



Insight

Five Things that Should be in the U.S. Arms Sale to Taiwan

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Summary

- The Obama Administration is [expected](#) to announce \$1 billion of military equipment sales to Taiwan.
- Arms sales are an important way to support Taiwan's ability to defend itself.
- The United States should sell Taiwan appropriate defensive weapons that would raise the costs and reduce the chances of potential Chinese aggression.

A recent article in [Bloomberg](#) indicates that the Obama Administration will soon announce the first U.S. arms sale to Taiwan since 2011. The four-year gap since the last round of sales is the longest period of time without an arms deal since the 1979 [Taiwan Relations Act](#) (TRA) defined the U.S.-Taiwan relationship.

When the United States established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, it severed official diplomatic ties with Taiwan, which it had previously recognized as the government of China. Congress passed the TRA to facilitate continued non-diplomatic relations between America and Taiwan and help maintain peace and security in the region. One important aspect of the TRA is that it [requires](#) the United States to “make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability.”

Since 1979, every president has announced multiple arms sales to Taiwan. The Obama Administration has sold \$12 billion worth of military equipment to Taiwan, but the four-year break led to bipartisan [pressure](#) from Congress to announce another round of sales.

The reported \$1 billion in new arms sales to Taiwan would relieve congressional pressure but would also be likely to increase tension in the U.S.-China relationship. The Chinese government, which opposes the sale of military equipment to Taiwan, usually responds negatively to arms deal announcements. China often cancels upcoming military exchanges with the United States but is [unlikely](#) to respond by fundamentally challenging American interests because of arms sales to Taiwan.

The purpose of U.S. arms sales is to enable Taiwan to ensure its own self-defense. Fundamentally, Taiwan's defense strategy should focus on making a potential attack cost-prohibitive for China. Therefore, Taiwanese arms purchases should raise the costs of Chinese offensive action. Since China's recent military buildup poses a multi-faceted threat, Taiwan should make military investments with regard to land, sea, and air capabilities—with a particular focus on asymmetric systems, which are inexpensive weapons capable of taking on much more expensive systems.

With that in mind, here are five things that should be in the new package of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan:

1. Anti-Ship & Anti-Submarine Capabilities

Much of the Chinese military buildup has been focused on naval capabilities. Therefore, small missile frigates are indispensable, and selling Taiwan more of these ships would strengthen its defense. Undersea mines would also be an inexpensive but highly effective system for Taiwanese investment. Mines would be useful in anti-submarine warfare as well, especially as China increases in its sub fleet.

2. Anti-Air Capabilities

Another major aspect of China's military buildup has been modernizing its air forces. Additionally, China has an estimated 1,500 short-range ballistic [missiles](#) pointed at Taiwan. In response, Taiwan should invest even more heavily in missile defense and anti-aircraft systems. After purchasing the Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC) interceptors from the United States, Taiwan has shown a commitment to continually upgrading its missile defense, which is among the most modern systems in the world. Selling Taiwan additional PAC-3 units or even the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system would strengthen the island's anti-air capabilities. Surface-to-air capabilities, such as Stinger missile systems, could help support anti-air missions as well.

3. Anti-Armor Capabilities

In the event of a worst-case-scenario Chinese invasion, Taiwan must continue to invest in land warfare capabilities. Anti-tank missiles such as the Javelin and TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) are an integral part of Taiwan's ability to deter land forces.

4. Soft Capabilities

Harder capabilities are enabled by intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets. Improving Taiwan's ISR with long-range early warning radar systems would help detect potential threats and benefit any future military operations.

5. Aircraft

For almost 10 years, both the Bush and Obama Administrations have refused requests from Taiwan to purchase new aircraft—often despite pressure from Congress. Taiwan's fleet of F-16s dates back to 1992, but the United States has only agreed to sell retrofit upgrades to the old planes. F-16s are a relatively low-cost aircraft for the capabilities they provide, and selling Taiwan new planes would significantly bolster its defense arsenal.

The utility of any particular weapons system in Taiwan's specific strategic environment is up for debate, but the importance of these systems goes beyond their military significance. Often, arms sales are useful in signaling political support in addition to enabling defense capabilities. With the upcoming Taiwanese presidential election in January 2016, selling Taiwan the best defense technologies demonstrates support for the island democracy regardless of which party wins.