

There's more to it than arms sales

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Last month, the US government announced that it would sell Taiwan arms worth US\$6.4 billion. The package is intended to counterbalance China's growing military might, maintain balance in the Taiwan Strait and send a signal to Washington's Asian allies that the US keeps its promises.

The decision has drawn a strong reaction from China, which is threatening to impose sanctions on US companies involved in the sale. Official Chinese media reported that the Chinese public "supports" such sanctions. In addition, US President Barack Obama, ignoring China's warnings, has announced that he will meet exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama later this month, thus bringing more tension to an already tense relationship.

Last year, Obama was busy with the financial crisis and as a result, the China-US relationship appeared uncharacteristically cordial. With the crisis subsiding and China taking advantage of the US' difficulties by playing up its aspirations to world power status, Asian democracies have begun to worry. Judging from Obama's policies since the beginning of this year, he seems intent on adjusting his direction.

President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), having just transited through the US, where he was afforded a new level of respectful treatment, should therefore take a harder look at whether he was treated this way to encourage his pro-China stance, or if it was a signal for him to desist.

Chinese analysts have concluded that the arms sale to Taiwan, Obama's plan to receive the Dalai Lama at the White House and tensions over trade and the yuan-dollar exchange rate issue indicate the US may be shifting its policy from strategic cooperation to strategic competition.

Certain experts at US think tanks expect that the China-US relationship will not be as good this year as it was last year. It is worth noting that although the government in Beijing frequently talks about opposing this and imposing sanctions on that, it might not have the endurance required to teach Obama a lesson.

China feels it is moving in the direction of becoming a great economic power, but this is mainly thanks to trade relations with the US.

Once that relationship is transformed from a cooperative to a competitive one, China will run into multiple obstacles as it tries to increase its wealth in the US market. When China's economic growth slows, warning flags will appear for domestic unemployment, consumption and social stability — and this will translate into political pressure for Beijing.

In addition, the view that China could use its foreign reserves as a weapon against the US government is unfounded.

However, despite the likelihood that China's threat of sanctions on US companies participating in the arms sale will not be enough to deter them — China is not their only market,

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after all — this may be an effective tactic for scaring off Taiwan and China-based Taiwanese companies, who will face more difficulties in defending their interests.

For many years, China attracted investment from Taiwanese companies by offering preferential treatment. Now, it is opening its doors to the Ma administration, which is hungry for bait. China is not doing this to help Taiwan's economy, but to accumulate bargaining chips to put pressure on Taipei.

Well-known Taiwanese companies have been targets of Chinese political blackmail, and now that the Ma administration is running headlong into the "one-China market" trap, Beijing is preparing for the day when it will be able to order Ma to swallow its "one China" principle whole. When that happens, Taiwan's government will have run out of options.

China's rivalry with the US is China's business and has nothing to do with Taiwan. However, Taiwan must avoid becoming needlessly implicated.

First, if Taiwan continues to graft its economy onto China so that the two sides become hopelessly intertwined, it will be difficult for the government to avoid trade-related friction between China and the US. This means that the government, in its eagerness to sign an economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) with China, must be careful so that it does not make a strategic mistake that hurts all Taiwanese.

Second, with the Ma administration treating Taiwan like a region of China, it is losing its diplomatic advantages as other democracies drift further and further away.

Once US-China strategic competition becomes reality, Taiwan will become an unreliable member of the alliance of Asian democracies. The consequences will be severe.

When the "US bandits" declared that they were preparing to sever diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (ROC) in late 1978, then-president Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) said there was an acute need for the US government to adopt concrete and effective measures to guarantee peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region, including the ROC, and for reiterating Washington's guarantees to friendly countries in the region.

This shows that Chiang was very clear on the legitimacy and position of the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) alien regime. The US today is continuing to pursue stability in the Taiwan Strait, but that goal now runs counter to the KMT's and China's goal of eventual unification.

If Ma betrays the wishes of the Taiwanese people and continues with his willful pro-Chinese policies and the pursuit of unification, he may choose the wrong side as strategic competition between the US and China develops.

If he takes this road, voters will spurn him and his administration.

□ TRANSLATED BY PERRY SVENSSON

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