Obama Administration decided, instead, to upgrade Taiwan’s existing models, arguing that the retrofit would make them almost as capable as American F-16C/D variants.

US officials contended the upgrades would keep the F-16A/Bs in service

rather than mothballed. Congressional supporters of Taiwan, though, voiced a suspicion that the Administration had pulled its punches to avoid provoking the Chinese, who have broken off military exchanges when they were peeved. Some US officials said the question of selling F-16C/Ds to Taiwan later was left open, while Taiwanese officials have floated in the press a possibility that they might instead ask for the new F-35s.

The Obama Administration implicitly recognizes the Taiwanese government’s legitimacy, and US officials assert that Taiwan’s security could be enhanced if the island’s political leaders would acquire the vision to establish a qualitative edge. President Ma, who was re-elected in January, told a visiting delegation from the US-Taiwan Business Council he would seek improved relations with the US. He then told an audience at the MND that Taiwan should forge a small but strong military force.

Quoting the teachings about deterrence from Sun Tzu, the Chinese strategist of 2,500 years ago, President Ma said: “The highest form of generalship is to balk the enemy’s plans.”

When Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia and Pacific Security Affairs Wallace C. Gregson was still in office, he cautioned, “Taiwan will never again have the luxury of relying on quantitative advantages over the PRC. Instead Taiwan must look to its qualitative advantages through focusing on innovation and asymmetry.”

For innovation, he said, Taiwan “must focus on building a talented and educated corps of junior officers and noncommissioned officers.” Gregson recognized that the island’s geography and urbanization restricted the space available for training. That limitation could be mitigated with computers, he said, that will “allow you to simulate operations with real ships at sea and fighters in the air.”

Gregson concluded that while Taiwan could not outspend the PRC, by prioritizing its budgets, “Taiwan can begin to shift the cost ratio of defense in its favor.” He cautioned, “True and lasting security cannot be achieved simply by purchasing the next gleaming piece of advanced hardware.” ■

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