

US shipped fuses for nuclear-armed missiles to Taiwan

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In what Pentagon officials said was a major breach in US nuclear weapons security, the Defense Logistics Agency has acknowledged shipping four large electrical fuses used in nuclear missile warheads to the Taiwanese military two years ago.

The four cone-shaped fuses, each about two feet tall, were sent in packing crates labeled as spare batteries for helicopters. They were finally returned to the United States last week, after the Taiwanese military notified the Pentagon.

The admission sparked an international uproar, with China complaining loudly over the supplying of such a sensitive weapons component to a regime that it regards as a bitter rival and potential military antagonist.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang issued a statement expressing "strong displeasure" and demanding the US provide an account to China to "eliminate the negative effects and disastrous consequences created by this incident."

President Bush telephoned Chinese President Hu Jintao to assure him that the transfer was inadvertent and did not represent a shift in US policy towards Taiwan.

The Bush administration claimed that the fuses were not usable in Taiwan, since the country's military has no intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), let alone those with nuclear warheads. All such assertions must be viewed skeptically, however, since the Pentagon has every reason to conceal the truth if a transfer of nuclear technology was actually intended.

The *Washington Post* put the case in notably cautious language, writing: "Taiwan has no known nuclear weapons program and the fuses would be of no known use to its Defense Ministry. At the same time, the island's government mounted a nuclear weapons

research program at one point, and the issue remains extremely sensitive in China."

According to the official account, delivered by Air Force Secretary Michael Wynne at a press conference Monday, the cones were shipped from F. E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming to a Pentagon warehouse in Utah, and from there on to Taiwan, filling an order from the Taiwanese military for helicopter batteries.

It was not clear at what point in the shipping process the packing crates containing the nuclear warhead fuses were labeled as batteries, but they apparently arrived in that condition in Taiwan in August 2006.

Six months later, Taiwanese military technicians opened the crates and saw the contents were not batteries. The Pentagon was notified, and an e-mail correspondence ensued that stretched over more than a year, with Pentagon logistics officials supposedly believing that it was merely a question of the wrong batteries being sent.

Finally, last week, Taiwanese officials notified the Pentagon that they were in possession of components for a missile carrying a nuclear warhead, and the cones were packed up and shipped back hurriedly to the United States.

Secretary Wynne tried to explain the shipment as an innocent clerical error, declaring, "In an organization as large as the DOD, the largest and most complex in the world, there will be mistakes. But they cannot be tolerated in the arena of strategic systems, whether they are nuclear or only associated equipment. Our policy on Taiwan arms sales has not changed."

According to the Pentagon account, the cone fuses are part of the standard equipment of the older 1960s-era Mark 12 version of the Minuteman nuclear weapon. About 700 such missiles are still in use, and the fuses signal when the missile is close enough to the target to

begin its detonation sequence. The fuses are being phased out of the US nuclear weapons system in favor of the updated Mark 12A, and shipped to the Utah depot for permanent storage.

How they were then forwarded to Taiwan will be the subject of an internal Pentagon investigation. A separate full-scale inventory of all nuclear weapons and components was ordered by Defense Secretary Gates, the Pentagon announced Thursday, in response to the Taiwan incident.

Whatever the exact circumstances that led to the shipment—and the public will certainly not learn this from any Pentagon-run probe—the incident is the second involving alleged mishandling of nuclear weapons or components in the past year.

Last August, an Air Force B-52 bomber flew from Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota to Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana with six armed nuclear-tipped cruise missiles mounted on its wings. Since Barksdale is the home base for US stealth bombers, such as those which carried out long-range strikes against Iraq and Afghanistan, this has led to considerable speculation that an operation was underway to position US nuclear weapons for a possible strike against Iran.

In the aftermath of that event, four lower-ranking officers were relieved of duty, charged with negligence and inattention. In the latest incident, the claim of innocent error is even more difficult to believe, since there were at least ten quarterly weapons inventories at the US bases that should have noted the absence of the four nuclear cone fuses.



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