

The four agreements signed by Taipei and Beijing last November were nothing but “window dressing,” experts attending a cross-strait forum said yesterday, urging the government to pressure Beijing to quit blocking other countries from signing free-trade agreements (FTA) with Taiwan as both sides mull an economic pact.

Wednesday will mark the agreements' first anniversary after they were signed on Nov. 4 last year by Straits Exchange Foundation Chairman Chiang Pin-kung (蔣經國) and his Chinese counterpart, Chen Yunlin (陳雲林), president of the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait. The agreements addressed direct sea links, daily charter flights, direct postal services and food safety.

National Taiwan University economics professor Kenneth Lin (林炳坤) told the forum that the government led by President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) advertised only the benefits signing an economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA), without explaining its negative impacts.

“Once an ECFA is signed and implemented in the ‘economic zone on the west coast of the Taiwan Strait (海峽兩岸經濟合作框架協議)’ as Beijing wishes, Taiwan’s economy is bound to be hollowed out like that of the outlying islands of Penghu,” he said at a forum held by the Taiwan Thinktank in Taipei to review the four agreements’ effectiveness.

The think tank is generally regarded as leaning toward the pan-green camp.

“While the Ma administration is making aggressive efforts to improve economic relations with Beijing, they should set the precondition that Beijing does not stop other countries from signing FTAs with Taiwan,” Lin said.

Lin also urged the government to let the public vote on the necessity of an ECFA, saying it would only work to the administration’s advantage at the negotiating table if it passes.

Lin said the four agreements denigrated Taiwan’s sovereignty and were based on China’s interests rather those of Taiwan.

The air transportation links, for example, were defined as “special aviation routes” and bar foreign aviation firms from taking part, he said. The result is a “hub-and-spoke distribution network,” he said, with China as the hub and cargo and passengers passing through it on their way to multiple destinations.

While the government set its eyes on Chinese tourists, the increase in their number not only affects the quality of tourism, but also crowds out visitors from other countries such as Japan, he said.

“But we don’t see the government address the problem,” he said. “The government firmly

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believes in free trade, but is free trade between Taiwan and China really good for us?"

Tung Li-wen (譚力文), a professor at the Graduate School of Public Security at Central Police University, said that despite the agreements, Taiwan must "beg" China to honor them when it doesn't.

"The two sides will sign more [agreements] in the future, including an ECFA and financial memorandums of understanding. But what we see so far is that China takes a 'salami slicing' approach to deal with the agreements it has signed," he said.

He added that Ma's zest to improve economic ties was the result of making too many promises before the presidential election in an effort to humiliate the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) after taking office.

"China's communist regime is good at fooling people, and the Ma administration's job is cheating its people," he said.

Tung said that while both sides had signed the "Kinmen Accord" in 1991 to extradite illegal immigrants and criminals to the other side of the Taiwan Strait, "China extradited only when it pleased them and turned up its nose when it did not."

Both sides signed an agreement on cross-strait cooperation to fight crime in June, but no criminals have been sent back to Taiwan through the mechanism, he said.

China sees signing the agreements as one thing and implementing them as another, Tung said. For example, Tung said smuggling was still rampant.

In addition, China may agree to one thing but obstruct it through technical means, Tung said.

While China agrees to allow more tourists to visit Taiwan, Taiwanese travel agencies must be approved by China to handle the matter, he said, noting that Taiwanese vessels can transport cross-strait goods only if they are registered in Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, Chen Ming-sheng (陳明生), assistant to DPP Legislator Tien Chiu-chin (田秋堉), told the forum that their long-term tracking of China's handling of the melamine controversy suggested Beijing was not serious about addressing the problem.

Chen was referring to the public health scare in October last year caused by melamine-contaminated imports from China.

Twelve Taiwanese firms have asked for a total of NT\$700 million (US\$21 million) in compensation from Duqing, the Chinese supplier of a contaminated non-dairy creamer, and from Sanlu, the now-bankrupt dairy firm that also sold melamine-contaminated milk powder.

China has not responded, even though food safety was included in the the four pacts signed last year.

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