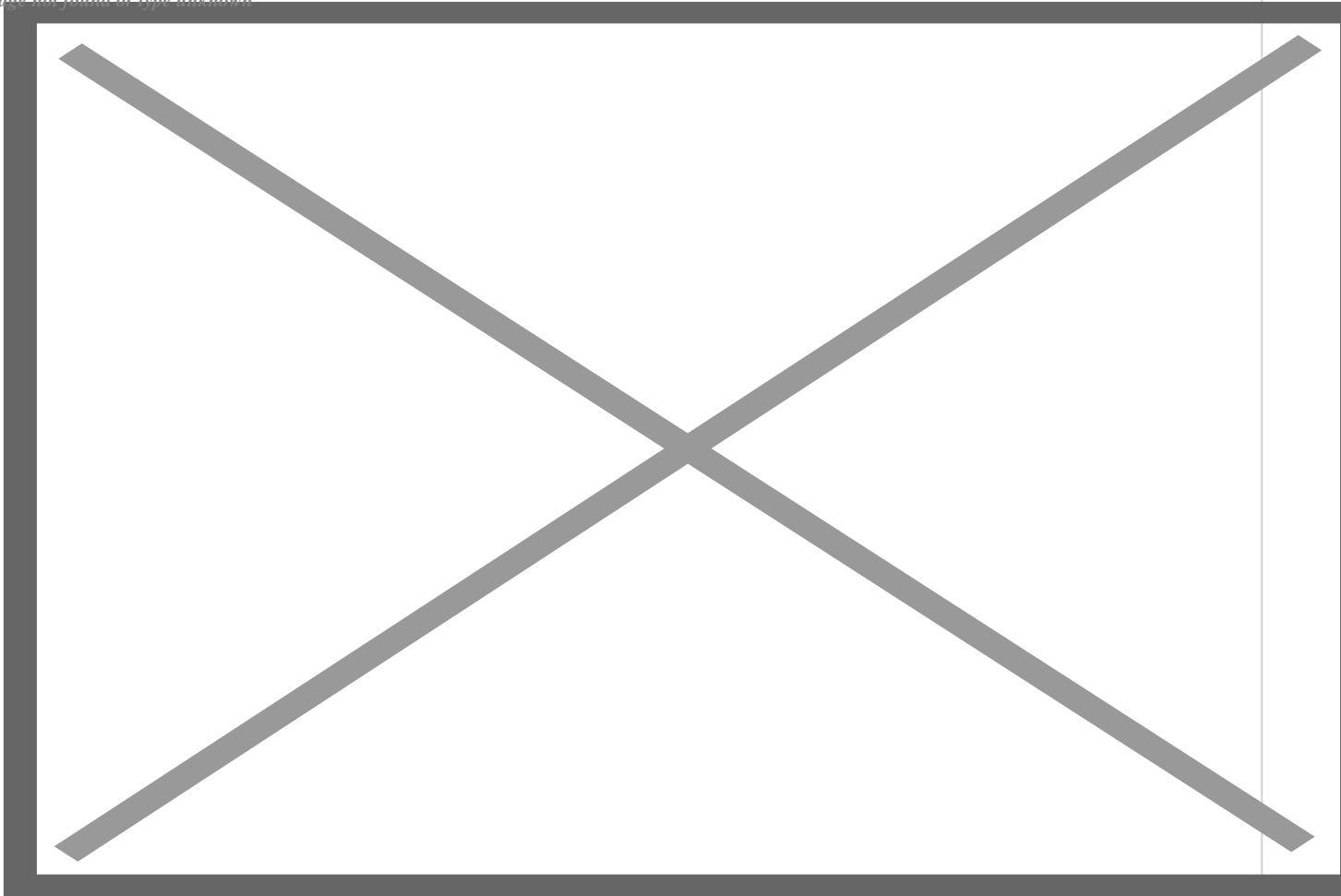


U.S. seeks to speed up delivery of new F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan

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Taiwan is on track to field one of the largest F-16 fleets in Asia once it takes delivery of 66 new F-16 C/D Block 70 aircraft under an \$8bn deal approved in 2019 [File: Patrick Lin/Reuters]

Washington, January 21 (RHC)-- The United States is looking for ways to potentially accelerate delivery of Taiwan's next generation of new-build F-16 fighter jets, officials in Washington said, bolstering the Taiwanese air force's ability to wage war.

The officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the Reuters news agency that they have not yet come up with a solution on how to speed up delivery of Block 70 F-16s, manufactured by Lockheed

Martin and equipped with new capabilities. The aircraft are currently slated to be delivered by the end of 2026.

Taiwan's government has privately expressed its wish for a faster delivery to U.S. President Joe Biden's administration, a senior Taiwanese official said, as the self-ruled island's air force scrambles jets to intercept increasingly aggressive Chinese military flights. More missions mean more wear-and-tear on Taiwan's aircraft.

"It's all about risk assessment ... and it's clear where the risks are," the Taiwanese official said, referring to tensions across the sensitive Taiwan Strait separating the island from mainland China. The F-16 is considered a highly manoeuvrable aircraft proven in air-to-air combat and air-to-surface attack.

Taiwan is on track to field one of the largest F-16 fleets in Asia once it takes delivery of 66 new-build F-16 C/D Block 70 aircraft under an \$8 billion deal approved in 2019. It would bring the island's total number of F-16s, including older versions, to more than 200 by 2026. The Block 70 aircraft are the newest F-16 configuration, with new avionics, a modernised cockpit and an improved engine, according to Lockheed Martin.

A move to accelerate the aircraft delivery would be seen in Beijing in part through a political lens, according to Abraham Denmark, a former senior Pentagon official. "It is yet another clear signal of US determination to support Taiwan's ability to defend itself," added Denmark, now an analyst at the Washington-based Wilson Center think-tank.

Despite lacking formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan, the U.S. is the island's main international backer and arms supplier. That defence relationship angers China, which has ramped up military and diplomatic pressure against the island that it claims as "sacred" Chinese territory.

In the face of Chinese pressure, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen has prioritised modernising the armed forces, which are well-armed but dwarfed by China's military. Lockheed Martin declined to comment on any potential future requests to change the production schedule, referring queries to the US government and Taiwan's defence ministry.

The U.S. State Department, which oversees foreign military sales, declined to comment on any internal discussions about potential changes to the delivery timeline. Taiwan's Air Force did not respond to questions on potential accelerated deliveries but told Reuters in a statement that the Taiwanese military's major weapon purchases are "rigorously planned in accordance with actual combat needs and planning schedules."

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