



# US Arms Sales Reveal Discord in Taiwan's Defense Strategy

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Where in the world are US troops most likely to be sent into a great-power war? Probably Taiwan, which faces the threat of invasion from China. As China (the People's Republic of China) grows more powerful, it comes closer to realizing its long-held desire to reunify with Taiwan (officially the Republic of China), which it deems a rogue province. Over the last four decades, the United States has sold arms to Taiwan in part to keep Beijing from attempting reunification by force. But growing Chinese military power, enhanced Taiwanese nationalism, and increasing calls in Washington to oppose China have endangered this delicate peace. Recent US arms sales reveal a growing debate over Taiwan's strategy for maintaining the status quo.

Should Taiwan continue buying big-ticket US defense items, like advanced fighter jets and tanks, or adopt a "porcupine" defense strategy, using its limited resources to buy many small weapons better suited to thwarting a Chinese invasion? This debate is complicated by the uncertainty of Beijing's intentions and US commitment to Taiwan.

Broadly speaking, Taiwanese and US policymakers fall into either the conventionalist or reformer camps. Conventionalists oppose the porcupine strategy because they think large US weapons, such as fighter jets and frigates, enable Taiwan's military to execute its traditional missions of denying China control of Taiwan's sea lanes and airspace. In this view, US officials could hurt Taiwan's security by only selling it small weapons for the porcupine strategy. Conventionalists also think that large systems are vehicles for

prestige. The more US fighter jets Taipei buys, the more likely US forces are to directly intervene if Beijing invades.

On the other hand, reformers think that a porcupine (or “hedgehog”) strategy is best suited to counter an invasion because it buys time for US forces to arrive. Given China’s recent military advancements, this mission is now more urgent than Taiwan’s traditional military objectives.

To be clear, military strategy can only determine Taiwan’s prospects so much. Beijing’s desire to reunify with Taiwan is political (see p.5), so politics in mainland China, the United States, and Taiwan matter greatly. Still, the military strategy and equipment Taipei brings to bear will affect Beijing’s cost-benefit analysis of invading Taiwan. Possible US intervention raises the stakes even higher. In sum, arms sales to Taiwan affect the odds of a US-China war.



*Taiwan Presidential Office*

## Debates over Arms Sales Are Really Debates about Strategy

Taiwan has not enjoyed the US defense commitment of being a treaty ally since 1979, but US arms have been transferred or sold to its military since 1950. Those arms have been especially important since Washington's treaty pact with Taiwan was replaced by a "strategic ambiguity" policy in 1979, which made it unclear whether US troops would help defend Taiwan in a war.<sup>1</sup> However, China assumes the worst and is building its military to fight Taiwanese *and* US forces.

### What are arms sales?

US arms sales refer to any sales of weapons, other equipment, or services from US defense companies to foreign governments. Since US defense companies provide sensitive goods and services, their exports are highly regulated by the government. US arms sales pass through one of two regulatory programs: Foreign Military Sales (FMS) or Direct Commercial Sales (DCS). From fiscal years 2018 to 2021, an average of \$47 billion of FMS and \$114.1 billion of DCS were inked each year.

Foreign countries use both programs to buy equipment and services from US companies. Certain high-end systems, such as fighter jets and missiles, must be sold as Foreign Military Sales. These are heavily scrutinized because US policymakers view them as signaling close political relations between the recipient country and the United States. Foreign Military Sales can include equipment stockpiled in US arsenals or new equipment made by US companies. Some Foreign Military Sales are paid for by grants from the US government, in which case they are part of the foreign assistance budget and cost taxpayers. Arms sales may have enthusiastic backing from policymakers for strategic reasons. But even sales with little strategic purpose may still be approved to profit US defense companies.

Sources: "Fiscal Year 2021 Security Cooperation Figures," *Defense Security Cooperation Agency*, December 22, 2021; Gen. Charles Hooper, "Foreign Military Sales (FMS)," *Defense Security Cooperation Agency*, March 20, 2018, YouTube video, 12:06; A. Trevor Thrall, Jordan Cohen, and Caroline Dorminey, "Power, Profit, or Prudence? US Arms Sales since 9/11," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 2020): 100-126; Eugene Gholz, "Conventional Arms Transfers and US Economic Security," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring 2019): 46.

