

Senator questions arms sales to Taiwan

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A senior US senator said on Wednesday that US arms sales to Taiwan were hurting closer ties with China and asked US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates what Beijing would have to do for the Pentagon to reconsider the transfers.

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Dianne Feinstein told Gates that Chinese leaders had offered to reposition at least some of their military forces opposite Taiwan. An aide said she was referring to an offer that was made in the past and was no longer on the table.

“There is no current offer from China,” her spokesman said after the Senate hearing.

Feinstein, a Democrat, said the redeployment offer had been raised during “my meeting with some of the leadership.”

She visited China and Taiwan earlier this month.

Feinstein did not spell out any details about the offer, telling Gates: “Perhaps some of this I should discuss with you privately.”

Wang Baodong (王宝东), a Chinese embassy spokesman in Washington, said China’s deployment of “defensive forces within its own borders was for safeguarding its territorial integrity and defending its national security.”

“As to the redeployment, it depends on how the situations are evolving,” he said by e-mail without elaborating.

He was responding to a question about Feinstein’s comments.

Feinstein called US arms sales to Taiwan “a substantial irritant” in relations between Washington and Beijing, and predicted they would remain so in the future.

She asked Gates what “substantial” steps China could take to ease its military posture in the Taiwan Strait in a way that would allow Washington to reconsider future arms sales to Taiwan.

“I think there is an opportunity to consider where we go if this across-the-strait situation is stable,” Gates said.

After US President Barack Obama’s administration notified Congress in January of plans to sell Taiwan up to US\$6.4 billion in arms, China broke off military-to-military contacts with the US. Earlier this month, China turned down a proposed fence-mending visit by Gates.

Gates cited as justification for the sales factors including what he called an “extraordinary Chinese deployment of all manner of cruise and ballistic missiles opposite Taiwan on the

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Chinese side of the strait.”

Feinstein responded: “In my meeting with some of the leadership, it was mentioned that China had offered to redeploy back. Now I understand the word ‘redeploy’ isn’t ‘remove.’ And I understand the nature of what’s there and the number of troops.”

Gates said it was up to Congress and the White House to decide whether to change the way arms are sold to Taiwan.

“The bottom line is the decision on Taiwan arms sales is fundamentally a political decision,” Gates said.

Gates said the US was “very concerned” about China’s growing anti-ship cruise and ballistic missile capabilities.

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