

Washington's Arms Deal With Taiwan Threatens US-China Relations

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A \$6.4-billion (4.6-billion euros) arms deal between the United States and Taiwan has enraged China and threatens to endanger cooperation between Washington and Beijing on key international and regional issues.

The Pentagon's approval last week of the sale of Patriot missiles, Black Hawk helicopters, mine-hunting ships and other weaponry to Taiwan prompted China's state-run media to accuse the US of "arrogance" and "double standards."

The China Daily newspaper, run by the People's Daily, the Communist Party's propaganda mouthpiece, said that the US move "exposes the Americans' usage of double standards and hypocrisy on major issues related to China's core interests."

"It's time the US was made to feel the heat for the continuing arms sales to Taiwan," said the newspaper.

Beijing's response has been just as furious, with the Chinese government issuing threats that US companies involved in the deal, including aircraft manufacturing giant Boeing, would be hit with sanctions and that military and security contacts with Washington would be suspended.

Sino-US relations under pressure

China warned the United States that the arms deal could do "serious harm" to relations between the two powers.

"In the short term this deal is going to have a larger impact on the Sino-US ties than on the Cross-Straits relations," Jonathan Holslag, an expert on China's foreign policy and regional security in Asia at the Brussels Institute for Contemporary China Studies (BICCS), told Deutsche Welle. "Beijing does not want to sever the current rapprochement with Taipei."

Dr. Gudrun Wacker from the Asia Division at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs believes that the arms deal with Taiwan is only one of the problems currently dogging Sino-US ties.

"US arms sales to Taiwan are not the only issue straining US-China relations," she told Deutsche Welle. "To mention only two points: the conflict with Google and over censorship of the Internet and a possible meeting of President Obama with the Dalai Lama in the near future. President Obama's offer of broad-based cooperation with China on bilateral and global issues has so far not brought about the response from China which the US has hoped

for. With its growing economic and political weight, there might be more assertive behavior from the Chinese side.”

Obama’s hopes of Chinese help begin to fade

The fiery rhetoric from China over the weekend could dash Washington’s hopes of securing Beijing’s help in curbing the nuclear programs of Iran and China’s ally North Korea while further destabilizing efforts to develop peaceful ties between Beijing and Taiwan.

While the United States has been pushing for stronger sanctions against Iran, China has repeatedly rejected this approach in favor of diplomacy as the only way to resolve the long-running dispute.

“China obviously blames Washington’s ambivalence,” Holslag added. “Washington reaches out one hand to beg for Beijing’s support in Afghanistan, Korea and for chasing pirates in the Indian Ocean. But with the other, the US continues to provide military aid to Taiwan and key allies in the Pacific. As long as the American stick to their military presence in China’s periphery, they should not expect China to behave as a partner.”

“It is too early to tell whether this will have an effect of China’s cooperation on the issues of North Korea and Iran,” Gudrun Wacker said. “China maintains good relations with both countries – North Korea is a traditional ally and Iran is an important partner for energy supply. With respect to North Korea, China is interested in a nuclear-free Korean peninsula and in preventing the collapse of North Korea.”

“On Iran, China has always argued in favor of a diplomatic solution and has been reluctant to support stronger sanctions against Tehran.”

But what could be more damaging is the potential deterioration in China’s will to find a peaceful solution to the Taiwan situation.

China’s relations with Taiwan under review

Beijing has claimed sovereignty over self-ruled Taiwan since Mao Zedong’s forces won the Chinese civil war in 1949. China has threatened to attack if Taiwan – regarded as a renegade province by Beijing – tries to formalize its de facto independence. Despite recognizing Taiwan as part of China since 1979, the United States remains Taiwan’s biggest ally and is obliged by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act to sell the island weapons it needs to defend itself.

“The baseline is still that China will use force in case Taiwan claims independence,” said Holslag. “Beijing sees the current pro-China administration in Taipei as a unique opportunity to draw the island into its orbit. But if both sides fail to reach consensus on the terms of closer economic cooperation or the political status of Taiwan, a next election might entirely alter the atmosphere and bring China and Taiwan back to the trenches.”

“But indeed, America also continues to see the Taiwan Strait as its first line of defence. In many ways, support for Taiwan is a matter of demonstrating that the US is still a resident military power in Asia,” Holslag added.

However, Gudrun Wacker believes that Taiwan is unlikely to come under any heightened

threat from China over the US arms deal.

“So far, Beijing’s criticism of the arms deal is only directed at the US, not to Taiwan,” she said. “It is likely that both sides will continue their efforts to talk to each other.”

“And of course, Taiwan and international actors like the United States and also the European Union are interested in such a solution as well,” she added. “Due to the strong economic integration which has taken place over the last decades, no side can be interested in a military escalation of the situation. For China, military action will therefore be the last resort.”

US deal could backfire for unpopular President Ma

China is already expected to punish Taiwan over the recent arms announcement by suspending economic exchanges, though it has yet to say exactly how cross-Strait cooperation will be affected.

The US deal may also undermine Taiwan’s flagging President Ma Ying-jeou who came to power in 2008 on a platform of promoting detente with China. After unseating the island’s previous pro-independence government, Ma agreed to historic trade and transit deals with China, opening direct flights and welcoming tourists.

But Ma’s popularity has fallen in polls over the last six months due to his ineffectiveness in dealing with the aftermath of a deadly typhoon in August and other internal policy decisions.

“Taiwan is now more than ever torn apart by persistent suspicion of an eventual hostile takeover by mainland China and the political elite’s charm offensive towards Beijing,” said Holslag. “The current government prioritizes closer economic ties and political dialogue, but the majority of the Taiwanese people want to keep a distance and avoid becoming China’s 23rd Province.”

Ma’s acceptance of the US weapons deal will be seen as a response to opponents in Taiwan who accuse him and his Nationalist Party (KMT) of getting too close to Beijing ahead of parliamentary by-elections in late February.

However, angering China will also put in jeopardy the essential trade deals Ma attempted to seal in fulfillment of his election promises

Experts believe that China won’t cancel trade talks with Taiwan but minor exchanges might be delayed, cancelled or rescheduled with a proposed free-trade deal due to be negotiated early this year, which would drop tariffs in hundreds of sectors, possibly being pushed back as far as 2011.

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