

The next 12 months will be a definitive period for US military sales to Taiwan, with US President Barack Obama having to make some tough decisions that could jeopardize the US' relations with China, a Washington conference was told.

Bernard Cole, a professor at the National War College, said China was expanding and modernizing its armed forces — from ballistic missiles to submarines — in a clear attempt to “deter and delay” US entry into any military confrontation with Taiwan.

Cole said the US Navy was “shrinking” — making it even more difficult for the US to intercede — as the financial interrelationship between the US and China grows.

To make matters worse, the sale of all significant weapons systems to Taiwan have in effect “stalled,” Cole said.

“The next year or so is going to be fairly definitive in terms of US military sales to Taiwan. The current US administration will face some very serious, difficult decisions,” he said.

The conference was organized by George Washington University's Sigur Center for Asian Studies to discuss US policy directions on Taiwan.

Alan Romburg, director of the East Asia Program at the Henry L Stimson Center, said that he had been told by senior People's Liberation Army (PLA) officials that when Obama announces the next round of arms sales to Taipei — “I say when and not if” — China will cancel all military-to-military contact with the US.

Nancy Tucker, author of a recent history of Taiwan and a history professor at Georgetown University, said the Obama administration was “unenthusiastic” about selling arms to Taiwan and “has not made a single notification to the US Congress of any arms sales to date.”

She said that she had been told the White House would decide if it was going to sell the much-wanted advanced F-16 fighter planes “some time relatively early in 2010.”

“What would or could the US do in a China-Taiwan military confrontation? The Taiwan Strait is the only place in the world where two nuclear-armed great powers could find themselves at war and that war does not have to come by intent, it could also come from misunderstanding, miscalculation or accident,” Tucker said.

Romburg insisted that the Obama administration would sell some arms to Taiwan soon, but not F-16s.

“I don't know when F-16s might be considered, but not soon. The threat of war is not going away. The PRC [People's Republic of China] will maintain the military capability to deter, and if

Next 12 months key for US arms sales: analyst

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necessary defeat, Taiwan independence till the day of unification,” Romburg said.

“We are sounding very much like there are not going to be any F-16 sales. And I would simply say that I don’t think that is certain yet. If Taiwan is going to continue relying on an air force for defense capability, then ultimately it does need F-16s and our government has not made up its mind definitely not to sell them,” Tucker said.

The conference was one day after a Pentagon meeting between US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Chinese General Xu Caihou (徐才厚), vice chairman of the PLA’s Central Military Commission.

A US official said later that Xu repeated his charge during the meeting that tensions over Taiwan were an “obstacle” to deepening ties with the US military.

Meanwhile, the Christian Science Monitor reported that Xu Guangyu (徐光宇), a retired PLA general who now works at the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association, a military think tank in Beijing affiliated with the Foreign Ministry, said: “China is very sensitive about the pattern of US military deployment in the region.”

There would be “big trouble, very serious trouble” if Washington sold the 66 upgraded F-16 fighters wanted by Taipei, Xu Guangyu.

President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) said in Taipei yesterday that the US government was stalling on Taiwan’s request for F-16 jet fighters because of displeasure from China.

Taiwan first asked to buy new F-16s in 2007 after approving substantial funding for the aircraft.

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