

Christopher and Qian Meet in The Hague

U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher and PRC Foreign Minister Qian Qichen conducted five hours of bilateral talks on April 19 at the Chinese ambassador's residence in the Dutch capital of The Hague. This exchange of views on bilateral, international, and regional issues was the fourth meeting between the two men since June last year, the last three having been held in Brunei, New York, and Osaka.

What Taipei was most concerned about in these talks was the issue of relations across the Taiwan Strait and the fear that its own interests might be damaged. The Chinese were also concerned about the Taiwan issue, as well as the possibility that the United States would impose sanctions on the PRC on account of its failure to enforce intellectual property rights protection and its nuclear-related sales to Pakistan. But for the Americans, the most important topics of discussion were nuclear proliferation and the Korean Peninsula. This time, issues such as human rights and Hong Kong were placed firmly on the back burner.

The Chinese stuck to their guns on the Taiwan issue and showed no sign of making any concessions. The Americans simply repeated their established position, that the two sides of the Strait should sort out their differences themselves through peaceful negotiation. Although Washington was unwilling to provoke Beijing too much, it did not make any substantial concessions either, so the result was that each side simply stated its own case. However, now that they realize how seriously Beijing views the Taiwan issue, the Americans are likely to be more cautious in their response in the future.

U.S. efforts to encourage Beijing and Taipei to reopen their dialogue are in line with current government policy in Taipei, but Taiwan should be careful to grasp the initiative and not let Beijing and Washington make arrangements for the two sides to go to the negotiating table before the time is ripe. Washington will have to be

more careful in the future about inviting the ROC head of state to visit the United States, while future arms sales to Taiwan will have to be approved on a case-by-case basis and will depend on Taipei's defense requirements, the state of U.S.-PRC relations, and the United States' own security interests.

It will be difficult for the PRC to avoid U.S. sanctions on the issue of its sales of nuclear materials to Pakistan. Whether Beijing agrees to implement a complete nuclear test ban will depend on progress with the development of nuclear weapons in the PRC and the results of recent tests. And although Beijing has stated that it is willing to cooperate with Washington in reducing tension in East Asia, it is doubtful whether the Chinese will join the proposed four-party talks on the Korean issue and exert pressure on Pyongyang without taking careful stock of the situation first.

One aspect of the Chinese attitude during the talks that impressed observers was the way they combined firm adherence to principle with flexible negotiating tactics. The Chinese refused to give an inch on human rights, the Korean Peninsula, overseas arms sales, or Taiwan, whereas the Americans were very careful not to tread on Beijing's toes, avoiding even the kind of threatening language often heard in their bilateral talks in the past. The Americans simply got nowhere with any of their demands, and this time, Beijing's most-favored-nation trading status was not even an issue, as Washington had agreed to renew it before the meeting.

From an overall point of view, the meeting was too short and the agenda too long for it to produce any concrete results, but the fact that it took place at all is evidence of the importance the two sides attach to their bilateral relationship. Both Washington and Beijing want to maintain a dialogue, and neither side intends to resort hastily to conflict.

The Americans and the Chinese recognize that a healthy and stable bilateral relationship serves the interests of both sides, and they also want to cooperate to maintain stability in the Asia-Pacific. For this reason, this kind of high-level dialogue is likely to continue and other channels of communication will be kept open. But as long as all the old points of conflict remain, such dialogue can only serve to reduce tensions and improve the climate of relations to a certain degree. Beijing-Washington relations will continue to be a combination of alliance and struggle.

(George W. Tsai)