

US downplays Taiwan before Hu visit

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The US will try to keep Taiwan as far down the agenda as possible during Chinese President Hu Jintao's (胡锦涛) three-day state visit to Washington this week.

During a lengthy White House briefing on the visit, US National Security Adviser Tom Donilon detailed the main topics to be covered during all of Hu's talks with US President Barack Obama and never once mentioned Taiwan.

China experts agree that US arms sales to Taiwan are of enormous importance to Beijing and conclude that Washington has decided to play the issue down and leave it up to the other side to introduce it.

Obama has met Hu eight times in the last two years and it is believed that Hu raised Taiwan on each of these occasions.

Hu will arrive in Washington tomorrow evening and will have dinner that night in the private White House residence with Obama, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Donilon. The Chinese president will be accompanied by two senior aides.

Both sides have agreed that the topic of conversation that night will be the overall relationship.

Donilon said they would talk about the tone of the relationship, its purpose, areas of cooperation and whether the right mechanisms for dealing with problems are in place.

They will also discuss how they see the relationship developing over the next 10, 15 and 20 years.

The next morning Obama and Hu will meet again with very few aides in the Oval Office before moving to the Cabinet Room for a much-expanded meeting including US Treasury officials.

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Later they will meet with Chinese business leaders, hold a short press conference and there will be a formal state dinner that night.

On Thursday, Hu will make his only public speech of the visit before leaving for Chicago.

Donilon has revealed that during the two closed summits in the White House — first in the Oval Office and then in the Cabinet Room — there will be three separate “baskets” of topics under discussion.

The first discussion will concentrate on security and political issues. The topics will be North Korea, Iran, Sudan and military-to-military relations.

However, it is during this session in the Oval Office that Hu is most likely to challenge the US about its continuing arms sales to Taiwan.

The next session, in the Cabinet Room, will deal with economic issues and US exports to China, which are growing at twice the rate of US exports to the rest of the world.

Lastly, they will discuss “global issues of special concern.”

“Human rights would fall into that category,” Donilon said.

Despite US efforts not to emphasize Taiwan, Obama and his national security team must be well aware of a letter delivered to the White House at the end of last week that was signed by 25 members of the US Senate — just more than a quarter — urging the president to “remain mindful” of the vital security interests of Taiwan during his talks with Hu.

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“The United States and Taiwan have a long history of trade and friendship that we are pleased to have seen strengthen over the years. We ask that during President Hu’s visit, you emphasize that the US’s position on Taiwan remains clear: The US will support Taiwan’s security and continue to provide Taiwan with defensive arms,” it says. “The PRC [People’s Republic of China] has engaged in a large-scale military build-up over the past few years and has not abandoned the threat of force, with an estimated 1,000 active missiles pointed directly at Taiwan. For these reasons, it is of utmost importance that President Hu understands the United States’ unwavering commitment to providing Taiwan with the tools necessary for its self-defense.”

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