

Experts call for US, China policy shift to avoid war

CRUNCH TIME:: A Perryman Group report highlighted the ‘positive impact’ of selling F-16s to Taiwan, such as generating US\$8.7 billion and creating 16,000 jobs

By William Lowther / Staff reporter in Washington

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Experts told a conference in Washington on Wednesday that to avoid war over Taiwan, Beijing and Washington must change their current policies.

“China must renounce the use of force against Taiwan or Washington must declare clearly, unequivocally and publicly that it will defend Taiwan against Chinese attack,” said Joseph Bosco, who served in the office of the US secretary of defense as a China country desk officer in 2005 and 2006.

The US, China and Taiwan urgently need a “declaration of strategic clarity,” he said.

Quoting former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger, Bosco said that while ambiguity was sometimes the lifeblood of diplomacy, it could not be maintained indefinitely.

Bosco told the conference, organized by the Center for National Policy and held in a US Senate meeting room, that Taiwan was now seen by many in Washington as an “irritant” to good US-China relations.

However, the overwhelming majority of Taiwanese “have no intention of subjecting themselves to Chinese communist rule,” he said.

As a result, there will come a point when Beijing thinks Washington is too “war-weary, distracted and financially distressed” to intervene and will be “sorely tempted” to make a military move against Taiwan, he said.

“If and when that happens, Congress and the American people will demand that the US come to Taiwan’s defense and in that scenario, China and the US will once again find themselves in military conflict,” he said.

Delays by the US government in selling F-16C/D aircraft to Taiwan “is sending the wrong signal to Beijing and others in the region,” Bosco said.

Southeast Asian nations have appealed to Washington to become more deeply involved in the region to counterbalance the reemergence of the Chinese threat, he said.

By clarifying US commitment to Taiwan, Washington would send a clear signal to China and to the countries of the region that the US would neither abandon nor be driven from East Asia, he said.

In that case, the “prudent choice for China” would be to “learn to get along with its neighbors and respect the international norm.”

Justin Logan of the CATO Institute said Taiwan was not spending enough on its own defense.

At the same time, he said, Taiwan’s national will to fight, to resist Chinese aggression, “is not a factor that mitigates in Taiwan’s favor.”

There was too much reliance on an assumption that the US would come to Taiwan’s defense, he said.

“It is notable that debates are raging, outside the public view, about simply giving up Taiwan or Finlandizing Taiwan,” Logan said.

“These options are becoming more common in the face of China’s growing military power and Taiwan’s atrophying military capabilities,” he said.

“What is needed is a wholesale change in national attitude on the island [Taiwan] about the threat posed by the PRC [People’s Republic of China] and the policies that should be embraced in order to influence the outcome,” he added.

However, the needed change in attitude in Taiwan was “unlikely” without significant change in Washington’s policies, he said.

US-Taiwan Business Council president Rupert Hammond--Chambers, who was the last speaker at the conference, said the mechanism used by the US to sell arms to Taiwan was “broken.”

While the administration of US President Barack Obama still needed to be persuaded to sell F-16C/D aircraft to Taiwan, he was encouraged by pressure from the US Congress for the White House to go ahead with the sale.

Following the conference, -Hammond-Chambers released a new report by the Perryman Group on the “positive economic impact” in the US of the sale of 66 F-16C/Ds to Taiwan.

The report estimates the F-16 program would generate US\$8.7 billion in gross product -output and provide about 16,000 jobs.

“The single most significant reason that the Obama administration has not moved forward on this issue is over concerns regarding China’s sensitivities, when the US should instead be evaluating the sale based on the needs of Taiwan and on its beneficial impact on the US economy,” Hammond-Chambers said.

Center for National Policy vice president Scott Bates said after hearing the three speakers: “This is the most sobering assessment of the security situation in the Taiwan Strait I have heard.”

“We are looking at a situation where the strategic balance may be tipped irrevocably unless steps are taken,” he said.

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