

DIA report may not sway US on F-16s

Written by Taipei Times

Wednesday, 24 February 2010 08:05 -

Despite a major new report by the US' Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) making it clear Taiwan's Air Force is in poor shape, it is by no means certain that Washington will sell Taipei the 66 advanced F-16C/D fighters it wants, sources in Washington said.

A White House source said US President Barack Obama had not made up his mind about the sale.

Weighing heavily against it is a belief that China will object much more strenuously than it did last month when Washington announced a US\$6.4 billion arms and technology package.

On top of this, there is a powerful Pentagon group that argues in private that the F-16s would not be enough to significantly tilt the balance of power in the Taiwan Strait back in Taiwan's favor.

Speaking on condition of confidentiality, a member of the group said there was only "limited support" within the US Defense Department for selling Taiwan the planes and that he very much doubted a sale would go through.

Meanwhile, John Pike, head of the Global Security think tank in Washington, said that the new DIA report was only "belaboring the obvious" and that the Pentagon had known for years about the poor condition of Taiwan's Air Force.

He said the administration of former US president George W. Bush had not agreed to sell the planes and that there was no reason to believe that Obama would change that policy.

Rupert Hammond-Chambers, president of the US-Taiwan Business Council, said the unclassified version of the DIA report was "light in substance and content" because the agency did not want to provide anything that might be materially useful to the Chinese.

He said the classified version would address more substantial issues and the very action of producing the report was "extremely useful in driving internal consideration of Taiwan's ... unaddressed request" for the F-16C/Ds.

The unclassified version, "clearly notes the need for Taiwan to replace aging equipment," Hammond-Chambers said.

But without knowing what is contained in the classified version, he said, it was not possible to know if the US was more likely to sell the planes to Taiwan.

The report, released in Taipei on Monday, said that although Taiwan has nearly 400 combat aircraft in service, "far fewer of these are operationally capable."

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While the Air Force has deteriorated over the past 15 years, Beijing has been expanding its military on all fronts.

“Taiwan has stood still while China very markedly has not,” Pike said.

Nevertheless, Taiwan’s friends on Capitol Hill are sure to use the report to press the administration and the Pentagon hard for the F-16C/Ds.

Gerrit van der Wees, a senior political adviser with the Formosan Association for Public Affairs, said he believed the report would be used as a “building block” by those in favor of the sale.

He added that he was “optimistic” that the Obama administration would approve the sale of the fighters “within the next few months.”

Meanwhile, the Ministry of National Defense yesterday downplayed the impression of the Air Force given in the report, saying the Air Force was upgrading its fighter jets as well as continuing to seek procurement of the F-16C/Ds.

Air Force Vice Chief of General Staff Major General Han Geng-sheng (韓景生) told a press conference that although the Air Force recognized the military balance of air power across the Taiwan Strait has tipped toward China, it has many programs to upgrade the capabilities of its fighters.

“The Air Force is working to prolong the service life of its F-5 fighters, which have not reached the end of their operational service life as said in the report,” Han said.

He said the upgrading of capabilities of the Indigenous Defense Fighter (IDF) has begun and the military had also completed medium and long-term proposals to upgrade its Mirage 2000 and F-16A/B jets.

The service must strengthen management of its fighter jets teams and its personnel before procuring next-generation fighters, Han said.

He said the Air Force would continue to seek procurement of F-16C/Ds as well as the most advanced fighter jets, with short distance take off and landing, advanced air-to-air attack and stealth capabilities.

Ministry spokesman Major General Yu Sy-tue (余錫堃) called on the US to continue to sell Taiwan arms in accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act.

During a question-and-answer session with Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Legislator Lu Shioh-yen (盧秀燕) at the legislature yesterday, Premier Wu Den-yih (吳登輝) said Taiwan would not give up its efforts to buy the F-16C/Ds.

“The imbalance of cross-strait military capabilities started to change many years ago. It is very

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difficult for us to overturn the situation by spending a large amount of money procuring large amounts of military equipment in a short period of time. Spending the money does not live up to the public's interest, either," Wu said.

The government needs to purchase "necessary, practical and reasonably priced" equipment, he said.

"The US has not agreed to the sale of F-16C/D fighter jets and submarines, but we are still negotiating ... we will not give up on the F-16C/Ds fighters and submarines because they are important to us," he said.

Source: [Taipei Times 2010/02/24](#)