

## ***Assessing New U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan***

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President George W. Bush decided April 23rd to offer Taiwan the largest arms package since his father sold various warships and F-16 fighters to Taiwan a decade ago. Bush did deny Taiwan the most expensive and controversial items on Taiwan's shopping list: four Arleigh Burke-class destroyers equipped with advanced Aegis radar systems. Bush did approve two other weapons systems that mainland China strongly protests: eight submarines and twelve P-3C Orion anti-submarine patrol aircraft (a different version of the same model involved in the recent spy plane incident with China). Also offered for sale are four older Kidd-class missile destroyers. Although these are not nearly as sophisticated as the Arleigh Burke-class, they are twice as big as any existing Taiwanese warship and much more capable than most Chinese destroyers. They would be a major addition to Taiwan's navy.

Most important, however, are the submarines. Currently, Taiwan is capable of disrupting any Chinese attempt to blockade the island. Taiwan's air force could inflict costly losses on Chinese shipping within about 1,000 km of Taiwan. These new submarines, however, would give Taiwan enhanced ability to attack Chinese shipping anywhere in East Asian waters. Taiwan could thus devastate China's vital overseas trade in the event war. China's capability to disrupt Taiwan's trade is more limited.

The U.S. has blocked the sale of modern submarines to Taiwan for many years because they were deemed to be offensive weapons unnecessary for Taiwan's self-defense. Taiwan currently has only two Dutch-built submarines plus two, very old, former-U.S. submarines used for training. The U.S. does not itself build the relatively inexpensive diesel-electric-powered submarines that Taiwan wants to buy. The U.S. and Great Britain build only expensive nuclear-powered submarines. Taiwan's vessels would

have to be built by Germany, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Japan, Russia, or Sweden. Of these, the first two are considered the most likely candidates because they are less concerned about offending China than some of the other producers. Modern German Type 209 submarines are exported to many countries, including South Korea and several ASEAN countries. The Type 209s are at least the equal of the Russian-built Kilo class submarines imported by China. It remains to be seen if the U.S. can convince Germany, the Netherlands, or some other country to build submarines for Taiwan.

### **China's Plummeting Submarine Force**

On paper, China seems to have one of the world's most powerful submarine fleets. A recent Pentagon study says that the Chinese navy will possess 60 submarines by 2005. Numbers, however, are deceiving. Only a handful of the Chinese submarines are the fairly modern Kilo and Chinese-made Song classes; China currently operates two Kilos and two Songs. By 2005 they will have at least four Kilos and perhaps a half dozen Songs. The rest of the Chinese submarine fleet is obsolete, including six primitive nuclear submarines, more than a dozen Ming class, and scores of the ancient R class. Most of the R class are so worn out that they are not even useful for training, and rarely put to sea. As the surviving units of this numerous class are scrapped, the size of China's submarine force will continue to plummet.

China's navy and air force have only very limited anti-submarine capability compared to most other navies, including Taiwan's. The best anti-submarine weapons include modern submarines equipped with high-quality sonar patrol aircraft, such as the P-3C, and surface ships with variable-depth sonar and advanced



anti-submarine weaponry. While China outnumbered Taiwan 4-2 in modern submarines, China has no modern anti-submarine patrol aircraft. Taiwan has a few, but twelve new P-3Cs would be a substantial addition to their current capability. Finally, Taiwan outnumbered China in warships with advanced anti-submarine weaponry.

Perhaps the major reason Beijing objects to the sale of Aegis-equipped warships to Taiwan is that the Aegis radar system has the potential to be used as part of a theater missile defense (TMD) system. The U.S. is considering joint development with Japan of an expensive TMD system. China strongly opposes the possibility that such a system might be shared with Taiwan. In recent years China has increased its deployment of ballistic missiles opposite Taiwan. So far, Taiwan has very limited means to intercept ballistic missiles that might be launched against it. A workable TMD system would allow Taiwan to defend against this one form of threat, for which it currently has no direct counter. Whether or not Taiwan acquires a TMD system, Taiwan's competent navy and air force will likely deter China from launching any missile attack, since Taiwan's potential retaliation could be quite costly for China.

Since the conclusion of the Chinese civil war in 1949 left the country split between the communist-ruled People's Republic of China on the mainland and the anticommunist Republic of China on Taiwan island, the U.S. has been the main arms sup-

plier to Taiwan. During this half century, U.S. policy has been to limit arms sales to Taiwan. U.S. presidents have been especially careful to limit sales of offensive weapons to Taiwan, such as bombers, submarines, and amphibious ships, which might allow raids on the mainland. (During the 1950s and 1960s, Taiwanese leaders often spoke about the need to "recover" the mainland.) This policy of balance and restraint has helped maintain the peace in the Taiwan Strait since the armed clashes of the 1950s.

### Shanghai Communiqué: A Dead Letter

Since President Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972, the U.S. has established closer relations with mainland China and reduced Taiwan's diplomatic status to something less than a nation. In 1982, President Reagan signed the Shanghai Communiqué, promising to reduce arms sales to Taiwan gradually and to avoid sales of offensive weapons. U.S. arms sales to Taiwan did dip during the 1980s while the U.S. began to help mainland China upgrade its weapons technology. This trend was reversed after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre in Beijing. U.S. programs to assist mainland Chinese weapons development ceased. Arms sales to Taiwan increased to such an extent that Taiwan was actually a larger arms importer than China throughout the 1990s. (Russia is once again China's principal supplier.) Thus, in practice, the Shanghai Communiqué is a dead letter. Taiwan is now so well-armed

that China has no viable military options against it.

These new arms sales are more than enough to maintain Taiwan's lead in its arms race with the mainland. They exceed the minimum necessary to insure a balance of power in the Taiwan Strait. China, which has been very restrained in its own arms procurement, might be encouraged to spend more on new weapons as a result, stimulating a more intense arms race in East Asia—to the detriment of everyone in the region. It is prudent for the U.S. to sell to Taiwan arms sufficient for its own self-defense, but a new arms race would benefit only arms manufacturers.

The U.S. will have better relations with all nations in the region if it maintains its long-standing policy of restraint in selling advanced and offensive weapons to Taiwan. Introducing more modern submarines into the region would be especially provocative. Bush has also suggested that the U.S. might reconsider selling Arleigh Burke-class destroyers to Taiwan if China, as might be expected, responds to the latest U.S. arms offer with additional weapons purchases. This should be avoided. China's current limited arms procurement insures the continued absolute and relative decline of the Chinese armed forces. Excessive arms sales to Taiwan might jeopardize this favorable trend.

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