

Taiwan air defense needs a boost: US commission

Written by Taipei Times

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As the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission officially released its annual report to the US Congress on Wednesday, commissioner Dan Blumenthal said there was unanimous agreement that “something must be done” to improve Taiwan’s air defense capabilities.

Addressing a packed hearing room in the US Senate, Blumenthal said there was “no silver bullet” that could balance the military forces facing each other across the Taiwan Strait, but that Congress needed to review the situation in a comprehensive manner.

Blumenthal, a China analyst with the American Enterprise Institute, said it was not up to the commission to recommend the sale of specific arms packages to Taipei, such as the 66 advanced F-16C/D fighter aircraft that Taiwan wants to buy.

Other sources said a number of the 12 bipartisan commissioners wanted US President Barack Obama to sell the aircraft to Taiwan, but that to get a unanimous report it decided not to include that specific recommendation in the document.

Blumenthal said all the commissioners agreed that, given the “sober facts on the eroding cross-strait air balance,” Congress had to take some action.

He hoped the report would result in the Pentagon working more closely with Taiwan on “a host” of issues that would lead to more stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Details of the report’s recommendations concerning Taiwan were published yesterday in the Taipei Times.

Created 10 years ago to advise Congress on policy toward China, the commission’s report this year was largely negative toward Beijing.

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Commission vice chairwoman Carolyn Bartholomew warned that in addition to improving its air force, China had boosted its offensive air and missile capabilities and strengthened its capacity to threaten US forces and bases in the region.

“Currently, China’s conventional missile capabilities alone may be sufficient to temporarily knock out five of the six US air bases in East Asia,” she said.

“Saturation missile strikes could destroy US air defenses, runways, parked aircraft, and fuel and maintenance facilities. Complicating this scenario is the future deployment of China’s anti-ship ballistic missile, which could hold US aircraft carriers at bay outside their normal operating range,” Bartholomew said.

The 316-page report paints a dark picture of what could happen if China attacked Taiwan in the current circumstances.

According to one expert who testified before the commission, China could potentially deliver “a staggering blow” to the Taiwanese air force in the first minutes and hours of any cross-strait conflict.

Using just a quarter of its short-range ballistic missile force, China could “cut every runway at Taiwan’s ten main fighter operating bases and damage or destroy virtually every unsheltered aircraft located on them.”

“The PLA [People’s Liberation Army] Air Force would likely target any aircraft that survived the initial onslaught,” the report says.

“At this stage, without outside military support for Taiwan, the PLA would possess air superiority over the island and be able to conduct attacks on a wide range of military and economic targets with minimal losses,” it says.

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