

Congressman calls for US-Taiwan FTA

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A leading US congressman is introducing new legislation on Capitol Hill proposing a free-trade agreement [FTA] with Taiwan.

In a dramatic presentation to congressional staff on Wednesday, Democratic Representative Robert Andrews declared that he wanted to go further and would push US President Barack Obama to recognize Taiwan as a “free and independent sovereign state.”

While other Taiwan watchers at the briefing said they doubted the new legislation would be enacted soon, they agreed it would increase Taiwan’s profile in Washington and could strengthen its hand in the negotiations with China on signing an economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA).

At the same briefing — organized by the Formosan Association for Public Affairs — Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Republican, said an ECFA was set to be signed “despite concerns about ever-growing Chinese economic influence on the island.”

“Like the Trojan horse that allowed the Greek invaders to penetrate the inner walls of Troy, the ECFA may prove to be a gift horse that the people of Taiwan would rather not look in the mouth. [An] ECFA may prove to be a political tool that masquerades as a trade instrument to achieve China’s ultimate goal of absorbing Taiwan,” she said.

It was one of the rare occasions in Congress that representatives from both sides of the aisle seemed to agree.

“When the People’s Republic of China [PRC] rattles its saber against Taiwan, it is not simply testing Taiwan. It is testing the United States of America, testing whether we truly adhere to the values that we profess. Do we mean what we say — do we practice what we preach? That is what is being tested,” Andrews said.

He said that for both economic and strategic reasons, the time had come for an FTA between the US and Taiwan and that in the coming weeks, he would introduce a resolution in Congress calling on the White House to “actively pursue” such an agreement.

Andrews said that the two economies were complimentary and there would be “true mutual benefit,” adding that “the strategic advantage is even more self-evident. An FTA will be affirmation that the United States regards the people of Taiwan as a free, sovereign and independent people.”

“You don’t make free-trade agreements with someone else’s state or territory. You make free-trade agreements with sovereign people, and I think that is a hugely important symbol,” Andrews said.

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He said an ECFA now being negotiated between Taiwan and China was “more of a cage than a framework.”

Taiwan, he said, was negotiating from a position of disadvantage.

“Any duly elected government has the autonomy to negotiate as it sees fit for its people,” Andrews said. “That presupposes negotiation that is free of coercion and is conducted in a truly bilateral and equivalent context, and that is most assuredly not the case. Because of the absence of United States support for Taiwan, the PRC is reading the situation as an indication to engage in a more coercive discussion with Taiwan. Active pursuit of a free-trade agreement between the United States and Taiwan would set a better context for whatever negotiations proceed between Taiwan and the PRC.”

Andrews said that what he was advocating was “a provocative position.”

“Our policy should move in a bolder and more truthful direction, acknowledging Taiwan as sovereign and independent. I know that’s provocative. It’s meant to be,” Andrews said.

He said that while he hoped China would evolve into a peaceful trading partner and be a true asset to the world economy, it would be a “dramatic mistake” to assume this would happen.

He said the best way to prepare for future Chinese growth was “not to compromise or cower in matters of principle.”

“We should provoke a non-violent discussion now, rather than wait for the day when the PRC has grown more strong and powerful and perhaps irreversibly bellicose in its relationship with the United States. The great moments of our history have been the ones where we have acted out of principle even when it’s risky or inconvenient. I think this is one of those moments,” Andrews said.

Asked about the credibility of his proposed legislation at a time when both the Obama administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress are opposed to FTAs, Andrews said it was both “practical and credible.”

Representative Scott Garrett, a Republican, supported Andrews and said the US should do everything possible “to support and bolster” Taiwan.

Garrett said that while most countries were now too frightened of China’s reaction to sign FTAs with Taiwan, many would likely follow suit if the US led the way.

He said that this in turn would give Taiwan more confidence in its direct negotiations with China.

The likelihood of the FTA legislation actually passing, Garrett said, was “only as real as the willingness of this Congress to stand up and do what is right.”

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Ros-Lehtinen said that while US trade interests in Asia were stagnating, “the Chinese dragon is extending its claws even further into the Pacific.”

She said a US-Taiwan FTA would boost US exports to Taiwan and expand the US market share in Asia and strengthen bilateral ties.

“It is time for the Obama administration to move forward in pursuing an FTA with our good friend, our democratic ally, our stalwart pal Taiwan. Let’s do it and let’s do it now,” Ros-Lehtinen said.

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