

US promotes Taiwanese submarine program, stoking further tensions with China

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Earlier this month, Taiwanese media reported that half a dozen foreign military contractors had submitted designs for a new fleet of eight diesel-electric submarines that Taipei plans to build domestically to bolster its navy. Taiwan claims this military build-up is necessary to defend against supposed aggression from mainland China.

Companies from India and Japan, and two from Europe and the United States respectively have submitted their designs to Taiwan's Indigenous Defence Submarine (IDS) program, initiated in December 2014. The specific companies have not been identified. The Japanese company, however, was reportedly contracted by a US firm to submit a proposal, just one indication of wider US influence in this process.

Taiwan's Defence Ministry will work with US contractors to choose a design by March 2019 with construction slated to begin the following year. Under the IDS program, sea trials would begin in 2024 and the first submarines would be deployed in 2026. Each submarine could cost about \$1 billion.

Taiwan currently operates just two, 30-year-old, combat-ready submarines, which are also set to be upgraded by a Dutch firm between 2020 and 2022 at a cost of \$12.3 million. The upgrades are meant to cover the gap while the new subs are being constructed.

Edward Rehfeldt, chairman of the US-based Rehfeldt Group which assists with the development of Taiwan's military, commented that Taiwan has "a strong navy, a strong air force," with "very good hi-tech weapons, but basically they need submarines to protect the undersea area." Rehfeldt declined to state whether his company was involved in the submarine project.

The growing military collaboration between Taipei and Washington is a product of the Donald Trump

administration's overall ramping up of pressure on China. In April, the US granted military contractors licences to sell submarine technology to Taiwan, including a submarine combat management system. A separate technical assistance agreement provides for the sale of sonar, modern periscopes, and weapon systems.

Last year, the US State Department also approved the sale of 46 advanced MK-48 torpedoes to Taiwan, as part of a larger \$1.4 billion arms deal. The proposal to sell the torpedoes had initially been proposed in 2001 under George W. Bush, but was shelved. Similarly, the decision to sell the submarine technology to Taiwan was also the revival of a plan first proposed under Bush also in 2001.

In addition, leading Republican Senators John Cornyn, the majority whip, and James Inhofe, a senior member of the Armed Services Committee, in March called for Washington to sell F-35 fighter jets to Taiwan, which would be the first such sale to the island since 1992.

Taiwan's Defence Minister Yen Teh-fa said in May, "The air force's operational requirements dictate that the next generation of fighters must possess stealth characteristics, be short take-off capable and be able to fight beyond visual range. The F-35 is a fine fighter and we are seeking it."

The chair of Taiwan's legislative Foreign Affairs and National Defence Committee, Wang Ting-yu, stressed the need for upgrades to Taiwan's submarines and F-16 fighter jets, which are currently underway, in order to dissuade any "improper notions" about a Chinese invasion.

"If you come for us, you will have to pay a severe price," Wang said. "It's like a durian or a porcupine. We won't bite you, but if you bite us, you will be hurt all over."

Washington has sought to bolster Taiwan's military in other ways as well, angering Beijing in the process. Taiwan's Defence Ministry requested the purchase of 108 US-made M1A2 Abrams battle tanks this month, and announced on July 17 that it had commissioned its first air brigade equipped with 29 AH-64E Apache attack helicopters bought from the US in 2008. Significantly, Taiwan was the first to use the latest variant of Boeing's AH-64 Apache outside of the US.

Trump, backed by the Republican and Democratic Parties, has also undertaken a number of provocative diplomatic actions which have exacerbated tensions with Beijing over the "One China" policy that treats Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

These actions include the Taiwan Travel Act, signed by Trump in March, allowing high-level visits to and from Taiwan by US and Taiwanese officials. It received no opposition in the US House or Senate. The massive US military spending bill for 2019, widely backed by the Democrats and passed by the House on Thursday, also recommends the Department of Defence authorize joint military drills between Washington and Taipei while improving the "predictability" of arms sales to Taiwan.

Beijing's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Geng Shuang warned last week before the House vote, "If these contents are put into law, then serious damage will be done to mutual trust between China and the US, to bilateral exchanges and cooperation in many fields, and to stability across the strait."

Taiwan, dubbed the unsinkable aircraft carrier by General Douglas MacArthur at the beginning of the Cold War, is viewed as a potential forward base of operations by the US against China—one of the reasons for Beijing's concern over the US questioning of the "One China" policy.

Taiwan is strategically located, close to the Chinese mainland as well as flashpoints in the East China Sea and the South China Sea's disputed islands. It also sits astride a vital trade route from the Malacca Strait to North East Asia, the world's second largest commercial artery accounting for 80 percent of China's oil imports. US strategists regard control over the Malacca Straits as crucial to maintaining US dominance over the region.

In another blow to the "One China" policy, the US

recently granted permission to Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen to travel via the US cities of Houston and Los Angeles on her way to a presidential inauguration in Paraguay in August. It was reported that in both cities she will be greeted by members of the US congress.



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