Given the uncertainty of US commitment, should Taiwan prepare to fight Chinese forces at *all* distances or save its fighting effort for its surrounding waters and the battle on land? This question is at the heart of Taiwan's strategy debate. Under the former strategy, Taipei would try to deny China control of the waters between mainland China and Taiwan's main island and

<sup>1</sup> Not all experts agree on this policy of "strategic ambiguity." For a policy of defending Taiwan's sovereignty unambiguously, see Richard Haass and David Sacks, "The Growing Danger of U.S. Ambiguity on Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs*, December 13, 2021. For a policy of dropping the US commitment to Taiwan's sovereignty and, with it, arms sales, see Lyle Goldstein in "Taiwan is Indefensible," *IntelligenceSquared Debates*, May 21, 2021, YouTube video, 56:20.

target Chinese assets on the mainland. This view has guided Taiwan's military thinking since the 1980s. Until recently, it was not in need of questioning, as Taiwan could defeat Chinese forces crossing the Strait. This view also appeals to fears of a Chinese blockade.<sup>2</sup>

But as Beijing's military capabilities have rapidly grown in the past decade, this strategy seems increasingly unrealistic to reformers. To them, it is a losing game to reach out beyond Taiwan's immediate periphery because Chinese jets and missiles can now pick off Taiwanese fighter jets and ships. Likewise, if China's invasion forces are large enough to get to Taiwan's beaches, Taiwan should save its limited resources for the fight on land, where it enjoys more of a defensive advantage. Though improvements to Taipei's fighting ability may not be decisive on their own, they could buy time for US forces to arrive.<sup>3</sup> As a recent Quincy Institute report stated, "Although Taiwan could probably not prevail without outside assistance, a hedgehog strategy would prolong the battle and buy time for outside intervention to succeed."<sup>4</sup>



This "hedgehog" or "porcupine" strategy offered by reformers promises a solution to the growing cross-Strait power disparity. It was officially codified in 2017 in Taiwan's Overall Defense Concept, promulgated by Taiwan's then-Chief of the General Staff, Admiral Lee Hsi-min. Under this plan, Taiwan's limited resources would be spent on a "large number of small things" as opposed to the big-ticket US platforms that Taiwan usually buys.

These small, cheap systems include drones, patrol boats, howitzers, and munitions such as mobile anti-ship missiles, sea mines, and man-portable anti-air and anti-tank missiles.<sup>5</sup> Porcupine reformers also support reforms to the

<sup>2</sup> Eric Heginbotham, et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2015): 206. Taiwan's defense strategy in 1999 prioritized, in order: gaining air superiority, denying Chinese forces sea access, and defeating Chinese landing forces on Taiwanese beaches. The porcupine defense concept reverses these priorities. See Michael D. Swaine, *Taiwan's National Security, Defense Policy, and Weapons Procurement Processes* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1999): 53. Even older platforms could likely help Taiwan counter a blockade. See Michael A. Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, *A Question of Time: Enhancing Taiwan's Conventional Deterrence Posture* (Arlington, VA: Center for Security Policy Studies, 2018): 19.

<sup>3</sup> Two analysts recently claimed a consensus on this point, saying "no one expects Taiwan to defeat an all-out invasion alone." See Michael A. Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, "Real Friends Twist Arms: Taiwan and the Case for Conditionality," *War on the Rocks*, July 27, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Esplin Odell, et al., *Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Quincy Institute, 2022): 215.

<sup>5</sup> Adm. (ret.) Lee Hsi-min, "Taiwan's Overall Defense Concept: Theory and the Practice," *Stanford University Hoover Institution*, September 27, 2021: 4.



reserve system and advocate a territorial defense force to improve Taiwan's readiness in case of an invasion.<sup>6</sup>

***Should Taiwan prepare to fight Chinese forces at all distances or save its fighting effort for its surrounding waters and the battle on land?***

The benefit of “small things” over big-ticket items like F-16 fighter jets and M1 Abrams tanks is that they can be easily spread out and hidden if Beijing launches a missile salvo. And, if any one platform is hit, better it be a “small thing” than a system worth tens of millions of dollars. However, Taiwan's military has resisted a shift to porcupine strategy thus far and has continued spending a large part of its budget on manned aircraft, tanks, and other big-ticket systems.<sup>7</sup>

