

ANALYSIS: US to defer arms sales to next year: analysts

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US officials will defer any major new arms sales to Taiwan until at least next year as Beijing steps up pressure on Washington, where mending Sino-US ties is a priority, defense analysts say.

Sales of anything more than minor parts or low-end upgrades will wait until early next year, possibly much longer, letting Taiwan trail further in the balance of power against China, but advancing relations between the two superpowers, analysts say.

China has used stronger language and actions this year, including the snubbing of US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, to deter arms sales to Taiwan.

Taiwan depends on its staunchest informal ally, the US, for arms and wants new systems to keep up with China.

A delay in getting new weapons systems would further tip a balance of power that already favors China, putting Beijing in an even stronger position to push any potential political resolution between the two sides.

China is rapidly modernizing its military, putting particular emphasis on boosting its air force and navy. Taiwan says it has seen no sign of China removing missiles aimed at it and estimates the number may rise from about 1,400 to as high as 2,000 this year.

Yet US President Barack Obama is seen focusing more on domestic issues and ties with China, the world's third-largest economy and holder of billions of dollars in US treasuries.

"It's a combination, the perfect storm," said Wendell Minnick, Asia bureau chief with Defense News. "You've got Obama dealing with domestic issues, you've got China ramping it up and you've got better Taiwan-China ties."

Some analysts anticipate a brief resumption of arms sales early next year because Sino-US contact normally dwindles at that time of year when both sides take holidays, but most expect Obama to defer the deals as long as China and Taiwan get along.

"Given [the] improvement in cross-strait relations, Washington doesn't want to see any escalation of arms, so I don't think anything will come out of 2011," said Raymond Wu (吳國瑞), managing director of Taipei-based political risk consultancy e-telligence.

Stuck in the pipeline are an upgrade to Taiwan's existing US-made F-16 fighter jets, six new cargo aircraft and an overhaul of a fleet of Lafayette frigates, Minnick said. Taiwan has also asked for 66 new later-model F-16s.

Any of those deals would outrage China, which reacted angrily when the US government approved a US\$6.4 billion arms package earlier this year.

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Increasingly confident as its economic might grows, China postponed military exchanges and threatened sanctions against firms that sell arms to Taiwan, though little has come of the threat.

“China’s words and actions are stronger compared [with] the past,” said Niu Jun (牛俊), a Peking University international relations professor. “It’s not a new tactic, but it’s getting stronger.”

US officials are coy about the timing of arms sales, saying that they do not consult China, but analysts say Washington listens attentively whenever Beijing makes a noise.

“When it all boils down to it, it is Chinese pressure and threats,” said Rupert Hammond-Chambers, president of the US-Taiwan Business Council.

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