

## Arms sales: the right move at the right time

Written by Nat Bellocchi ☐☐☐

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The decision by the administration of US President Barack Obama to approve the sale of an additional package of arms to Taiwan comes just in the nick of time. It does show a realization on the part of the US administration that Taiwan should not be left to fend for itself, but needs both support and encouragement from the US.

For too long, the people of Taiwan have had the impression that the US was too busy with issues elsewhere in the world — Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, North Korea, Iran — to be concerned with Taiwan's drift toward China's sphere of influence. The arms sale has changed that: It is a signal that the US will stand by its commitments under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act and may help defend Taiwan.

Having said that, we may want to ask if the signal is strong enough? This depends on how much further the Obama administration is willing to go. Will it keep the door open to further packages such as the 66 F-16C/D jet fighters requested by Taipei in 2006 or the submarines that have been under discussion since at least 2001? And there might be other items required to redress the increasing imbalance in air and naval power across the Taiwan Strait. In particular, is there anything that has truly addressed the imbalance of missiles across the Strait? It is essential that the US works with Taiwan on these issues.

The announcement of the sale also comes at a time of increasing belligerence and recalcitrance by Beijing on a wide array of issues: the sentencing of human rights activist Liu Xiaobo (刘小波) — author of Charter 08 — to 11 years in prison; the blocking of a meaningful accord at the global warming conference in Copenhagen; the refusal to agree on sanctions against Iran; the harsh crackdowns in Tibet and East Turkestan; cyber terrorism against Google and other Western companies and even government offices.

These developments are prompting a fundamental reassessment among Western governments and companies on the nature of engagement with China. The assumption behind US and European policy toward China until now has been that economic opening would lead to political liberalization. This basic premise seems increasingly less tenable: What we see is the rise of China — both economically and politically — accompanied with increasing authoritarianism at home and a willingness to throw its weight around in support of unsavory regimes and causes.

The Obama administration needs to stand firm on the basic principles of human rights and democracy. These cannot be whittled away in exchange for expediency in getting China to move a few inches on issues such as Iran or North Korea.

Against this background, it is also essential that Taiwan clearly shows it wants to remain a free and democratic nation and wants to strengthen its ties with the democratic West instead of moving into the sphere of influence of an undemocratic and repressive China. All too often, economic and business interests push a government in the direction of narrow and short-term

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gains. Taiwan's government needs to keep a longer-term vision of a free and democratic Taiwan in mind.

It also needs to be emphasized that peace and stability in the Strait can only be achieved if Taiwan maintains strong political, economic and social ties with the many democratic countries, especially its neighbors, and keeps a healthy distance from China.

The new arms sale by the Obama administration is a good beginning to help make this possible.

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