

The Pentagon Runs Amok

Obama is letting the generals and contractors roll over him

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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It is not possible to believe that it is coincidence that just as the Pentagon is being called upon to justify its immunity from the across-the-board budget freeze that President Barack Obama is declaring for the federal government, at least three provocative U.S. arms sales have been announced — to Taiwan, Poland and four Persian Gulf states.

The announcements were clearly scheduled to provoke, respectively, China, Russia and Iran. Each will now bark loudly, and perhaps take retaliatory action. Their responses will, in turn, serve as justification by the Pentagon for the 7.1 percent increase in proposed defense spending, even as painful cuts are being administered in other fields.

The other beneficiaries of this move will be the defense contractors — the happy band of manufacturers and trainers and their lobbyists — into the ranks of which many senior military officers and Pentagon officials retire once their active duty days are done.

The timing is extraordinary, if one had any inclination to consider it to be coincidental. The other “coincidental” development was the failure — again — of the missile-defense system in a \$150 million trial that took place Sunday. That system, a dog that has been around for years, cleverly conceived and presented as an umbrella over the United States and some of its allies against Iranian or North Korean missiles, has two basic problems. First, it is expensive. Second, it doesn’t work, although those two flaws do not necessarily deter Pentagon planners or defense contractors.

The three newly announced arms sales were surer bets, in the sense that each is sure to alarm or enrage some serious country.

The biggest sale, announced Friday, and the most serious in terms of impact, is a plan to sell \$6.4 billion in arms to Taiwan. China considers Taiwan to be part of China. The island will receive from the United States 60 Black Hawk helicopters, 114 missile-defense rockets, 12 anti-ship missiles and two mine-hunting vessels, as well as communications and surveillance equipment.

The timing of the U.S. announcement — unless the furious Chinese reaction is seen as helping the Pentagon’s budgetary case with the Congress — would seem to be particularly unpropitious.

The United States is asking China to sign on to sanctions against Iran. It continues to rely on China to keep North Korea in line. Mr. Obama’s new initiative to double U.S. exports is dependent on China’s adjusting its currency, a step it is reluctant to take in any case. And in

general, China's relations with Taiwan have been *improving* steadily, tending more toward enhanced commercial ties, as opposed to military competition. The new U.S. arms sales would seem to cut counter to this evolution of relations and must have been a difficult decision for the Taipei government to take, one certainly encouraged by U.S. defense equipment exporters.

The Chinese reaction will probably not be pleasant for the United States. It immediately is likely to exclude U.S. companies involved in the sale, such as Boeing, from operating in China. It also will cut for the time being military-to-military contacts with the United States, and perhaps others. The most serious action China can take — one which it was already moving toward — is a reduction in its purchases of U.S. debt. That would have a grave initial and then secondary impact on the U.S. economy.

It would mean, first, that the U.S. government would have to pay higher interest rates to borrow the cash necessary to cover its enormous, growing budget deficits. Second — and probably most serious — it would mean that the U.S. government would have to compete in U.S. financial markets to a greater degree for the capital needed to restart the engines of American industry.

That is absolutely the last thing that the Obama administration needs at this point. It makes one wonder how much pressure was put on Mr. Obama by defense industry lobbyists to obtain authorization for the arms sales to Taiwan — or worse, whether he understood what he was doing.

The second arms deal was made public when Poland announced that the United States would sell it surface-to-air missiles for deployment 35 miles from the Russian border by April. Russia has consistently opposed such U.S. action, considering it provocative and inconsistent with Mr. Obama's declaration of his intention to reset relations with Russia. Where and how Russia's reaction will come is not yet known, although cooperation on sanctions against Iran and/or the signing of a new arms reduction treaty may now be out the window.

The third major arms deal announced in recent days was that the United States will sell Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and perhaps other Arab Persian Gulf states new anti-missile defense systems, targeted against nearby Iran.

Apart from the financial aspects of the deal for companies like Raytheon, the theory is that the new weapons will make the Gulf states more comfortable hosting the U.S. military installations already on their territory.

The theory also is that Israel will be more comfortable with U.S. missile-defense systems in the Gulf to protect it from Iranian retaliation if Israel were to bomb Iranian nuclear installations. This theory is severely flawed in that Israel could equally well conclude that it now can attack Iran with *less* risk of Iranian retaliation against America's allies in the Gulf. The easy way to prevent Israel from starting a major Middle East war by attacking Iran is simply to tell it that the United States will not come to its rescue if it does so and then finds that it can't handle the Iranian counterattack.

The budget line for defense stands at \$708 billion, 53 percent of discretionary spending, eight times more than the next largest item, health and human services. Does that reflect America's priorities? Is that who we are?

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