

US signals new arms sales to Taiwan: official

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The administration of US President Barack Obama is moving toward possible new arms sales to Taiwan, including design work on diesel-electric submarines, a US Department of State official said on Wednesday.

Also progressing toward notification to the US Congress is the sale to Taiwan of UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, said Robert Kovac, acting deputy assistant secretary of state for defense trade.

In addition, the Obama administration is weighing more sales to Taiwan of Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC-3) missiles, as well as an operations deal for the Po Sheng (Broad Victory) command and control program, Kovac said.

"All of those things are going on," he said during a break in testimony to a US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs subcommittee hearing on US aerospace exports.

Asked whether "going on" meant advancing toward notification to Congress as a prelude to any sale, Kovac said: "In some cases, yes," including the Black Hawks and the submarines.

On supplying additional PAC-3 missiles, he said this was "in discussions."

China suspended military-to-military contacts with the US after former president George W. Bush notified Congress in October last year of plans to sell Taiwan a long-delayed arms package valued at up to US\$6.4 billion.

The US does not build diesel-electric submarines, but the design work, estimated at US\$360 million, would require a US company to show it had the ability to build them or had found a foreign partner that would do so, said Ed Ross, director of operations at the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency from 1994 to 2007.

The cost of building eight diesel-electric submarines had been estimated at US\$10.2 billion and would take 10 to 15 years, he said in a telephone interview.

"It's a very significant event if they go forward with these sales," said Ross, now a defense consultant specializing in East Asia. "They are desperately needed for Taiwan's defense and deterrence to maintain the relative military balance in the Taiwan Strait."

The Black Hawk, a tactical transport helicopter, is built by Sikorsky Aircraft, a unit of United Technologies Corp.

The PAC-3 missile is built by Lockheed Martin Corp and Raytheon Co is the system integrator. Lockheed was the prime contractor for the original Po Sheng program, designed to integrate Taiwan's air, marine, ground and command and control assets in a single network.

Taiwan has long sought 60 Black Hawks and the submarines. Bush had cleared both for sale

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in April 2001, but he omitted them when he finally sent Congress his arms package last year after much debate in the Legislative Yuan.

Included were up to 330 PAC-3 missiles and related equipment valued at up to US\$3.1 billion, about half the amount Taiwan had sought for defense against missiles and aircraft.

“We decided that trying to make up for the delays in the arms sale package in one fell swoop was potentially destabilizing to the improvements in cross-strait relations that occurred during the first year” of President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration, Dennis Wilder, senior director for East Asian affairs on Bush's National Security Council staff, told Reuters in March.

“We also clearly told Taiwan that nothing had been taken off the table,” he said. “We wanted to leave the door open for the next US administration to do its own review in consultation with Taiwan to decide on future arms sales.”

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said in a Sept. 16 speech that China's investments in anti-ship weaponry “could threaten America's primary way to project power and help allies in the Pacific — in particular our forward air bases and carrier strike groups.”

In response, China said it opposed US arms sales to Taiwan.

“We are firmly opposed to US arms sales to Taiwan,” Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Jiang Yu (江玉) told a regular briefing. “Our position is consistent in this regard.”

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