

China's strident tone raises concerns among Western governments, analysts

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China's indignant reaction to the announcement of U.S. plans to sell weapons to Taiwan appears to be in keeping with a new triumphalist attitude from Beijing that is worrying governments and analysts across the globe.

From the Copenhagen climate change conference to Internet freedom to China's border with India, China observers have noticed a tough tone emanating from its government, its representatives and influential analysts from its state-funded think tanks.

Calling in U.S. Ambassador Jon Huntsman on Saturday, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister He Yafei said the United States would be responsible for "serious repercussions" if it did not reverse the decision to sell Taiwan \$6.4 billion worth of helicopters, Patriot Advanced Capability-3 missiles, minesweepers and communications gear. The reaction came even though China has known for months about the planned deal, U.S. officials said.

"There has been a change in China's attitude," said Kenneth G. Lieberthal, a former senior National Security Council official who is currently at the Brookings Institution. "The Chinese find with startling speed that people have come to view them as a major global player. And that has fed a sense of confidence."

Lieberthal said another factor in China's new tone is a sense that after two centuries of exploitation by the West, China is resuming its role as one of the great nations of the world.

This new posture has befuddled Western officials and analysts: Is it just China's tone that is changing or are its policies changing as well?

In a case in point, one senior U.S. official termed as unusual China's behavior at the December climate conference, during which China publicly reprimanded White House envoy Todd Stern, dispatched a Foreign Ministry functionary to an event for state leaders and fought strenuously against fixed targets for emission cuts in the developed world.

Another issue is Internet freedom and cybersecurity, highlighted by Google's recent threat to leave China unless the country stops its Web censorship. At China's request, that topic was left off the table at this year's World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Josef Ackermann, chief executive of Deutsche Bank and co-chairman of the event, told Bloomberg News. The forum ends Sunday.

China dismisses concerns

Analysts say a combination of hubris and insecurity appears to be driving China's mood. On one hand, Beijing thinks that the relative ease with which it skated over the global financial crisis underscores the superiority of its system and that China is not only rising but has arrived on the global stage -- much faster than anyone could have predicted. On the other, recent uprisings in the western regions of Tibet and Xinjiang have fed Chinese leaders' insecurity about their one-party state. As such, any perceived threat to their power is met with a backlash.

A spokesman for the Chinese Embassy in Washington said China's tone had not changed.

"China's positions on issues like arms sales to Taiwan and Tibet have been consistent and clear," Wang Baodong said, "as these issues bear on sovereignty and territorial integrity, which are closely related to Chinese core national

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interests."

The unease over China's new tone is shared by Europeans as well. "How Should Europe Respond to China's Strident Rise?" is the title of a new paper from the Center for European Reform. Just two years earlier, its author, institute director Charles Grant, had predicted that China and the European Union would shape the new world order.

"There is a real rethink going on about China in Europe," Grant said in an interview from Davos. "I don't think governments know what to do, but they know that their policies aren't working."

U.S. officials first began noticing the new Chinese attitude last year. Anecdotes range from the political to the personal.

At the World Economic Forum last year, Premier Wen Jiabao lambasted the United States for its economic mismanagement. A few weeks later, China's central bank questioned whether the dollar could continue to play its role as the international reserve currency.

And in another vignette, confirmed by several sources, a senior U.S. official involved in the economy hosted his Chinese counterpart, who then made a series of disparaging remarks about the bureau that the American ran. Later that night, the two were to dine at the American's house. The Chinese representatives called ahead, asking what was for dinner. They were informed that it was fish. "The director doesn't eat fish," one of them told his American interlocutor. "He wants steak. He says fish makes you weak." The menu was changed.

Tone with Europe, India

With Europe and India, China's strident tone has been even more apparent. In autumn 2008, China canceled a summit with the European Union after French President Nicolas Sarkozy met with the exiled Tibetan leader, the Dalai Lama. Before that, it had denounced German Chancellor Angela Merkel over her contacts with the Tibetan spiritual leader. And in recent weeks, it has engaged in a heated exchange with British officials over its moves to block a broader agreement at the climate conference.

At the Chinese Embassy, Wang differed on the climate issue. "China is strongly behind the idea of meeting the issue of climate change," he said, "but at the same time we think that there are some people who want to confuse the situation, and we feel the need to try to let the rest of the world know our position clearly."

China also suspended ties with Denmark after its prime minister met the Dalai Lama and resumed them only after the Danish government issued a statement in December saying it would oppose Tibetan independence and consider Beijing's reaction before inviting him again.

"The Europeans have competed to be China's favored friend," Grant said, "but then they get put in the doghouse one by one."

China's newfound toughness also played out in a renewed dispute with India over Beijing's claims to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which borders Tibet. Last summer, China blocked the Asian Development Bank from making a \$60 million loan for infrastructure improvements in the state. India then moved to fund the projects itself, prompting China to send more troops to the border.

David Finkelstein, a former U.S. Army officer at the Defense Intelligence Agency who now runs the China program at the Center for Naval Analyses, said the new tone underscores a shift in China. "On the external front," he said, "we will likely see a China that is more willing than in the past to proactively shape the external environment and international order rather than passively react to it."

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An example would be events that unfolded in December when 22 Chinese Muslims showed up in Cambodia and requested political asylum. China wanted to hold seven of them on suspicion of participating in anti-Chinese riots in the Xinjiang region in July.

Under intense pressure from Beijing, Cambodia sent the group home, despite protests from the United States. Two days after the group was repatriated, China signed 14 deals with Cambodia worth about \$1 billion.

What the future holds

Whether this new bluster from Beijing presages tougher policies and actions in areas of direct concern to the United States is a key question, Lieberthal said. What China does after the United States sells Taiwan the weapons may provide some clues.

Even before the United States announced its plans Friday, at least six senior Chinese officials, including officers from the People's Liberation Army, had warned Washington against the sale.

Once the deal was announced, China's Defense Ministry said it was suspending a portion of the recently resumed military relations with the United States. China also announced that it would sanction the U.S. companies involved in the sale.

What happens next will be crucial. China quietly sanctioned several U.S. companies for participating in such weapons sales in the past. However, it would mark a major change if China makes the list public and includes, for example, Boeing, which sells billions of dollars worth of airplanes to China each year.

He, the vice foreign minister, warned that the sales would also affect China's cooperation with the United States on regional issues. Does that mean China will continue to block Western efforts to tighten sanctions on Iran? Bonnie S. Glaser, a China security analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the answer will probably come soon.

France takes over the presidency of the U.N. Security Council on Monday and is expected to push for a rapid move in that direction.