

It will take “decades” for Taiwan and China to consider unification as the conditions are not currently ripe, the Presidential Office said yesterday, dismissing a Wall Street Journal (WSJ) report that quoted President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) as saying that it will happen “in the next decade.”

Paul Chang (張瑋), the acting director-general of the Department of Public Affairs, said the paper misquoted Ma in an interview published online on Monday, adding that Ma was “stunned” when he saw the report and immediately asked him to straighten things out.

Playing a recording of the interview, Chang said what Ma said in the Nov. 25 interview was “decades,” not a “decade.”

On the tape, Ma can clearly be heard to say: “Whether there will be reunification as expected by the mainland side depends very much on what is going to unfold in the next decades.”

Whether the two sides will unite was a question that no one can answer at this stage, he was quoted as saying.

“But as the president of this country, I believe that the 23 million people of Taiwan want to secure one or two generations of peace and prosperity so that people on either side of the Taiwan Strait can have sufficient time and freedom to understand, to appreciate and to decide what to do,” Ma was quoted as saying.

The WSJ interview, headlined “Taiwan’s Detente Gamble,” said Ma saw the impact of Taiwan’s democracy on China as a historic opportunity.

“I want to create a situation where the two sides could ... see which system is better for the Chinese culture, for the Chinese people,” he was quoted as saying.

But it’s a dream his counterparts in Beijing don’t share, the report said.

“The people on the Chinese mainland do not quite understand my policy,” the story quoted him as saying. “Sometimes they don’t understand why we don’t want unification. I said, well, it’s quite obvious that conditions for unification are not ripe. And we don’t even know each other that well.”

As with any country grappling with China’s rise, the report said the success of engagement will turn on how well Ma knows China.

“Critics say he’s too naive about the country he is dealing with,” the WSJ said.

“All of the various engagement efforts are, in essence, a bet that Beijing will turn out to be a reliable negotiating partner — a partner that can be trusted to, say, move its missiles away from the coast, or allow the full quota of mainland tourists to leave the country,” it said.

'Decades' to unification, Ma's aides say

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Ma emphasized Beijing's military threat and Washington's role in the interview, saying: "The relaxed tensions [across the Taiwan Strait] depend very much on the continued supply of arms from the United States to Taiwan ... Certainly Taiwan will not feel comfortable to go to a negotiating table without sufficient defense buildup in order to protect the safety of the island."

Commenting on US President Barack Obama's November visit to the region, Ma said he did not think Obama's policy toward this part of the world deviated from that of his predecessors.

"And he also told his [Chinese] host that he would continue to sell arms for the defense to Taiwan," Ma was quoted as saying.

On the planned economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) with Beijing, the WSJ said Ma is not exactly a free-trader, but he understood Taiwan will suffer badly if it does not open up, adding that he is on a tight deadline.

Ma emphasized Beijing's obstruction of Taipei's efforts to ink free-trade agreements with other countries, the story said, but it said he was confident that Taiwan's institutions will prove resilient in the face of any untoward influence from Beijing.

"We have more than 70,000 business firms investing on the Chinese mainland, employing millions of Chinese workers. They could have used that to, you know, interfere in our politics or whatever, and so far that's not that prominent," he was quoted as saying.

"This is a very democratic and transparent society. Anything of that sort would certainly be reported and affect the cross-strait relations," he was quoted as saying.

The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) said yesterday that Ma has no right to unilaterally determine the future of Taiwan.

Regardless of the word used by Ma, "he is in no position to unilaterally put a timetable" on Taiwan's future, DPP Legislator Lee Chun-yee (李俊毅) said, panning the president for being "arrogant and presumptuous."

Ma's efforts for "eventual unification" are the antithesis of Taiwan's democratic values and if the president betrayed the will of the public by reuniting with China, "he would force a large and bloody revolution," Lee said.

DPP spokesman Chuang Shuo-han (莊舒涵) said more than 85 percent of Taiwanese support the status quo.

Ma's comment shows that he is ignoring public opinion by veering Taiwan toward unification, Chuang said, stressing that decisions on Taiwan's future must be determined by referendum.

Choosing Ma means choosing unification with China, said Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) Chairman Huang Kun-huei (黃昆輝), warning that signing an ECFA will expedite the unification

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process.

The best way to stop Ma from pushing for unification is by voting him out of office, Huang said.

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