

Monterey Talks to include F-35Bs: official

Written by Taipei Times
Monday, 24 July 2017 07:08 -



National Security Council Secretary-General Yen Teh-fa is pictured in an undated photograph.
Photo: CNA

Taiwanese officials are to bring up the procurement of Lockheed Martin F-35B jets and submarine technology in the Monterey Talks, an annual high-level defense dialogue in the US scheduled for the middle of next month.

The precise time and location of the talks is classified.

It is believed that key members of the US government are to be present, a high-ranking official said on condition of anonymity.

It is to be the first round of the talks since US President Donald Trump took office.

The meeting is the highest level of dialogue between the two nations.

Historically, it is attended by the top leaders of the two nations' defense, intelligence and diplomatic establishments, as well as the commander of the US Pacific Command, the director of the American Institute in Taiwan and Taiwan's representative to the US.

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Previously, it was reported that President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) administration wished to upgrade its delegation by sending National Security Council Secretary-General Yen Teh-fa (顏德發), but the official dismissed the story.

The Cabinet, following precedent, instead named council Deputy Secretary-General York Chen (陳水扁) as envoy.

Vice Minister of National Defense Pu Tze-chun (吳敦義), Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Paul Chang (張善政) and Mainland Affairs Council Deputy Minister Lin Cheng-yi (林錫山) are also expected to attend.

The US government has not fixed its list of attendees, the official said in response to speculation about which US officials would attend.

“Experience tells us that high-ranking officials often do little more than show up at the banquet before leaving, giving little time to talk. The important thing is to meet officials who are in charge of things that are relevant to us,” the official added.

Last month, the Trump administration approved the sale of eight classes of weapons and technologies, including ground-attack missiles and torpedoes — a sale that was originally scheduled to be approved before Trump took office.

However, the Tsai administration also wants to buy F-35B jets — a variant of the fifth-generation fighter-bomber that is capable of vertical takeoff and short landings — and wishes to obtain technology for the nation's domestic submarine program.

The F-35B's ability to operate from improvised runways could be a boon to Taiwan's defense if its airbases came under attack by Chinese missiles, while domestically built submarines would be important in attrition and defense.

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However, the nation's diplomats talk about arms sales whenever they meet US defense officials, the official said.

"Such discussions are certainly to be expected at the Monterey Talks. We also anticipate that no immediate conclusion will be reached at the meeting. The US side is not going to say yes or no on the spot. Instead, they are going to speak in ambiguous terms and take the transcripts back for further consideration," the official said.

When asked to comment on the possibility that the US Navy might make port calls in Taiwan, the official said that the issue rests with the US Congress in its review of the National Defense Authorization Act for the US' next fiscal year.

"As a matter of etiquette, the executive and legislative branches need to be kept separate. It will not be appropriate to talk about this with their executive departments," the official said.

Source: [Taipei Times - 2017/07/24](#)