

US may be considering Asia-Pacific policy shift

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Former US deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asia Randy Schriver said that US President Barack Obama's administration may be "on the verge" of changing its policies toward Taiwan and the Asia-Pacific region as a whole.

While not spelling out the possible change in detail, Schriver strongly hinted that it could result in a Taiwan arms sale freeze.

In an article published on Monday in the conservative Washington Times, Schriver said that following the signing of the Economic Cooperative Framework Agreement (ECFA) by Taiwan and China, there was further evidence of cross-strait rapprochement.

"Curiously," he wrote, the Chinese military buildup opposite Taiwan continues, with analysts saying that about 1,500 ballistic missiles are pointed at Taiwan.

"Why have we not seen even a modest, symbolic step on China's part, commensurate with improvements in the economic and political spheres, to reduce the military intimidation it imposes on the people of Taiwan?" Schriver asked.

"Understanding why the buildup continues, informs policy decisions the Obama administration must face," he wrote.

There are four possible explanations for the continuing Chinese military buildup, he wrote.

The first is that China has "no intent whatsoever to diminish the tools of intimidation and coercion in which so much investment has been made."

Rather, Chinese leaders "are forced to conclude that they must retain the military threat to keep Taiwan in check," he wrote.

Second, civilian leaders in China may be unwilling — or perhaps even unable — to challenge the People's Liberation Army (PLA) leadership. In turn, the PLA knows that if it pulls back on Taiwan, its budget — and justification for its continued growth — could be cut, Schriver wrote.

The third possible explanation for the military buildup opposite Taiwan, he said, was it is really designed to threaten other US allies such as Japan.

"Finally, a fourth possible explanation is that China might be willing to pull back missiles and reduce the threat — but is waiting for the right time and the right deal," he wrote.

"If the PLA military buildup opposite Taiwan continues apace, the need to provide Taiwan with weapons for self-defense also continues. This should be manageable if Washington doesn't lose its nerve," he wrote.

"The US approach over the course of many years has been to make weapons available to

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Taiwan so that Taipei's leaders have the confidence to go to the negotiating table with Beijing. This approach is paying off, but some would have us abandon it just when benefits are being reaped," he wrote.

He said that either through "willful misdirection" or through "naivete," the Obama administration appears to be ready to change the long-standing policy of providing weapons to Taiwan.

"The Obama administration has gone to great lengths to deny a Taiwan arms-sales freeze is in place, perhaps protesting a bit too much," he wrote.

"Why does the administration continue a fiction that Taiwan has not formally requested more F-16[C/D] fighters? Why do mid and junior-level officials within the Obama administration allude to instructions from 'senior leadership' to hold congressional notifications on Taiwan arms sales and not to expect another major sale in 2010?" he asked.

"Even after [the] ECFA, a strong and capable Taiwan remains a key ingredient to security in the region," he wrote.

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