

US announces \$1.8 billion arms sale to Taiwan

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Washington: The Obama administration announced on Wednesday a \$1.83 billion arms sale to Taiwan, the first offered by the US to the self-governing island in four years.

China regards Taiwan as part of its territory and has said the sale, which was expected, should be canceled to avoid harming its relations across the Taiwan Strait and between China and the US

The US maintained there's no need for it to hurt the relationship, which has also been strained by China's island-building in the South China Sea and alleged cybertheft.

The administration notified Congress that the proposed arms package includes two decommissioned US Navy frigates, anti-tank missiles, amphibious assault vehicles and Stinger surface-to-air missiles. There's also support for Taiwan's capabilities in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and a weapons system to defend against anti-ship missiles.

Congress has 30 days to review the sale, but it's unlikely to raise objections. There's been mounting bipartisan concern that Taiwan is inadequately armed to defend itself against an increasingly powerful mainland China.

US lawmakers welcomed the announcement. There were calls from both parties for more frequent arms sales to Taiwan.

New York Rep. Eliot Engel, the top-ranking Democrat on the house foreign affairs committee, said the sale would contribute to peace and stability across the strait. "I wish we would see them on a regular basis," he said.

The committee's Republican chairman, California Rep. Ed Royce, said the administration had "needlessly dragged out" the approval process, and that other Taiwanese requests "have still not seen the light of day."

Senator John McCain, Republican chairman of the senate armed services committee, said the US should avoid extended periods during which "fear of upsetting the US-China relationship may harm Taiwan's defense capabilities."

The administration has announced more than \$12 billion in arms sales to Taiwan since 2010, but none since \$5.9 billion in sales in September 2011 that included upgrades for Taiwan's F-16 fighter jets. That drew a diplomatic protest from Beijing, which suspended some military exchanges with the United States. It did not seriously impair ties.

In the meantime, President Barack Obama has sought greater cooperation with China on issues such as climate change, and the two sides have increased military exchanges to reduce the risk of conflict.

State Department spokesman John Kirby said the US was in contact Wednesday with both Taiwan and China about the sale, which he said was consistent with US support for Taiwan's ability to defend itself under the Taiwan Relations Act.

"There's no need for it to have any derogatory effect on our relationship with China," Kirby told reporters. "We still want to work to establish a better, more transparent, more effective relationship with China in the region and we're going to continue to work at that."

In Beijing on Tuesday, China's Foreign Ministry issued a stern warning that the sale threatened relations with the US.

On Wednesday, Ma Xiaoguang, China's spokesman for the Cabinet's Taiwan Affairs Office, reiterated China's opposition to arms sales to Taiwan from any country and called for Taiwan to "treasure" improved relations with the mainland.

Relations across the Taiwan Strait have undergone a steady improvement over the past two decades, especially under the China-friendly administration of Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou.

- AP