

The US might encourage Taiwan to play a larger role in the growing South China Sea dispute, a US official said.

US Department of State spokesman Jeff Rathke on Tuesday offered support for President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) peace initiative, while Washington policymakers are expected to discuss the issue with Democratic Progressive Party Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) when she visits the city next week.

In addition, the Brookings Institution has published a lengthy paper urging Taiwan's inclusion in negotiations related to the South China Sea.

"We appreciate Taiwan's call on claimants to exercise restraint, to refrain from unilateral actions that could escalate tensions and to respect international law as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention," Rathke said.

Asked about Ma's plan to emphasize that resources can be shared even though sovereignty cannot be divided, Rathke stressed that the US position on the South China Sea was long-standing and had not changed.

"With regard to claims of sovereignty over land features in the South China Sea, our position is that maritime claims must accord with the Law of the Sea, and we have a strong interest in peace and security, and in the manner in which claimants address their disputes," Rathke said.

"As to the question of sovereignty over islands claimed by Taiwan or other land features claimed by claimants, we don't take a position on the sovereignty of land features," he said.

Rathke said that China's extensive land reclamation efforts in the region had contributed to rising tensions and that under international law land reclamation could not change the maritime zones of a geographic feature.

US re-evaluating Taiwan's role in South China Sea

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Washington sources have told the Taipei Times that the administration of US President Barack Obama would be interested to learn Tsai's plans for the South China Sea and said she would face questions on the subject.

They also suggested that Taiwan should expand its role as a peacemaker in the region.

Meanwhile, Lynn Kuok, a foreign policy academic at Brookings, released a paper entitled *Taiwan's Evolving Position in the South China Sea*.

Kuok said that all parties who have an interest in better management of the dispute and a more peaceful region — including China — should support Taiwan's inclusion in negotiations and activities relating to the South China Sea.

"This can be done in ways consistent with China's 'one China' principle," Kuok said.

She added: "Proper management of the dispute necessarily involves Taiwan — Taiwan controls the largest land feature in the South China Sea, its vessels regularly patrol the area and it has one of the biggest fishing industries in the Pacific."

Kuok said that, for China, supporting Taiwan's participation in cooperative activities would show Beijing's desire for better cross-strait relations and its dual-track approach to the dispute; seeking one-on-one negotiations on sovereignty issues and multilateral arrangements within the region to promote peace and stability.

She said that Taiwan should clarify its claims, avoid unleashing nationalist sentiment, which would limit policy options, and continue promoting Ma's peace plan.

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In addition, Taiwan should push from behind the scenes for participation in code of conduct negotiations and in cooperative activities involving all claimants, she said.

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