

US will not retaliate over beef ban, Jason Yuan says

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Washington will deal with Taiwanese lawmakers' attempts to block imports of US ground beef and offal sensitively, rather than by refusing requests for arms sales or for the president to make transit stops in the US, Taiwan's representative to Washington Jason Yuan (袁國良) said on Friday.

On the sidelines of a Republic of China flag-raising ceremony, Yuan said the beef issue would be handled by the US Department of Agriculture, while the other two issues fall within the remit of the US Department of Defense, the US Department of State and the White House.

"They won't mingle these issues," Yuan said in response to reporters' questions on whether the amendment to be passed by Taiwan's legislature could trigger reprisals from Washington.

Taipei agreed to allow the import of US bone-in beef on Oct. 22. Lawmakers who were concerned about the safety of the US beef, however, are set to pass an amendment to the Act Governing Food Sanitation (食品安全法) on Tuesday to exclude US ground beef and offal, despite the signing of a Taiwan-US beef protocol.

Yuan refused to directly answer questions on whether the issue would influence other aspects of bilateral ties, saying that no matter how close the Taiwan-US friendship is, "disputes cannot be avoided all together."

Just as many US congressmen who come from agricultural states speak out for their constituents, Taiwanese lawmakers must also defend their constituents' interests, he said.

"How could there never be disputes between them?" Yuan asked.

As Taiwan's representative to Washington, Yuan said his job was to convey Taiwan's point of view to officials in the US capital.

Meanwhile, Richard Bush, director of the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at the Washington-based Brookings Institute, said he was puzzled as to how the issue had developed.

Bush, who previously served as the chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan in Washington, assumed that Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) lawmakers were concerned that the US beef issue would be exploited by the opposition Democratic Progressive Party to make headway in the polls, particularly among floating voters.

"The politically safe strategy, therefore, is to go along with a ban, even if there is no scientific basis for the fears and even though there are many different ways to protect the food supply," Bush said.

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Bush also suspects that some members of the KMT caucus were trying to make a point regarding the balance of power between the Legislative Yuan on the one hand and the Office of President and the Executive Yuan on the other.

At a separate setting, Rupert Hammond-Chambers, president of the US-Taiwan Business Council, urged Washington to refrain from retaliating against Taiwan's legislative decision to resume a ban on certain US beef imports by freezing the long-stalled talks with Taiwan on a trade agreement.

Delaying talks on the proposed US-Taiwan trade and investment framework agreement (TIFA) to force Taiwan to give in would be a "counterproductive approach," Hammond-Chambers said in the Council's annual year-end report distributed on Friday.

Such a strategy could harm Taiwan's trust in the US, which Taiwan also regards as its most important trading partner, Hammond-Chambers warned.

"A decade ago, America was Taiwan's most important trading partner. When coupled with our security relationship and guarantees, it meant that there is no more important relationship for Taiwan than that with the US," he said.

The situation, however, is now changing, the business leader said.

"China's economic importance to Taiwan has soared and that relationship will soon be formalized in a free-trade agreement," Hammond-Chambers said.

"Meanwhile, America's increasing inability to maintain a credible and consistent security commitment undermines Taiwan's confidence in our resolve. Couple that with our 'on again, off again' trade policy and we are doing a great deal to undermine broader US interests in the market," Hammond-Chambers said.

Citing a Financial Times report, Hammond-Chambers said that Minister of Foreign Affairs Timothy Yang (楊慶堃) had told legislators that "it was the government's understanding that 'there is a certain interaction' between the beef ban and future US arms sales to Taiwan."

Hammond-Chambers, however, said that if this were true, "this sort of linkage directly violates the Taiwan Relations Act, which clearly states that 'the [US] president and the Congress shall determine the nature and quantity of such defense articles and services based solely upon their judgment of the [defense] needs of Taiwan.'"

President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has instructed his government to use every power possible to attempt to minimize any damaging impact on Taiwan's relations with the US that the lawmakers' decision could have.

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