**Background: The Political Question of Taiwan**

In June 1950, months after Nationalist forces defeated by Communists in the Chinese Civil War fled to Taiwan, Washington began supporting Taiwan as a partner against the Communist-ruled mainland. Since the Nationalist exodus, the People's Republic of China has viewed Taiwan as a rogue province and wanted to reunite with it (forcibly if necessary) because Taiwan is the last vestige of the Nationalist enemy and was part of China from 1683 to 1895. Nationalist-ruled Taipei also pursued reunification during the Cold War, but a growing proportion of Taiwanese now view themselves as a distinct nation and want to keep functioning independently in all but name. In contrast to clear support for Taiwan in the 1950s and 1960s, US policy since 1972 has acknowledged (but not accepted) Beijing's claim to Taiwan. This shift was part of a broader US-China alignment against the Soviet Union. Congress complicated this in 1979 by passing a law requiring continued US arms sales to Taiwan. The messy result is the current “One China” policy, which sidesteps the question of Taiwan's final political status.

Sources: “China's National Defense in the New Era,” *State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*, July 24, 2019; Iris Zhao, “An increasing number of Taiwanese people want independence, but they're in no rush,” *ABC News*, December 10, 2021; Richard C. Bush, “A One-China Policy Primer,” *Brookings Institution*, March 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Adm. (ret.) Lee Hsi-min and Michael A. Hunzeker, “The View of Ukraine from Taiwan: Get Real About Territorial Defense,” *War on the Rocks*, March 15, 2022; Ian Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia* (Manchester, UK: Eastbridge Books, 2019): 206-211; Amy Qin and Amy Chang Chien, “As China Rattles Sabers, Taiwan Asks: Are We Ready for War?” *New York Times*, June 14, 2022; Paul Huang, “Taiwan's Military Is a Hollow Shell,” *Foreign Policy*, February 15, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Two reasons that conventionalists currently dominate Taiwan's defense debates are the KMT's (currently the main opposition party) dominance of Taiwan's defense ministry and the DPP's (currently the ruling party) lack of defense expertise compared to the KMT. Discussion with Dr. Dennis Weng, August 2022; see also Michael A. Hunzeker, “Statement before the U.S.-China Economic & Security Review Commission,” *U.S.-China Economic & Security Review Commission*, February 18, 2021: 8.

## Which Arms for Which Strategy?

There are clear tradeoffs in Taiwan's defense purchases. Many (though not all) weapons bought from the United States can fulfill a conventional or porcupine strategy, but not both. Numbers tell the story. In 2019, Washington inked more than \$10 billion in Foreign Military Sales to Taiwan. The most notable items were 66 F-16 fighter jets, training and spare parts for them, and 108 M1A2T tanks.<sup>8</sup> Most porcupine strategy advocates view both systems as vulnerable to the ballistic missiles that would saturate Taiwan before an invasion. Fighter jets in particular would be fairly easy and tempting targets since Beijing knows where Taipei's airbases are.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, in 2020, Washington sold Taiwan more than 530 anti-ship and land-attack missiles and 64 ground-launched missiles. These missiles came with 111 mobile launchers which could theoretically disperse and survive better than jets or tanks. All of this was procured for around \$3.8 billion—just over *one-third* of the cost of the F-16s and M1s, demonstrating the tradeoffs between a small number of large things and a large number of small things.<sup>10</sup>

To be clear, not all systems fit neatly into either strategy. Some, like early-warning radars, serve both. Others may seem neutral but can be used for advocacy. For example, torpedoes can be used for Taiwan's existing submarines, but a batch sold in 2020 was used by Taiwan's president to support a new submarine program at odds with porcupine defense. Also, the lag between arms sales notifications and deliveries means strategic choices often take years to manifest.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Edward Wong, "U.S. Pushes Large Arms Sale to Taiwan, Including Jet Missiles That Can Hit China," *New York Times*, September 17, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Iskander Rehman, Jim Thomas, and John Stillion, *Hard ROC 2.0: Taiwan and Deterrence Through Protraction* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2014): 12-14.

<sup>10</sup> Masao Dahlgren and Shaan Shaikh, "US Approves Taiwan ATACMS, SLAM-ER, Harpoon Missile Sales," *CSIS Missile Threat*, October 27, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Franz-Stefan Gady, "US Agrees to Supply Taiwan With Advanced Torpedoes," *The Diplomat*, September 9, 2016; Hunzeker, "Statement before the U.S.-China Economic & Security Review Commission": 8-9, 11.



