

United States Senate

October 23, 2024

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
U.S Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin:

I am writing to express serious concerns regarding the delivery of moldy body armor and other substandard military equipment to Taiwan. This embarrassing debacle highlights shortcomings in the Biden-Harris administration's counter-China strategy, undermining our relationship with a key regional partner, weakening deterrence against China, and wasting hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars.

Last month the Department of Defense Inspector General (IG) published a report highlighting the significant failures in the oversight, planning, and execution of the presidential drawdown authority (PDA) process.¹ These failures are particularly alarming, not only because of Taiwan's critical role as a key security partner but also because they could impact the confidence of other U.S. allies and partners that rely on timely and reliable defense support. If such issues persist, they could erode trust in U.S. defense commitments globally, undermining the security relationships the U.S. has worked to strengthen.

According to the IG's findings, between November 2023 and March 2024, the Department of Defense failed to follow established guidelines for delivering military assistance to Taiwan. More than 67% of the equipment — including over 340 pallets — sustained water damage while stored at Travis Air Force Base for three months due to inadequate storage facilities.² This resulted in the shipment of over 3,000 moldy body armor plates and 500 wet tactical vests, equipment that is essential for the safety of Taiwanese personnel.³ Additionally, the report indicates that 2.7 million rounds of ammunition provided to Taiwan included expired stock and packaging errors, further raising concerns about quality control.⁴

Inspector General Robert P. Storch emphasized that these failures resulted in the delivery of non-mission-ready equipment, which not only prevented the Department from meeting its security

¹ Oversight, accessed October 8, 2024, <https://www.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/oig-reports/DoD/DODIG-2024-086-SECURE.pdf>.

² I would suggest using the original source of the information rather than a news report: "Evaluation of the DoD's Tracking and Accountability of Presidential Drawdown Equipment Provided to Taiwan," Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, September 11, 2024; <https://www.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/oig-reports/DoD/DODIG-2024-130Redacted-SECURE.pdf>.

³ Elenor Watson, "U.S. Delivered 'Wet and Moldy Body Armor' to Taiwan, Pentagon Watchdog Says," CBS News, September 13, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/u-s-wet-moldy-body-armor-to-taiwan>.

⁴ Ibid.

cooperation goals but also incurred additional costs.⁵ More than \$730,000 in taxpayer funds and considerable labor hours were wasted on attempting to clean and salvage the damaged body armor.⁶ These inefficiencies delay the critical support Taiwan needs, jeopardize America's position as a reliable security partner, and waste taxpayer money.

This situation presents not only operational risks for Taiwan but also a broader strategic risk to U.S. credibility. As the report stresses, these failures could severely undermine Taiwan's confidence in the United States at a time when the region faces growing security challenges. With ongoing tensions in the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. cannot afford to weaken its commitments or lose the trust of critical partners and allies.

Given the gravity of these issues and their implications for both U.S. foreign policy and national security, I urge you to take immediate corrective actions to address the systemic problems identified in the report. Specifically, I request answers to the following questions:

1. What steps are being taken to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in the presidential drawdown authority (PDA) process to prevent further miscommunication and mishaps related to equipment transportation and delivery?
2. How does the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) plan to improve oversight and accountability for future equipment shipments, and will the plan include quality control checks at each stage of the delivery process, along with clear timelines and accountability measures?
3. What budget or funding sources were used to cover the \$730,000 spent on cleaning and attempting to salvage the damaged body armor, and what operations or other equipment procurement, if any, were delayed or canceled as a result of reallocating these funds?
4. What actions are being taken to expedite the replacement of the damaged equipment and expired ammunition sent to Taiwan, and how is the Department ensuring that Taiwan receives the operationally-ready support it requires?
5. How does the Department intend to apply the lessons learned from the failures in the PDA-01 shipment to improve future PDA operations, including military assistance deliveries to both Taiwan and other partners?
6. What other equipment stored alongside the moldy body armor was inspected for damage, and was any damage found? If so, please provide a detailed line-item description for each damaged item, including a cost estimate for repairs or replacement.

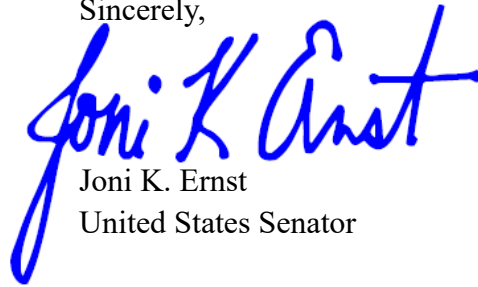
As the U.S. continues to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape not only in the Indo-Pacific but around the globe, ensuring the readiness and reliability of our security commitments is

⁵ "Press Release: Evaluation of the DOD's Tracking and Accountability of Presidential Drawdown," Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, September 12, 2024, <https://www.dodig.mil/In-the-Spotlight/Article/3903595/press-release-evaluation-of-the-dods-tracking-and-accountability-of-presidential/>.

⁶ Ibid.

essential. I appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to your prompt response outlining the steps being taken to rectify these issues and safeguard the future of U.S. security cooperation with Taiwan and other important partners.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joni K. Ernst". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator