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US Hopes Accord with Israel Will Limit Military Sales to China

By Michael Bowman

The United States and Israel have announced an understanding on the need for consultations before Israel sells military technology to other nations. The accord appears to have defused a dispute that had arisen between Washington and Jerusalem over Israeli military sales to China. Analysts say China's quest for greater military power will not be contained easily.

U.S. and Israeli officials say the agreement is designed to ensure that their two governments see eye-to-eye on third-party military transfer issues, but does not give the United States veto power over Israeli dealings with other nations.

"It does not create a list of prohibited items that Israel cannot sell," said Pentagon spokesman Major Paul Swiergosz. "It does not threaten; it does not impose sanctions. What it does do is provide a consultative process that will allow the two countries to reach a common understanding with respect to technology security policy."

Major Swiergosz says the Defense Department does have legitimate concerns about the transfer of military technology to China and elsewhere.

"We want to make sure that the technology over which we do have some control does not, ultimately, facilitate the creation of weapons systems that we might have to deal with, in some sense," he added.

Former State Department arms technology negotiator Jim Lewis is more blunt in describing U.S. apprehensions.

"The primary concern is that the Chinese military is very clear about the fact that they see the United States as their principal enemy," he said.

U.S. anxieties over Israeli weapons sales to China are nothing new. In 2000, the United States dissuaded Israel from completing a \$1 billion deal to sell the Chinese an advanced airborne early warning system. Beginning last year, the United States raised objections to Israel's planned servicing of spare parts for a Chinese fleet of unmanned anti-radar drones.

Calls to the Chinese embassy in Washington seeking comment on the matter were not returned.

The director of China studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, David Lampton, says, when it comes to Chinese military

ambitions, all eyes are on Taiwan, an independently-governed island Beijing considers part of Chinese territory.

"The one area in which the United States could imagine coming into conflict with China, and where China could imagine coming into conflict with the United States, is the Taiwan Straits," he said. "Indeed, China's military modernization is focused around developing a military force that would be potent in the Taiwan Straits and deter the United States from intervening."

Mr. Lampton says China's largest military supplier is Russia, but that Beijing would like to diversify and eventually make purchases from nations like France, if and when an EU ban on sales to China is lifted. Should that happen, he says U.S. officials would feel pressure to allow American companies to compete for lucrative Chinese contracts. Overall, Mr. Lampton says containing China's appetite for advanced military technology will be no easy task.

"As China's economy is growing, as China becomes more powerful, more and more of the traditional friends of the United States will have larger commercial and strategic interests with China," he said.

"And, therefore, it will be increasingly difficult, over time, to have broad barriers to the sale of military and other technology to China," continued Mr. Lampton. "Also, China itself is restructuring its defense manufacturing industry. R and D [research and development] is going up. So, not only will China be more able to acquire technology abroad over time, China is going to become much more capable of producing its own, as well."

But former State Department negotiator Jim Lewis, now a senior fellow at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, says it is vital that the United States maintains a technological lead over China, and that agreements like the U.S.-Israeli understanding are useful in that regard.

"The Chinese cannot catch up with us in military technology, that is not going to happen anytime in the next 20 years," he said. "But they hope they can leapfrog [advance] by obtaining technology from foreign sources, like Europe or Israel or Russia. And they also hope they can acquire technology illegally from places like the United States. We [the U.S.] are the place to go if you want the most advanced military technology. The Chinese know that, and it is in our interest to make sure, until relations between the two countries are better, that they do not get it."

Mr. Lewis adds that vigilance is required. He says, while governments in Washington and Jerusalem may agree on the need to control military technology, individual defense contractors may succumb to temptation and attempt covert transfers on their own.

