

On “Imbalance in the Taiwan Strait”

David Lai

This commentary is in response to the article, “Imbalance in the Taiwan Strait” by Dennis V. Hickey published in the Autumn 2013 issue of Parameters (vol. 43, no. 2).

This is a timely discussion of US arms sales to Taiwan. The author has done a great job drawing attention to the evolving security situation across the Taiwan Strait and placing the debates in the US policy and analyst circles about America’s options on this thorny issue in perspective.

While well presented, this article would have been better had the author been more straightforward on Option 1 and included recommendations for Chinese policymakers regarding predicaments with the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 (TRA) and US arms sales to Taiwan. With respect to this option, the author should have stated that though it is worthwhile to call for the United States to terminate arms sales to Taiwan, there is practically no chance of this happening as long as the Taiwan issue remains unresolved.

As for recommendations, the author could have pointed out that the main driver for US arms sales to Taiwan comes not from the alleged American ill intent and economic interests, as many Chinese analysts have long charged, but from Taiwan’s need for security. The reason is as simple as Business 101: if Taiwan wants more weapons, the United States is obliged to sell, although not unconditionally; if Taiwan does not want more arms, the United States cannot force Taiwan to buy. The fact is that the Taiwan government, whether under the administration of the pro-independence party (the Democratic Progressive Party) or the pro-eventual unification one (the Kuomintang or Nationalist Party), has repeatedly asked for more arms from the United States.

Nations seek arms when they are concerned with the specter of war; they lay down arms when peace is secured. China should see that the solution to the issue of US arms sales to Taiwan lies in cross-Taiwan Strait relations. China should have a better chance to affect the arms sale business with its efforts on cross-Taiwan Strait relations. Demanding the United States to abandon this business is like putting the cart before the horse—the efforts are not going anywhere. China’s insistence on terminating US arms sales to Taiwan as one of the three preconditions for improving United States-China military-to-military relationship is a prime example (the other two preconditions are stopping US military reconnaissance operations in the Chinese-claimed maritime exclusive economic zones and removing US restrictions on military exchange and technology transfers to China). The setbacks following each US authorization of arms sales to Taiwan (i.e., Chinese suspension of military-to-military contacts with the United States) have been counterproductive and dangerous at a time when the two nations have a high “trust deficit” regarding each other’s strategic intent, and a low

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understanding of each other's operational rules of engagement. It is time to make adjustments.

The Author Replies

Dennis V. Hickey

A number of interesting points are raised in this commentary; however, I disagree with others. Let me explain.

First, with respect to Option 1 (terminating arms sales to Taiwan), Dr. Lai suggests that I should have noted there is “practically no chance of this happening.” But some do not share this opinion. In fact, in 2011, Representative Ros-Lehtinen (R.-Florida) claimed she had organized Congressional hearings in the US House of Representatives because “some politicians” had begun to pressure the Obama administration to “abandon” Taiwan. Let's remember that many Americans were stunned by President Richard Nixon's announcement in 1971 that he would journey to China to meet Chairman Mao Zedong. Millions were also surprised when the Reagan administration announced on August 17, 1982, that the United States would reduce its arms sales to Taiwan and eventually terminate arms transfers. Such episodes help remind us that anything is possible in international politics.

Second, Lai appears to quarrel with the assertion that economic considerations may serve as a “driver” for US arms sales to Taiwan. He should carefully review the wording of those studies supporting arms sales and the petitions submitted to President Obama. In fact, when commenting on the sale of new warplanes to Taiwan, the September/October 2011 edition of *The Taiwan Communiqué*, a publication financed by Taiwan separatists based in America, contends that it is “the economic argument that will be the main reason why Congress will attempt to override the decision and force the administration to go ahead with the [F-16] sale.”

Third, Lai claims that both major political parties in Taiwan always support US arms sales. This is incorrect. During the 1990s, the DPP opposed massive arms purchases (party documents described them as a waste of money). The DPP only changed its position after capturing the presidency in 2000. Not surprisingly, the KMT then did a complete reversal and opposed such purchases. This explains why a massive arms sales package offered by the Bush administration in 2001 was not purchased by Taiwan. Domestic politics always plays a big role in Taiwan's arms purchases.

Finally, Lai suggests that “the solution to the issue of US arms sales to Taiwan lies in cross-strait relations.” He is correct. In an article entitled “Wake Up to Reality: Taiwan, the Chinese Mainland and Peace Across the Taiwan Strait,” (*The Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Volume 18, No. 1, Spring 2013, pages 1-20), I argued that “it will be difficult for the two sides to sustain the momentum in cross-strait relations unless Beijing—and to some extent Taipei—begin to recalibrate their relationship in a more pragmatic way and adopt some new thinking on the

concepts of sovereignty and the political status of the ROC. In short, they need to figure out a way to acknowledge the fact that both the ROC and PRC exist.” To be sure, it is time for Beijing to “wake up to reality.”