

Taiwan arms no reason to harm US-China ties: Gates

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US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates yesterday chided China for suspending military ties over US arms sales to Taiwan, saying Beijing's stance "makes little sense."

Renewing his call for stronger relations between the Chinese and US militaries, Gates said such a dialogue should not be "held hostage" over the weapons sales.

The sales have been going on for decades and Washington has made clear that it does not support independence for Taiwan, Gates said in a speech at a security conference in Singapore.

"Chinese officials have broken off interactions between our militaries, citing US arms sales to Taiwan as the rationale," he said. "For a variety of reasons, this makes little sense."

However, a top Chinese officer at the conference rejected Gates' view, saying Beijing was not to blame and that arms sales to Taiwan and US naval ships in the South China Sea were undermining military relations.

"We do not regard US arms sales to Taiwan as something normal," General Ma Xiaotian (马晓天), deputy chief of staff of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), said at the Shangri-La Dialogue, an annual high-level security forum.

"The United States says it does not support Taiwan independence. We hope it's not simply ... lip service," he said.

Gates had planned to travel to Beijing on an Asian tour that began on Thursday in Singapore. However, China rebuffed the defense secretary and called off the visit.

As a result, Gates chose not to meet the Chinese military delegation at the Singapore conference. After his speech, an uncomfortable exchange between a Chinese general and Gates illustrated the often tense relations between the two countries' militaries.

Major General Zhu Chenghu (朱 Chenghu), speaking in English, asked Gates to explain what he called a contradiction between the US condemnation of North Korea over the sinking of Seoul's Cheonan warship and a more cautious US reaction to a deadly raid by Israel against a Gaza-bound aid ship.

"I think it [the Israeli raid] needs to be investigated and we will withhold judgment until that investigation is complete. But I think there is no comparison whatever between what happened in the eastern -Mediterranean and what happened to the Cheonan," Gates said.

The South Korean ship was the target of a surprise attack, Gates said, while the Israelis issued warnings to the aid ship before their raid.

After his remarks, Gates walked over and shook hands with General Ma, the head of the

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Chinese delegation.

In his speech, Gates said US President Barack Obama's decision to approve an arms package for Taiwan in January should have come as no surprise, as it was in keeping with long-standing US policy.

He said Washington had declared publicly for years that it did not endorse independence for Taiwan.

Gates said China's on-off approach would not persuade Washington to alter its policy and argued that US weapons sales to Taiwan helped maintain regional peace given China's growing military buildup.

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