US administration approves $1.8 billion arms sale to Taiwan

Peter Symonds
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The Obama administration formally notified the US Congress on Wednesday that it had authorised the sale to Taiwan of $1.83 billion in advanced weaponry, including two guided missile frigates. The sale, the first in more than four years, provoked an angry reaction from China, which regards Taiwan as a renegade Chinese province.

Along with the frigates and associated hardware and ammunition, the package includes anti-tank missiles, Stinger surface-to-air missiles and $375 million in AAV-7 Amphibious Assault Vehicles. Not included are submarines, advanced jet fighters and heavy helicopters that Taiwan had expressed interest in purchasing.

US State Department spokesman David McKeeby played down the sale, telling the *Diplomat*: "Today's notification is consistent with the Taiwan Relations Act, and our support for Taiwan's ability to maintain a sufficient self-defence capability." He noted that the new authorisation followed previous arms sales to Taiwan totalling more than $12 billion and stressed that it was in keeping with Washington's "One China" policy.

These pro-forma comments reflect the tortured logic of US foreign policy toward Taiwan. Having backed the Kuomintang (KMT) dictatorship on Taiwan from 1949 as the Chinese government in exile, the US reached a rapprochement with Beijing in 1972, paving the way for its recognition as the government of all China, including Taiwan. At the same time, Washington opposed any forcible reunification of the island with the mainland, thus providing the rationale for arms sales under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act.

As part of its "pivot to Asia," the Obama administration is engaged in a systematic military build-up and strengthening of military ties in the Indo-Pacific directed against China. US actions have heightened tensions throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea, where Washington is challenging China's maritime claims. In October, the USS Lassen, a guided-missile destroyer, provocatively intruded within the 12-nautical mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-administered islets.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zheng Zeguang summonsed the US charge d'affaires in Beijing to protest against the announced arms sale, saying it went against international law and severely harmed China's sovereignty and security interests. According to the official Xinhua news agency, Zheng said: "To safeguard our national interests, China has decided to take necessary measures, including imposing sanctions against the companies involved in the arms sale."

The US dismissed China's protests. US State Department spokesman John Kirby declared: "The Chinese can react to this as they see fit. This is nothing new ... There's no need for it to have any derogatory effect on our relationship with China." After a $6.4 billion arms package for Taiwan was announced in 2011, China blocked high-level military exchanges for nearly a year.

While taking a confrontational stance over the South China Sea, the Obama administration has adopted a more cautious approach over Taiwan, which China regards as central to its national interests. Beijing has threatened to go to war with Taiwan if Taipei ever declares formal independence from China.

Obama has delayed giving formal approval to resuming arms sales to Taiwan despite strong pressure from the Republican-dominated Congress to do so. The administration may have been prompted to proceed by the upcoming Taiwanese presidential election in January, in which opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Tsai Ing-wen is currently the

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frontrunner.

The DPP advocates a more independent stance for Taiwan. In the event that Tsai won, a new US arms sale shortly after the election would heighten tensions with China. A former senior US official told the *Financial Times*: "If we were to do this after the election, it will look to Beijing as if we are endorsing Tsai, or even egging her on."

While welcoming the arms sale, right-wing Republicans called for such deals to be speeded up. Senator John McCain called for "a more regularised process" to "avoid extended periods in which a fear of upsetting the US-China relationship may harm Taiwan's defence capabilities." Ed Royce, chairman of the House foreign relations committee, declared that he was "deeply concerned" that the Obama administration had "needlessly dragged out this process."

Congress has 30 days to review the deal, which will almost certainly be approved. Regardless of the Obama administration's immediate calculations, the approval to sell another $1.8 billion in sophisticated weaponry to Taiwan can only add to regional tensions.

Speaking in Hawaii on Monday, US Pacific Fleet Commander, Admiral Scott Swift, accused China of undermining security in the South China Sea by warning off ships and aircraft that came close to Chinese-administered islets. Such "unilateral assertiveness," he declared, was becoming a trend that was "unacceptable." In reality, the US and its allies are deliberately and provocatively challenging Chinese territorial claims by mounting supposed "freedom of navigation" operations near these reefs and atolls.

At the same time, Swift pointed to the broader danger of an arms race in Asia. "My concern is that after many decades of peace and prosperity, we may be seeing the leading edge of a return to 'might makes it right' to the region," he said. "Claimants and non-claimants alike are transferring larger shares of national wealth to develop more capable naval forces beyond what is needed merely for self-defence."

The chief proponent of the principle of "might makes it right," however, is US imperialism. Over the past two decades in particular, it has waged one illegal war of aggression after another—in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and now Iraq again and Syria. Moreover, as the latest arms sale to Taiwan underscores, the US has not only fuelled the growing arms race in Asia through its aggressive "pivot" but is one of the main arms suppliers.

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