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From: OpsNewsTicker
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Subject: U.S. House panel votes for F-16s for Taiwan (Reuters)

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - A U.S. House committee on Thursday voted to require President Barack Obama to sell 66 new F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan in addition to a \$5.3 billion upgrade of its existing fleet he approved in September.

Supporters from both parties said they wanted to send a message that Congress was committed to U.S. ally Taiwan in the face of an increasing military threat from mainland China.

But selling the next generation of F-16 fighter planes to Taiwan would undoubtedly anger China, already upset over the U.S. decision in September to retrofit 145 Lockheed Martin Corp F-16 A/B aircraft for Taiwan.

Obama administration officials said this upgrade would give the planes essentially the same capabilities as late-model F-16 C/Ds that Taiwan had sought to deter any attack.

China opposes U.S. arms sales to Taiwan on the grounds that they sabotage Beijing's plans for reunification. Beijing deems Taiwan a renegade province and has never renounced the use of force to bring the island under its control.

Beijing has shown no sign of ending an arms build-up that is focused on Taiwan.

On Capitol Hill, lawmakers sympathetic to Taiwan say Washington has an obligation under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act to provide Taiwan with the weapons it needs to defend against any attack from mainland China.

"Taiwan needs those F-16s and she needs them now to defend the skies over the Taiwan Strait," said Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the Republican chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, after the panel approved the measure on Thursday requiring the sale of the next generation F-16 C/Ds.

The legislation by Republican Representative Kay Granger passed the House panel on a bipartisan voice vote, boding well for its eventual passage of the entire House.

A similar proposal by Republican Senator John Cornyn failed recently in the Senate, but supporters could try to revive it. Some senators said they objected to the measure because it did not belong on a bill to provide trade benefits for developing countries that was being debated at the time.

On Thursday the House committee passed another bill aimed at strengthening ties with Taiwan. Among

other things, it would include Taiwan in a visa waiver program, and encourages high-level visits between Taiwanese and U.S. officials. The United States has restricted these visits as a matter of practice.

Representative Howard Berman, the panel's senior Democrat, said change was overdue.

"Why is it that the president of a democratic partner of the United States is not allowed to visit this country, except as part of transit stops to other countries? It's time that all Taiwanese officials are afforded the proper respect and be allowed to visit the United States," Berman said.

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