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## Debates over Strategy Are Political

The conventionalist–porcupine dispute is not purely military. Both strategies consider whether and under what conditions Washington would directly intervene to help Taiwan in war. If US forces did deploy against China, it could be decisive for the outcome of the battle, as China’s growing military superiority means it may soon be able to exhaust and overwhelm even a well-prepared Taiwan.<sup>12</sup> In this case, it is uncertain whether or not US forces will directly intervene. From this uncertainty, the conventional and porcupine strategies prescribe different weapons.

For the conventionalists, the main political concern is that Washington will not deploy forces in scenarios short of full-on invasion, such as a blockade. Such worries are not theoretical—one of China’s military plans for Taiwan is the “joint blockade campaign,” which aims to choke the island off from resources and US support to ensure reunification.<sup>13</sup> Porcupine reformers, on the other hand, see the US military’s inability to quickly deploy to Taiwan as the main

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<sup>12</sup> Whether Chinese forces can overwhelm Taiwan if US forces do not enter the conflict is speculative. The answer depends on the numbers, training, deployment, and equipping of each side’s forces in the future. US assessments of China’s capabilities can be found in “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China: 2021,” *Office of the Secretary of Defense*, November 3, 2021: 115-123.

<sup>13</sup> Zhang Yuliang, *Science of Campaigns* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2006): 329; Michael S. Chase, et al., *China’s Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2015): 33.



concern. This can be overcome if Taiwan, using a porcupine strategy, holds off Chinese forces long enough for US forces. If US forces *can* to arrive to repel Chinese forces, they will be more *willing* to do so.



[United States Navy](#)

## The Conventionalists: Ready Whether or Not America Comes

Conventionalists draw two conclusions from the lack of a clear US commitment to Taiwan.<sup>14</sup> One is that Taipei should prioritize helping itself in contingencies short of a full-on invasion (namely, a blockade). Given the ambiguous US commitment, conventionalists doubt that US forces will help break a blockade or that they will be able to do so. This emphasis on a blockade is informed by the separate fear that Beijing may think it can avoid triggering US intervention by launching a blockade without a follow-up invasion.<sup>15</sup> These beliefs drive conventionalists' preferred arms and strategy. Fighters, frigates, and submarines—even if expensive—give Taipei a better chance of fighting a blockade on its own than small, asymmetric arms

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<sup>14</sup> The uncertainty over the US commitment is due to the US policy of strategic ambiguity, general unknowability about alliance commitments, and the unique political impediments to a clear Taiwan policy. Namely, clearly stating a commitment to defend Taiwan would be hard for the United States because Beijing has shown it cares more about Taiwan's future. Alternatively, even a US president that was certain he/she would not commit US forces to Taiwan's defense would likely not say so out loud, as this may hurt deterrence against Beijing and demoralize Taiwan. See Patrick Porter and Michael Mazarr, "Countering China's Adventurism over Taiwan: A Third Way," *Lowy Institute*, May 20, 2021: 16.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond Kuo, "The Counter-Intuitive Sensibility of Taiwan's New Defense Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, December 6, 2021; Michael E. O'Hanlon, "An asymmetric defense of Taiwan," *Brookings Institution*, April 28, 2021; Lonnie Henley, "Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic & Security Review Commission," *U.S.-China Economic & Security Review Commission*, February 18, 2021.



preferred under a porcupine strategy.<sup>16</sup> As put by US professor and representative of Taiwan’s KMT party Dr. Dennis Weng, “‘Fortress Taiwan’ can be blockaded, and a porcupine can be starved to death.”<sup>17</sup>

Recognizing the uncertainty of the US commitment to Taiwan, conventionalists also believe that buying big and flashy weapons may make US military action more likely. Of course, this argument has its flaws. It costs Washington little to sell Taiwan arms that profit US defense companies and building credibility through arms sales may matter far less than US assessments of the costs, benefits, and risks of going to war with Beijing.<sup>18</sup> Taiwan’s leaders nevertheless use this logic to justify expensive, prestigious weapons systems such as the F-16 fighter jet.



[Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, 2021 Quadrennial Defense Review](#)

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<sup>16</sup> Dee Wu, “The KMT’s Defense Policy: Toward a Symmetric Posture,” *The Diplomat*, April 1, 2022; Odell, et al., *Active Denial*: 81-82; Hunzeker and Lanoszka, *A Question of Time*: 63-77, 90-91.

