

The US announces provocative arms sale to Taiwan

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The Trump administration has announced this month the largest and most significant arms sale to Taiwan in decades—66 advanced F-16 Viper fighters worth \$8 billion. The provocative move takes place as the White House has stepped up its confrontation with China across the board—diplomatically, economically and militarily.

The sale of the F-16V warplanes will significantly strengthen the Taiwanese air force. Its advanced radar and avionics make it compatible with the F-35 stealth fighters that are operated by the US Air Force, Navy and Marines. The F-16Vs, which are expected to replace Taiwan's ageing F-5E fighters, will add to its existing fleet of 144 F-16A/B aircraft, which it is in the process of upgrading.

The sale of F-16V fighters is the first such deal since the administration of President George H.W. Bush approved the sale of 150 fighter jets to Taiwan in 1992. The Obama administration rejected a request by Taipei to buy F-16C/D jets, only agreeing to upgrade the existing fleet.

The sale, which was first reported on August 16, still faces congressional scrutiny which may take weeks to finalise. However, both the Democrats and Republicans are supporting the Trump administration's aggressive stance against China and have backed stronger ties with Taiwan. Indeed, Trump has been criticised by lawmakers from both parties for delaying the sale of the warplanes so as not to interfere with trade talks with Beijing.

Since coming to office, Trump has systematically boosted relations with Taiwan, including through the increased arms sales. In 2017, he approved a \$1.42 billion package that included technical support for early warning radar, high-speed anti-radiation missiles, torpedoes and missile components. Last year Trump

agreed to the \$330 million sale of spare parts for F-16s and other military aircraft.

Trump set the stage for accelerated arms sales to Taiwan by signing the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act into law on the last day of 2018. In relation to Taiwan, the Act specifically calls on the White House to sell arms on a regular basis and urged top US military and civilian officials to visit Taipei for talks with their counterparts.

Two arms sales to Taiwan have already taken place this year: in April, a \$500 million package of training and support for its F-16 fleet, and in July, a \$2.2 billion sale including 108 Abrams tanks and 250 Stinger missiles. The sales approved by Trump have already exceeded those by both Obama and George W. Bush in their first term of office of \$12 billion and \$5 billion, respectively.

China has reacted angrily to the latest announcement. Foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying declared that Beijing "firmly opposes" the sale. "It must be stressed that the Taiwan issue concerns China's sovereignty, territorial integrity and security interests," she said, and warned that the "US will have to bear the consequences" if all arms sales did not stop.

Beijing regards Taiwan as an integral part of China and has threatened to use military force if the "renegade province" ever attempted to proclaim formal independence. As part of the normalisation of US-China diplomatic relations signalled by President Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972, Washington accepted the so-called One China policy which treats Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan. At the same time, the US opposes any forcible reunification of Taiwan with the mainland and the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act authorises the sale of "arms of a defensive character" to Taipei.

From the outset, however, Trump has called into question this policy of so-called “strategic ambiguity.” On assuming office, he publicly called the One China policy into question, suggesting that he would tear it up if Beijing did not make concessions on trade and other issues. Last year he signed into law the Taiwan Travel Act which authorises high-level travel and talks between top US and Taiwanese officials, both civilian and military.

In a particularly provocative step, the US Defence Department released its “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report” in June that designated Taiwan as a “country”—in other words, an independent sovereign nation—effectively overturning the One China policy. Listing Taiwan with Singapore, New Zealand and Mongolia, it declared: “All four countries contribute to US missions around the world.”

On the military front, the Trump administration has stepped up the number of US warships passing through the narrow Taiwan Strait which separates the island from the Chinese mainland. Just days after the announced sale of F-16Vs, the US Navy sailed a transport landing ship through the Taiwan Strait—the seventh such passage this year. Previously, one or so a year was the norm.

The arms sale is also calculated to boost the flagging political support in Taiwan for President Tsai Ing-wen who faces an election in January. Tsai’s Democratic Progressive Party advocates a more independent stance by Taiwan and her government in August unveiled its largest defence spending increase in more than a decade to bring the military budget to \$US13 billion.

Cary Huang, a commentator for the *South China Morning Post*, wrote last weekend: “The Taiwanese president faces an uphill battle at the polls and is pinning her hopes on painting her leadership as a bulwark against a repressive and assertive China.”

The arms sale is in line with the increasingly bellicose US propaganda against China from both the Democrats and Republicans. The two leading lawmakers in the House Foreign Affairs Committee—Democrat Eliot Engel and Republican Michael McCaul—issued a joint statement supporting the sale of F-16Vs to Taiwan. As China “steps up its aggression in the region,” it declared, “we need to do all we can to support our friends around the world.”

In reality, it is US imperialism, firstly under Obama’s

“pivot to Asia,” and now under Trump, that has deliberately ratcheted up tensions with China throughout the Indo-Pacific region and initiated a military build-up in preparation for war. American strategists have long regarded Taiwan as a crucial strategic element in its war planning against China.



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