

Asymmetric Defence and US Arms Sales to Taiwan: Strengthening Deterrence Across the Taiwan Strait

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Alperen Celik



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In this guest contribution, **Diego Toderi** examines Taiwan's shift towards asymmetric defence and the role of recent US arms sales in strengthening its military capabilities. He explores how systems such as HIMARS and ATACMS could enhance Taiwan's resilience, complicate PLA operational planning, and contribute to deterrence across the Taiwan Strait.

On December 17th 2025, the US announced its largest arms sales to Taiwan in its history. Valued at approximately US\$11.1 billion, the package includes 82 HIMARS rocket launchers, 420 long-range ATACMS ballistic missiles, and 60 M109A7 self-propelled howitzers, alongside a variety of unmanned loitering munitions and anti-tank missiles. The scale of the arms sales and its contents prompted an immediate blowback from Beijing which condemned the move and then, in late December, launched naval and military exercises in the vicinity of Taiwan.

The reason for such a response by Beijing may lie in the fact that the latest arms package could significantly improve the capability of the armed forces of the Republic of China to sustain its shift towards asymmetric defence. Prompted by the increased capabilities of the PLA's long-range strike capabilities, this strategy seeks to break from the traditional approach to defence. This previously emphasised investments in a small number of high-tech capabilities, such as procurement of advanced fighter jets or indigenously produced submarines. Instead, asymmetric defence seeks to deter aggression and defend Taiwan through the procurement and development of large numbers of cheap, less complex mobile systems. These could provide the Taiwanese armed forces with a long-range precision strike capability that is resilient to an initial PLA bombardment campaign. These asymmetric capabilities are easy to spread out and much more difficult to target and destroy. This is especially so in comparison to traditional capabilities such as F-16 fighter jets that are confined to fixed airbases, whose defences can be easily overwhelmed by sustained attack. Such a strategy's goal is to strengthen deterrence by allowing Taiwan to sustain the necessary key capabilities needed to prevent an amphibious landing even in the face of a sustained and determined Chinese conventional strike campaign. It was based off of this strategy that Taipei revealed its US\$40 billion Special Defence Budget Plan. This sought to fund the acquisition of key asymmetric capabilities, ranging from an island-wide air defence structure composed of mobile short-range air defence systems to American loitering munitions.

This latest arms sale package could prove a significant boost to the efficacy of this new asymmetric strategy. In particular, the acquisition of a large number of HIMARs rocket launcher systems and ATACMs missiles provides Taipei with a resilient, cheap long-range precision strike capability it requires to strengthen its asymmetric defence. Combat tested and proven in the fields of Ukraine, the wheeled HIMARS system is highly mobile, increasing its survivability and allowing it to quickly counter any amphibious landing attempts with large volumes of sustained and precise firepower.

Beyond their immediate battlefield utility, these systems could also complicate PLA operational planning. A larger number of dispersed launchers would force Chinese forces to devote greater intelligence, surveillance, and strike resources to locating mobile Taiwanese assets. This could increase uncertainty during an invasion while preserving Taiwan's capacity to respond after an initial attack.

Overall, the latest arms package showcases that despite a turbulent and radical shift in US foreign policy, Washington still remains committed to strengthening Taiwan's defences and deterring any attempts at cross-strait invasion.

About the Author: Diego Toderi is an International Relations student at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), with research interests spanning defence policy, international security, and geopolitics.