

US official's talk ignores Taiwan's real issues

Written by Gerrit Van Der Wees
Sunday, 08 March 2015 08:23

On Feb. 27, US Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman gave a major address on US-Northeast Asia relations at the Carnegie Endowment in Washington.

Overall, it was a good speech, emphasizing that the US is committed to engage with Northeast Asia — Japan, Korea and China. She said that the US has a sustained, well-resourced, high-level engagement with the region, and that the rebalance is a “recognition of reality. America’s security and prosperity are inextricably and increasingly linked with the Asia-Pacific.”

However, Taiwan was hardly mentioned: Only once during the speech did she refer to the nation, saying China has complaints about US friendship with the people of Taiwan. When someone in the question-and-answer session asked about that, Sherman said that it “is a good sign” that Taiwan is not talked about as much as it once was.

This might be true, but Sherman, and the US, can do better than that: Taiwan is a vibrant democracy, which is under an existential threat from across the Taiwan Strait by its large and undemocratic neighbor, China. Given these circumstances, it would have been nice if the speech had mentioned Taiwan as a shining example of democracy.

As it was, Sherman did say that “the concept of one China and the Three Communiques has become a standard, that the economic integration between Taiwan and mainland China is quite so — it is the status quo that the political issues are worked out over time.”

There are a number of problems with that statement. First, the “One China, Three Communiques” mantra might have become standard in the repeated recitations of US officials, but it perpetuates an outdated concept dating to the 1970s, which keeps Taiwan dangling in international isolation. For the people in a vibrantly democratic Taiwan, this is becoming less of a tenable position. Taiwanese ask: “Why can’t we be treated like any other country in the international family of nations?”

Second, whether the economic integration between Taiwan and China is the “status quo” is highly debatable: The Sunflower movement and the results of the local elections in November

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last year show very clearly that the large majority of the people of Taiwan reject the policies of the administration of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), which push Taiwan into a closer economic embrace with China.

It was precisely on this topic that former US secretary of state Hillary Rodham Clinton, in an interview with Taiwan Business Weekly on June 18 last year, warned Taiwan against economic over-dependence on China, saying that the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government's push for closer cross-strait ties could lead to Taiwan losing its economic and political independence, and leave it vulnerable to an over-reliance on China.

A third point not mentioned by Sherman is Taiwan's strategic importance: It is located right between the South China Sea and the East China Sea — two areas of major tension where China is aggressively pushing the envelope — and is therefore a key link in the US' security chain in the region. So, what we would have liked to see in the speech is a bit more vision about Taiwan's strategic importance and its future.

In her speech, Sherman referred to the “lofty nature of UN ideals” and that it was “the handiwork of clear-eyed realists [who] ... saw as their most urgent job the development of institutions that would keep nations from once again ripping each other apart.”

To the people of Taiwan, the most poignant injustice in Western policies is that they are still not treated as an equal member in the international community, and excluded from the institutions Sherman holds so high.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2015/03/08](#)