<sup>17</sup> Dennis Weng, Luncheon Keynote Speech, *U.S.-Taiwan Defense Industry Conference 2021*, October 11, 2021: 2.

<sup>18</sup> Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

## The Reformers: A Porcupine Buys Time

Supporters of porcupine reforms instead focus on the worst-case scenario: an all-out invasion. Their goal is to equip and train Taiwanese forces such that they can buy time for US forces to arrive and beat Beijing in an invasion. This, they believe, makes a US commitment likelier because Washington's biggest problem is "the time required to move forces from their garrisons into areas of operations," as a recent Quincy Institute report stated.<sup>19</sup>

Conventionalists could counterargue that preventing a Chinese attack relies mainly on political, not military, solutions. As mentioned above, Beijing's behavior toward Taiwan is rooted in its political desire for reunification. If Beijing believed that it could realistically reunify or secure some kind of compromise with Taipei without war, it would likely do so. Why? For one, the costs of attacking Taiwan would be enormous. The difficulty of amphibious invasion and Taiwan's rough terrain ensure that, even without US direct intervention, a Chinese invasion would be bloody. Even if the initial offensive succeeded, many more Chinese troops would be needed to pacify Taiwan's population. Moreover, invading Taiwan would risk international condemnation and economic fallout with the United States and the European Union.<sup>20</sup> Peace is imaginable because these costs and risks leave Beijing reluctant to choose force.<sup>21</sup>

But political solutions are arguably unrealistic given the current state of politics in Beijing, Taipei, and Washington. Giving Beijing reasons *not* to attack Taiwan would require concessions that Taipei and Washington are increasingly reluctant to make. Taiwan's citizens increasingly identify as Taiwanese (not Chinese), instilling doubt in Beijing that it can peacefully reunify with Taiwan. Among the US public, increasingly warm feelings toward Taiwan and cold feelings toward China make appeasing Beijing politically difficult.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, with Beijing's rising military capabilities come the temptation to use them. Faced with growing pro-independence tendencies in Taiwan, Beijing will grow more attracted to using force. Reformers argue that, given these facts, the porcupine strategy stands the best chance of deterring invasion.

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<sup>19</sup> Odell, et al., *Active Denial*: 63. If Taiwan opted for porcupine defense, it may also be possible for US forces to stay east of Taiwan and intervene without coming within range of China's missiles – a less costly and thus more credible commitment for Washington than sending forces into the Taiwan Strait. See Eugene Gholz, Benjamin Friedman, and Enea Gjoza, "Defensive Defense: A Better Way to Protect US Allies in Asia," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Winter 2020): 182-183.

<sup>20</sup> Tanner Greer, "Taiwan Can Win a War With China," *Foreign Policy*, September 15, 2018; Harlan Ullman, "Reality Check #10: China will not invade Taiwan," *Atlantic Council*, February 18, 2022; James Palmer, "Why Doesn't China Invade Taiwan?" *Foreign Policy*, August 10, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> As China expert Paul Heer has said, "the Chinese aren't looking for an excuse or an opportunity to attack Taiwan, they're consistently looking for reasons *not* to." See "Should the US Embrace or Reject Engagement with China?" *Deep Dish on Global Affairs Podcast*, August 4, 2022, podcast, 23:08-23:28.

<sup>22</sup> Dina Smeltz and Craig Kafura, "Americans Favor Aiding Taiwan with Arms but Not Troops," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, August 11, 2022.

## Conclusion

Shifts in US arms sales to Taiwan over the last few years reveal a strategic debate essential to Taiwan's future, which comes down to two central questions: How can Taipei best prevent Beijing from pursuing reunification with force? And, if Beijing does use force, how can it best be countered? Conventionalists want Taiwan to keep buying its traditional systems so as to better defend against Chinese actions short of invasion and increase Washington's symbolic stake in Taipei's defense. Meanwhile, reformers support a porcupine strategy to keep an overwhelming Chinese military at bay long enough for US forces to arrive. Either way, how Taiwan arms and defends itself will continue to be front of mind for policymakers in Taipei and Washington. On the line is nothing less than Taiwan's future and peace between the United States and China. The stakes of sensible strategy and military procurement could hardly be higher.

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