

US provocatively approves major arms sale to Taiwan

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The Trump administration's decision on Thursday to approve a major arms deal with Taiwan, along with the announcement of penalties on Chinese companies and individuals over trade with North Korea, is a deliberate slap in the face to Beijing. It sets the stage for a confrontational meeting when Trump meets his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping for their second summit on the sidelines of next week's G20 meeting in Hamburg, Germany.

The \$1.4 billion weapons sale to Taiwan is the Trump administration's first and the first since December 2015. The package, which includes MK-48 torpedoes, high-speed anti-radiation missiles and early-warning radar surveillance technical support, will significantly enhance Taiwan's military.

China is particularly sensitive to the arms deal with Taiwan, which it regards as a renegade province. Beijing has threatened to take military action should Taiwan's government ever declare formal independence. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, who was elected last year, is a member of the Democratic Progressive Party, which favours a more independent stand from China.

The Chinese government has routinely protested against US arms sales to Taiwan, which Washington justifies under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act as necessary to prevent the forcible Chinese takeover of the island. This week's deal will reignite fears in Beijing that Trump is reverting to more belligerent US support for Taiwan.

In an inflammatory and unprecedented step last December, Trump took a phone call from President Tsai, ostensibly for Tsai to congratulate him on winning the US election. This symbolic move was followed by Trump tweets and comments suggesting he would tear up the "One China" policy that has been the

foundation of US-Chinese relations for nearly four decades.

Under the One China policy, successive US administrations have recognised Beijing as the legitimate government of China, including Taiwan, and have no formal diplomatic ties with Taipei.

While Trump formally upheld the One China policy before meeting Xi in April, his administration includes top officials, such as chief of staff Reince Priebus, who have had close relations with Taiwan. Taiwanese Foreign Minister David Lee described Priebus's appointment as "good news" for the island.

The Chinese embassy in Washington declared on Friday that "the Chinese government and Chinese people have every right to be outraged" over the arms deal.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang yesterday called on the US to stop the sale, saying it would hurt Chinese sovereignty and ran contrary to Washington's commitment to the One China policy. Lu said Beijing had begun to make "solemn representations" to the US over the arms deal, which he stated went against the consensus reached by Trump and Xi in April.

In his meeting with Xi, Trump backed away from his more provocative remarks in a bid to secure tough Chinese measures against North Korea to force Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear and missile programs. Beijing has taken steps to pressure North Korea to accept US demands, including a freeze on coal imports from the country and, according to some reports, a reduction in energy sales to North Korea.

Trump, however, declared yesterday at the White House that the "era of strategic patience with the North Korean regime has failed"—a reference to the policies of the previous Obama administration, which sought to

ratchet up sanctions on North Korea to force it to halt its nuclear and missile tests.

By declaring that “patience is over,” Trump leaves few options other than the use of military strikes against North Korea. His national security adviser, Gen. H. R. McMaster, warned on Thursday that the threat from North Korea is “much more immediate now.” He said Trump had directed his officials to “prepare a range of options, including a military option.”

While McMaster declared that nobody wants to take the military option, the Pentagon has been preparing just such a plan. Three aircraft carrier strike groups have been stationed in the vicinity of the Korean Peninsula, together with an unspecified number of nuclear submarines. The US military can also call on its huge military forces based throughout the region, including in Japan and South Korea.

Trump made his menacing comments alongside newly elected South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who has indicated a willingness to ease tensions with North Korea. The US president, however, used the opportunity to publicly berate Pyongyang, claiming that the small, poverty-stricken country posed an imminent threat to the US.

Trump’s remarks also indicate that time has run out for China to bully North Korea into line. In a tweet over a week ago, the US president declared that while he appreciated Beijing’s efforts, “it has not worked out.” The US decision to take punitive action against Chinese entities and individuals is a clear message that the Trump administration will adopt a more aggressive stance against China.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin announced sanctions on Thursday to cut off the Bank of Dandong from US financial markets, alleging that it had been the means for funneling millions of dollars into North Korea. US citizens also will be prohibited from doing business with two Chinese business executives accused of operating front companies on behalf of North Korea, and with Dalian Global Unity Shipping, which is charged with transporting freight between China and North Korea.

Mnuchin absurdly declared that the US is “in no way targeting China with these actions” and that it looked forward “to continuing to work closely with the government of China to stop the illicit financing in North Korea.” China’s ambassador in Washington, Cui

Tiankai, reacted by declaring that China opposed any US use of domestic laws to impose “long-arm jurisdiction.”

The imposition of secondary US sanctions on China is particularly galling to Beijing as, in line with agreements reached in April with Trump, it has lifted a longstanding ban on the import of US beef, ostensibly imposed over concerns about mad cow disease. In fact, as the Trump administration announced its sanctions, the US ambassador to China, Terry Branstad, Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue and assorted American cattlemen were gathered in a luxury Beijing hotel to celebrate the end of the ban.

During a bilateral meeting between US and South Korean officials yesterday, the director of the National Economic Council, Gary Cohn, signaled a return to the anti-Chinese demagoguery that marked Trump’s presidential campaign. He criticised China’s “predatory practices” on trade and said the US hoped to work with South Korea to tackle alleged Chinese trade abuses.

The shift in the Trump administration’s approach to China will not be limited to trade. The bellicose US stance toward North Korea has always been indirectly aimed against Beijing and exploited as a means for a huge US military build-up throughout the Asia-Pacific in preparation for conflict with China, which Washington regards as the chief obstacle to its dominance of the region.



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