

Carrot and Stick, Szechuan Style

Why does the Chinese premier rush to announce that President Bush will visit Beijing next fall—even before the White House is ready to make the news public? Why do senior Chinese officials suddenly declare, after months of railing against Bush's plans to build a missile defense system, that maybe the two sides can get together and talk about it after all? And why is China's vice premier, Qian Qichen, in town this week, self-invited and all smiles?

The very simple answer to all these questions is that next month the Bush administration will announce what new arms systems it will approve for sale to Taiwan. The Taiwanese have asked, for the umpteenth year in a row, for approval of the Aegis battle management system, which will help them address the increasingly dangerous threat of Chinese airpower and other advanced Chinese weaponry—including hundreds of ballistic missiles deployed just a hundred miles away across the Taiwan Strait. The Beijing government is now pulling out all the stops to prevent this sale, precisely because Chinese leaders want Taiwan to remain vulnerable to any attack they may choose to launch. The Chinese already have about 300 short-range missiles aimed at Taiwan, and they're building up at a rate of 50 per year. Just this past week, the *Washington Times's* Bill Gertz reported that the Pentagon has discovered yet another recently built Chinese missile base. The last thing Beijing wants is for Taiwan to nullify this deadly threat with U.S. technology.

We are often told how clever and sophisticated the Chinese are. But really theirs has been the crudest, most obvious form of diplomatic coercion. Until this past week, the Chinese were using the stick: threatening Bush with a breakdown of relations, an arms race, and even war. Now comes the carrot: If Bush will refuse to help Taiwan with more advanced weaponry, all other problems in the U.S.-China relationship can be solved. If Bush behaves himself on Taiwan, he and Jiang Zemin can have a lovely and productive discussion in Beijing this fall. Of course, if Bush does go ahead and sell Aegis to Taiwan, all bets are off. The Chinese evidently believe

the new American president is a jackass who can be prodded in the right direction by a few whacks from behind and a prize dangled before his nose.

Fortunately, the new administration looks to be made of tougher stuff than the Chinese have been used to. Deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage, and Vice President Cheney's chief of staff I. Lewis Libby have argued persistently over the past two decades that the United States should do more to help Taiwan defend itself. At his confirmation hearing last week, Armitage pointedly noted that China's defense budget was increasing while Taiwan's was decreasing. He also knows the key to U.S. policy is effective deterrence. "If there is a conflict in the Taiwan Strait," he said "then we haven't done our job." Armitage observed that past Republican administrations—and he obviously meant the Reagan administration, where he served as assistant secretary of defense—had managed to maintain decent relations with China without caving to Beijing's pressure tactics: "I don't mean we rolled over and let China tickle our tummy."

So there's reason to hope that this administration will not succumb to the latest round of Chinese tummy-tickling and chest-thumping. We admit to some concern about Bush's apparent agreement to hold a summit with Jiang next fall. There's nothing wrong with a summit, so long as American policy remains firm. But there are some in the administration, probably at the State Department and possibly even in the White House, who will argue that if Bush goes ahead and approves the sale of Aegis to Taiwan next month, this will spoil the trip or even provoke the Chinese to cancel it. We hope Bush resists this counsel of appeasement, which comes right out of Bill Clinton's engagement playbook. If the price of going to Beijing is shortchanging Taiwan's defense needs, then it is too high. Better to follow Armitage's advice. It is possible to maintain decent relations with China *and* to stand by our friends—but only if we don't roll over every time Beijing holds out a treat.

—Robert Kagan, for the Editors