

US military chief confirms build-up

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The top commander of US military forces in the Pacific on Thursday confirmed reports that the Chinese army has been upgrading and deploying larger numbers of missiles across the Taiwan Strait.

“The PLA has focused considerable effort on building up its integrated air defense capabilities and has deployed an increasing number of upgraded Russian SA-20 PMU 2 along the Taiwan Strait,” Admiral Robert Willard said, -confirming -earlier reports by a Canadian defense magazine that said China has deployed eight battalions of advanced missile systems in Fujian Province.

Willard also said that Taiwan must someday improve upon its existing fighter jets to keep pace with China’s increasing air power.

Some of China’s other military modernization programs highlighted by Willard’s testimony to the US House of Representatives Armed Services Committee include the development of sophisticated shipboard air defense systems as well as supersonic -anti-ship cruise missiles.

Yesterday, media reports in Washington said that some US officials are insisting that China’s buildup of both conventional and nuclear forces is aimed solely at possible conflict with Taiwan.

China’s military forces have also been developing a new submarine-launched nuclear ballistic missile capable of reaching the Western US and aims to deploy its own aircraft carrier by 2012, Willard said.

“The PLA’s continued military advancements sustain a trend of shifting the cross-strait military balance in Beijing’s favor,” Willard said. “China continues to develop weapons systems, technologies and concepts of operation that support anti-access and area denial strategies in the [Asia-Pacific] region.”

In response, Ministry of National Defense (MND) spokesperson Yu Sy-tue (于錫堃) said yesterday that the military would continue to monitor such developments and added that it would take “appropriate measures” when necessary, without elaborating.

The comments come after the Taiwanese government has -consistently pushed the US to supply it with 66 advanced F-16C/D fighters, an upgrade of its current inventory of F-16A/B fighters.

The jets were not included as part of a US\$6.4 billion arms sale announced by US President Obama in January and China has warned against any sales of new F-16s.

While Willard agreed that Taiwan would need to improve its own fighter jet capabilities to counter the fast-growing military imbalance with China, he declined to predict when the US

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might provide Taiwan with the new jets.

He later told reporters that a decision to sell Taiwan new F-16 jets must be determined by the entire US government.

The issue was underscored in December last year when a Pentagon report said that many of Taiwan's 400 combat aircraft would not be available to help withstand an attack from China.

Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) lawmakers on the legislature's Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committee told the Taipei Times that these new developments came as a "slap in the face" to President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) stance of building closer ties, including military confidence building measures with China.

"His China policies are a total failure," said DPP Legislator Twu Shiing-jer (吳錫爵). "Despite all Ma's rhetoric about warming ties, China is continuing to increase the number of missiles across the Taiwan Strait, further showing that it doesn't care at all about Taiwan's interests."

The president has insisted that China remove all missiles pointed at Taiwan before cross-strait peace talks can take place. One of Ma's cornerstone policies has been an effort to reduce tensions across the Taiwan Strait, and in previous statements he has urged Beijing to remove its missiles, saying that they give Taiwanese, "a very bad feeling."

"Well, it looks like all this talk about warming ties, cross-strait foreign affairs detente and reconciliation has been a sham," DPP Legislator Tsai Huang-liang (蔡煌良) said. "China's threat continues to rise and meanwhile our ministry of national defense has become directionless ... we should revise our policies immediately."

Meanwhile, Tsai said that Willard's testimony should give the government ample reasons to pursue an aggressive weapons modernization campaign, adding that the MND should explore different ways of acquiring the new F-16s and even F-35s, the US' newest combat fighter jet.

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