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OPINION

Arming Taiwan

By ED ROSS
FROM TODAY'S WALL STREET JOURNAL ASIA
July 18, 2008

Among the many challenges facing the United States in an election year is the issue of arms sales to Taiwan. Before he leaves office, President Bush must decide whether or not to approve various major sales to the island, including 60 additional F-16s, Patriot PAC III missiles and Apache and Blackhawk helicopters. At present, the Department of State and the National Security Council are holding up these sales. This is an issue which deserves President Bush's immediate attention.

A little history helps illuminate what's going on. In 2001, shortly after President Bush took office, he approved in principle several billion dollars in new arms sales to Taiwan. This decision reflected the President's concern for China's military build-up and a continuing U.S. commitment to the Taiwan Relations Act, which obligates the U.S. to provide the island with weapons to defend itself.



During the eight-year tenure of former Taiwan president Chen Shui-bian, political infighting between the ruling Democratic Progressive Party and the opposition Kuomintang stalled the funding for these weapons purchases. At the same time, Mr. Chen's independence-leaning policies angered China's leaders. Washington was displeased by Mr. Chen's

inability to push through the arms purchases, and because his actions and outspokenness interfered with improving U.S.-China relations.

The damage those eight years did to U.S.-Taiwan relations was considerable. Taiwan's relative air, missile defense and antisubmarine warfare capabilities fell further behind as important Taiwan military acquisitions were postponed. China, however, purchased advanced weapons from the Soviet Union and increased funding for its own military research and development programs.

Equally important, mutual confidence between Taipei and Washington may have been permanently weakened. U.S. leaders lost confidence in Taiwan's leaders at a time when the U.S. was becoming increasingly dependent on improved U.S.-China relations. In Taiwan, more than ever, domestic political considerations took precedence over national security issues. And although last year the Kuomintang-dominated legislature in Taipei finally passed a defense budget funding many new arms purchases, the damage to U.S.-Taiwan relations already had been done. The U.S. had become increasingly reluctant to take the heat from China over weapons sales it was not confident Taiwan would follow through on.

When Taiwan's current president, Ma Ying-jeou, assumed office in May, he ushered in a policy of Taiwan-China détente and subsequently has expressed his desire for resumed purchases of U.S. arms. Still, the lingering fallout from the previous eight years and President Bush's personal reluctance to anger Beijing continue to hold up various pending arms sales.

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Whether or not President Bush approves some or all arms sales after the Beijing Olympics in August -- he will attend the opening ceremony -- remains an open question. High-ranking officials at State and the White House fear major U.S. arms sales, even then, would undermine Taiwan-China détente and do major damage to U.S.-China relations. They also ask why Taiwan needs more weapons packages now. Why not let the next U.S. President address this issue, while the sale of other, less provocative systems, training and spare parts continue?

Herein lies the crux of the problem. How much risk can the U.S. take with Taiwan's security? If it was certain that Taiwan-China détente would go forward without sacrificing Taiwan's young and still fragile democracy, none of this would be of concern.

Beijing has proven all too often, however, that it will demand much and give little and that it sees the use and threat of force as an instrument of diplomacy. Has it demonstrated otherwise? Taiwan democratically elected a president who ran on a platform of détente with China. What has changed on the China side of the equation?

Until Beijing removes short- and medium-range ballistic missiles targeting Taiwan and reduces the number of combat aircraft and troops on its side of the Taiwan Strait, why should the U.S. delay in responding to Taiwan's requests for arms purchases? It will take months for the next administration to sort out its China/Taiwan policies, only delaying important decisions further. In the meantime, China's pressure on the U.S. will only increase as it continues to finance U.S. debt and leaves Washington worried that it won't cooperate with it in the international arena if the U.S. proceeds with major arms sales.

As Taiwan enters this challenging period of détente with China, it needs strong U.S. moral and material support more than ever. By taking action on U.S. arms sales to Taiwan before he leaves office, President Bush would bolster a democratic Taiwan and make it much easier for his successor to withstand pressure from Beijing as arms sales contracts are concluded and weapons systems are delivered. At the same time, President Ma must assure Washington that he is committed to Taiwan's defense and that if Washington approves the sale of F-16s and other major weapons, Taiwan will follow through with signed contracts and adequate funding.

It is time to demonstrate clearly that, while the U.S. supports Taiwan-China détente, it stands firmly behind Taiwan's democracy.

Mr. Ross, a defense consultant, is the former principal director for operations in the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. He writes a weekly Internet column at www.EWRoss.com.

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