

## Taiwan's Air Force needs help: US report

Written by Taipei Times

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A report released yesterday by the US Defense Intelligence Agency that assesses the overall effectiveness of Taiwan's air defenses has reinforced concerns about the state of Taiwan's aging fighter squadrons.

An unclassified version of the report seen by the Taipei Times produces a damning indictment of the poor state of many of the Air Force's jets, raising serious doubts about the nation's ability to defend itself in the event of a Chinese attack.

"Although Taiwan has nearly 400 combat aircraft in service, far fewer of these are operationally capable," the report said.

The military's 60 "F-5 fighters have reached the end of their operational service life," while the effectiveness of its 56 Mirage 2000 jets has been greatly reduced by high maintenance costs, lack of spare parts and problems with turbine blades, the report said.

The military magazine Defense News reported in August that the assessment was produced after supporters of Taiwan on the US Senate's Armed Services Committee inserted a requirement for such a report in the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act which was passed last July.

At the time, analysts said the purpose of the insertion was to give the US government a timely reminder that the military balance of air power across the Taiwan Strait was now firmly in China's favor and hopefully prompt it into action on granting Taiwan's long-held request for 66 advanced F-16C/D fighter jets.

The most recent US\$6.4 billion arms sale package to Taiwan announced by US President Barack Obama's administration last month, however, didn't mention the F-16s.

"The unclassified version of this report does have some surprising conclusions, though it does not openly promote the sale of new F-16s to Taiwan, it does demonstrate a serious degradation of Taiwan's air force," said Wendell Minnick, Asia bureau chief of Defense News.

"The other issue of interest, not cited in the report, is that the window of opportunity for F-16s is closing. As the new F-35 comes on line in the next five years, the production line of F-16s will begin to close. The US will not allow the export of the F-35 to Taiwan for a variety of technological and security reasons," he said.

"So if Taiwan wants to get F-16s it needs to push as hard as it can now before the window of opportunity closes," he said.

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