An open letter to Wang Jin-pyng

Sunday, May 23, 2010, Page 8

Dear Mr Speaker, Wang Jin-pyng (王金平),

As strong supporters of a free and democratic Taiwan, we would like to call your attention to a number of concerns we have regarding the ongoing negotiations between the Taiwanese and Chinese governments to arrive at an economic cooperation framework agreement.

While in principle, an economic agreement between the two countries would be laudable, it concerns us that there has been a lack of transparency and legislative checks and balances on the part of the government in Taiwan: Media and civic groups have complained about the secrecy of the negotiations and the fact that there is no clarity on what the agreement would entail or what impact it would have on Taiwan's economy, in particular its agriculture sector, small and medium-size industries and the labor force.

Furthermore, the Legislative Yuan appears to be sidelined in the decisionmaking process, which does not bode well for the country's young democracy. Against this background, we urge you to emphasize that you attach great importance to checks and balances in a democratic system. It is also imperative that the Taiwanese government seeks a democratic consensus on this important decision through a public referendum of all people in Taiwan before the agreement is signed.

Many in Taiwan and abroad are also concerned about the impact of closer economic ties on Taiwan's de facto independence and sovereignty: They feel that closer economic ties will give the government in Beijing leverage to push Taiwan into further political isolation. This would make it increasingly difficult for the people of Taiwan to maintain their freedom, basic human rights and democracy, as well as to determine their own future. The problem is, of course, that China unjustifiably claims sovereignty over Taiwan and doesn't recognize its right to exist as a free, democratic and independent nation.

If Taiwan increasingly moves into the sphere of influence of a still very undemocratic China, this will have a negative impact on democracy and human rights in Taiwan itself and on its role as a beacon for democracy in East Asia. We feel that the present approach by the Ma administration is too much predicated on China having a say in how Taiwan relates to the rest of the world.

In our view, Taiwan should be accepted in its own right and be able to sign free trade agreements with other nations without going through China.

We may also refer to recent statements by two of Taiwan's strongest supporters in the US Congress, who are very critical of the proposed agreement: In a briefing on April 28, Congressman Robert Andrews referred to it as a "cage" for Taiwan from which it will be difficult to escape, while Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen referred to it as a "Trojan Horse," one gift-horse Taiwan should not allow in because Beijing is using it as a political tool with the ultimate goal of absorbing Taiwan.

Mr Speaker, we hope you will agree with us that maintaining a free and democratic Taiwan is essential, not only for the people of Taiwan, but also for the cause of freedom and democracy in East Asia as a whole. We thus urge you to take a critical look at the proposed trade agreement and ensure that the economic, political and strategic interests of the Taiwanese people are fully safeguarded.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Sincerely yours,

Nat Bellocchi

Former chairman, American Institute in Taiwan

Coen Blaauw

Formosan Association for Public Affairs, Washington

Gordon G. Chang

Author, The Coming Collapse of China

Peter Chow

Professor of economics,

City College of New York

Stephane Corcuff

Associate professor of political science, China and Taiwan studies,

University of Lyon

Michael Danielsen

Chairman, Taiwan Corner, Copenhagen

June Teufel Dreyer

Professor of political science,

University of Miami

Norman W. Getsinger

US Foreign Service (retired); Graduate program,

The George Washington University

Terri Giles

Executive director, Formosa Foundation, Los Angeles

Michael Rand Hoare

Emeritus reader,

University of London

Thomas G. Hughes

Former chief of staff to the late Senator Claiborne Pell, Washington

Richard C. Kagan

Professor emeritus of history, Hamline University; author, Taiwan's Statesman: Lee Teng-hui and Democracy in Asia

Jerome F. Keating

Associate professor,

National Taipei University (retired); co-author, Island in the Stream, a Quick Case Study of Taiwan's Complex History

Hon. David Kilgour

Former member of parliament and secretary of state for Asia-Pacific, Canada

Andre Laliberte

Associate professor, School of Political Studies,

University of Ottawa

Daniel Lynch

Associate professor, School of International Relations,

University of Southern California

Victor H. Mair

Professor of Chinese language and literature,

University of Pennsylvania

Donald Rodgers

Associate professor of political science,

Austin College

Terence C. Russell

Associate professor of Chinese, Asian Studies Centre,

University of Manitoba

Christian Schafferer

Associate professor of international trade, Overseas Chinese University; chair of Austrian Association of East Asian Studies; editor, Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia

Michael Stainton,

York Centre for Asia Research, Toronto

Peter Tague

Professor of law,

Georgetown University

John J. Tkacik Jr

Former senior research fellow, The Heritage Foundation; former officer at the Taiwan Coordination Desk, US Department of State, Washington

Arthur Waldron

Lauder professor of international relations,

University of Pennsylvania

Vincent Wei-cheng Wang

Professor of political science,

University of Richmond

Gerrit van der Wees

Editor, Taiwan Communique, Washington

Michael Yahuda

Professor emeritus, London School of Economics

Stephen Yates

President, DC Asia Advisory; former deputy assistant to the US vice president for national security affairs.