Despite strong objections from China, the Obama administration on Jan. 29 unveiled an arms deal with Taiwan worth $6.4 billion. The deal, versions of which have been under consideration since 2001, includes 60 UH-60M Blackhawk helicopters, 114 PAC-3 missiles and their accompanying radar systems, two Osprey-class mine-hunting ships, 12 Harpoon anti-ship missiles, and an array of advanced communications equipment.

Initially conceived as an $18.2 billion package including eight diesel-electric submarines, 12 P-3C Orion anti-submarine aircraft, and six Patriot missile batteries, the deal’s path to approval has been complex. Periods of tension between China and Taiwan, Taiwan domestic political wrangling, and Bush administration concerns over the U.S. relationship with China have stalled agreements over the course of the negotiations.

By law, Congress had 30 days to raise objections to the arms sales before the administration could proceed. That period expired Feb. 28 without congressional action.

The arms sale comes at a time of heightened tension between China and the United States over a host of issues, including climate change, trade policy, Google’s threat to leave China, and Iran's nuclear program.

When asked about the reason for the arms sale, Department of State spokesman P.J. Crowley said Feb. 1, “We’ve taken this action consistent with our one-China policy and [the] Taiwan Relations Act. We think that these defensive arms will contribute to security and stability across the Taiwan Strait.” Under the one-China policy, the United States does not formally recognize or support Taiwan’s independence. The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act commits the United States to the defense of Taiwan and authorizes arms sales to aid its defense.

The Chinese response to the announcement of the deal has been sharp. “The U.S. move pose[s] grave danger to China’s core interests and hurt bilateral ties seriously, which will inevitably affect bilateral cooperation on some major regional and international issues,” Ma Zhaoxu, a spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, said during a Feb. 2 press briefing in Beijing. China announced that it is suspending its military ties with the United States and that U.S. companies involved in the sale will face sanctions. “In disregard of the strong opposition of China, relevant U.S. companies insisted on selling arms to Taiwan. China will impose sanctions on those companies,” Ma said.

Alan Romberg, a former staff member on China issues at the National Security Council and now a distinguished fellow at the Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington, wrote on the group’s Web site that Beijing may be miscalculating its leverage. “No one should sell short the importance of ‘the Taiwan issue’ to [China]. It is fundamental. But understanding that does not define the entirety of the issue or limit the legitimacy of the national interests of other players in maintaining peace and stability in the region.”

Notably absent from the sale are F-16C/D fighter jets and diesel-fueled submarines Taipei has been seeking for years. Taiwan’s state-sponsored Central News Agency quoted Premier Wu Den-Yih as saying, “Buying weapons at a reasonable price for the country’s self-defense is the government’s basic guideline. The purchase of F-16C/D jets and submarines is still under discussion, and
Washington is evaluating the sale, but negotiations on the submarines will be difficult because of their very high price.” The administration said that it is still reviewing whether the sale of the F-16s is necessary for Taiwan’s defense. Taiwan currently operates a force of earlier-model F-16 A/B fighter aircraft.

A Jan. 21 Defense Intelligence Agency assessment of Taiwan’s air defenses, which the Washington Times posted on its Web site, says China has recently “increased the quantity and sophistication of its ballistic and cruise missiles and fighter aircraft opposite Taiwan, which has diminished Taiwan’s ability to deny [Chinese] efforts to attain air superiority in a conflict.” The report outlines shortcomings in Taiwan’s air force and its missile defense capabilities.

Responding to the report, Huang Xueping, spokesman for China’s Ministry of National Defense said at a Feb. 25 press briefing, “We are highly concerned about the report because the Taiwan issue is a matter of great significance to China’s core interests.” Xinhua, China’s state news agency, suggested this report might be used to justify the sale of the F-16s Taiwan has been requesting.

The controversy may make international cooperation on a global arms trade treaty more difficult. Argentine ambassador Roberto García Moritán, chair of a UN process to develop such a treaty, said during a Feb. 11 meeting in Vienna that “suddenly the political climate certainly has changed.” He added that the proposed sales “will have certain effects in July” when the United Nations resumes work on the treaty. Last year, countries agreed to a series of meetings leading up to a UN conference on the treaty in 2012. Although China has participated in previous expert and working groups related to the treaty process, it has abstained on past votes moving it forward. (See ACT, November 2009.)

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said China and the United States can continue to cooperate on proliferation challenges in spite of the controversy over the deal. “We envision this relationship as one where we can work together on issues of mutual concern. We’ve worked together on issues of proliferation, particularly around North Korea,” he said during a Feb. 4 press briefing. “I think that the Chinese will continue to work with us on the important next steps that we have to take relating to Iran because it’s not just in our interest or in others’ interest, it’s quite clearly in their interest as well.”

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