

Buying the right weapons

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Just as Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) was visiting the US for talks with US President Donald Trump, unconfirmed reports were coming in that the US is considering a new round of military sales to Taiwan.

According to the reports, Taiwan might be offered the weapons deal this summer, and the package may include advanced air defense systems as well as Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II multirole jets.

Certain commentators in Taiwan might welcome the news, saying it signifies the US' continued support of Taiwan and its capability of defending itself in the event of a military invasion by the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF).

The 2016 Air Defense Options for Taiwan: report published by conservative US think tank the RAND Corporation suggested that F-35 aircraft, while extremely potent, would not actually be suited to the reinforcement of Taiwan's defensive capabilities.

The first problem concerns the expense incurred and whether the money would be more wisely spent elsewhere; the second concerns where the F-35s would fit in with Taiwan's existing military capabilities and whether a focus on fighter jets as part of the defense mix is a good idea.

First of all, purchasing F-35s would not necessarily increase the size of the Republic of China Air Force fleet, as it would likely mean retiring existing fighters while retrofitting others. The air force's budget, after all, is limited. Money spent on this pursuit would further strain financial resources available for bolstering other parts of the defensive mix, such as surface-to-air (SAM) missile systems, which are crucial to repel the missiles the PLAAF would fire at Taiwan in the event of conflict, and this leads to the second point.

In a sustained PLAAF missile offensive on Taiwan, most of the nation's aircraft, including any newly purchased F-35s, would be extremely vulnerable to being blown up on the ground by guided bombs. Those that survived would be left without adequate support infrastructure, and even those that were able to take off would likely not have a functioning airbase to return to: Air

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force base runways would be rendered useless by ballistic missiles and aircraft hangars would be destroyed by low-altitude cruise missiles.

Case studies in the RAND report suggested that “fighters are too vulnerable to ground attack to be able to play a decisive role in air defense under a very large attack of the kind that the PLA is now equipped to deliver.”

The report said that very large investments in fighter aircraft are “unlikely to prove particularly potent in the future.”

The answer is a shift in emphasis to SAM defense systems. Due to budgetary constraints, this would necessitate declining any offer of F-35s and redirecting the savings made to acquiring the new missile defense systems.

The decision to launch a military attack on Taiwan involves far more complex considerations than the relative merits and amount of hardware. To China, a military offensive is certainly not the most desirable means for achieving “unification.”

Beijing would have to consider what it would mean in terms of the losses China would sustain in equipment, personnel and infrastructure; its standing in the international community; its reputation among already jittery neighbors; how it would deal with a resistant and resentful Taiwanese population for decades afterwards; what absorbing 23 million people used to liberal democracy would mean for China’s own political stability and how it would proceed if its initial offensive failed.

However, Taiwan needs to be prepared for any eventuality. Instead of jumping at any chance to buy new weapons, the government must consider such purchases carefully and in the context of Taiwan’s own defensive needs.

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