

Think tank urges US to strengthen Taiwan relations

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A Washington think tank is advising US President Barack Obama to foster closer diplomatic, defense and economic relations with Taiwan to offset China's "potentially coercive" embrace.

In an eight-page policy brief, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) concludes that US cross-strait policy remains based on a "tangled and complex web of decades-old doctrine, law and joint statements."

"Support for rapprochement cannot be the sum total of American policy. The new focus on economic relations also increases the potential for Beijing to constrain Taiwan's freedom of action," it says.

"In order to put the rapprochement on a sustainable footing, the United States should take affirmative steps — including the expansion of trade ties, exploring new approaches to Taiwan's defense and conferring political support," it says.

Written by Abraham Denmark, head of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at CNAS, and Richard Fontaine, former foreign policy adviser to Senator John McCain, the policy brief stresses that while President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) cross-strait policies could bring new stability and prosperity they also contain elements of risk.

Increased economic integration, it says, will necessarily challenge Taipei's autonomy and hand China a potent "instrument of influence" over Taiwan.

China could soon buy more than half of all Taiwan's exports, says the brief, while Taiwan would make up just a small fraction of Chinese trade.

"This asymmetry opens the door for Beijing to use economic policy as an instrument of foreign policy during a future crisis," it says.

"By reducing trade and investment, restricting Chinese tourists from visiting Taiwan, or eliminating cross-strait flights, Beijing could significantly disrupt Taiwan's economy without threatening its own. In this sense, ECFA [an economic cooperation framework agreement] and other agreements, could hand Beijing a potent non-military tool of coercion," it says.

The think tank made three substantive recommendations to the White House.

First, expand trade relations with Taiwan and lend diplomatic support to countries (such as ASEAN nations) seeking to do the same.

"As Taiwan's economy becomes increasingly interconnected with that of the mainland, the US should encourage Taiwan's emergence as an important regional and international trading partner," it says.

Second, continue arms sales to Taiwan and help analyze its defense posture in a changing

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military and diplomatic environment.

“Arms sales have an importance beyond their military utility — they demonstrate a tangible American political commitment to Taiwan,” the brief says.

And third, plan appropriate high-level visits and express political support.

“As Beijing improves its ties with Taiwan, it will need to accept the reality that other countries will seek to confer on Taipei benefits that make the mainland uncomfortable, such as new economic agreements and high-level American visitors. The United States will have to play a delicate game, balancing interests in productive relations with a rising China with the desire to remain on good terms with the small democracy in Taiwan,” the brief says.

“Taiwan represents an important and highly visible test of America’s commitment to its democratic friends around the world,” it says.

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