

US stays mum on Ma's 'never'

Written by Taipei Times

Wednesday, 12 May 2010 08:12 -

Deputy US Secretary of State James Steinberg has refused to comment on President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) recent declaration that he will never ask the US to fight for Taiwan.

"It's not particularly useful to speculate what would happen in the event that conflict comes about," he said.

Speaking at a conference on "US-China Cooperation on Global Issues," Steinberg said: "The goal is to try to avoid it [conflict] and that comes about by a commitment by both sides to look for a peaceful resolution of their differences that takes into account the interests and the wishes of parties on both sides of the [Taiwan] Strait."

Steinberg had been asked at the conference — organized by the Brookings Institution in Washington — if he was encouraged by Ma's determination that Taiwan would defend itself, or if he was relieved that the US would "never be dragged into a potentially bloody war" or if he was concerned that Ma was distancing Taiwan from the US.

"We're generally quite encouraged by the direction of cross-strait relations between Taiwan and the PRC [People's Republic of China]," he said. "I think we have long believed that a strategy of engagement by the two sides to look for a peaceful resolution of the issues is critical to their common future."

"We have always believed that this is something that is best resolved through dialogue and that we've encouraged Beijing to make clear that it can respond to these efforts by the leadership in Taiwan to try to find common ground, to build trust across the straits," he said.

However, he would not be drawn into a discussion of what Ma had said.

"The discussions on the economic cooperation framework [agreement] are particularly important. That provides a foundation for the two sides really to deal with each other, because this is a situation where conflict is in nobody's interest," Steinberg said.

Earlier, he said that both Washington and Beijing were "very focused" on preparing for a second Strategic and Economic Dialogue scheduled to take place on May 24 and May 25 in Beijing.

Led by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, a team of 15 US Cabinet members and agency heads will take part in the meeting to discuss international and regional security issues, clean energy and climate change and the global economic crisis.

"We will undoubtedly also discuss core issues like peace and security in the Taiwan Strait and, from our perspective, the need for China to have a deeper engagement with the Dalai Lama over Tibet within the framework of the one-China policy that we have continued to

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reiterate," Steinberg said.

Steinberg said the second Strategic and Economic Dialogue — the first was held last year in Washington — would be used to deal with long-term challenges and “also frankly as an action-forcing event to help us move forward on some issues.”

It would be a great opportunity to sustain dialogue between key decision-makers and policymakers in both governments, he said.

“Each side is free to raise the issues of their concern and we will have an opportunity to make our points about issues including human rights and religious freedom, the need to protect intellectual property, our concerns about aspects of the military modernization in China as well as the issue of the overall global economic balance and the role of exchange rates,” Steinberg said.

He said that for the most part, the US and China would “sink or swim together” on major issues from global economic growth to health to terrorism to proliferation to protecting sea lanes.

Asked if China had an increasing interest in building trust and confidence, Steinberg said that one of the great challenges facing Washington was how to understand and adapt to China's growing military power.

“Because China's approach lacks the kind of transparency that we'd like, we do have questions about the long-term intentions,” he said.

Steinberg said Washington wanted to strengthen military-to-military exchanges — cut short when the US announced new arms sales to Taiwan earlier this year — and to better understand China's goals, plans and intentions.

It is necessary, he said, to know what was driving China's decisions over military modernization, not just in terms of equipment but also in terms of doctrine and operations, “to give us the assurance that what it is seeking to achieve is consistent with the security and the political and economic interest of others.”

Source: [Taipei Times - 2010/05/12](#)