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Background Briefing on President's Meeting with Chinese Premier Wen

The James S. Brady Briefing Room

3:35 P.M. EST

MR. McCORMACK: Good afternoon, everybody. We have not one, but two senior administration officials to talk about the President's meeting with Chinese Premier Wen, or Wen, I was corrected. So I will turn it over to our briefers now. The attribution is senior administration official.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: He did it right that time. Last time he was using a falling tone, so we're going to work on his Chinese as we go ahead. Well, folks, I'm here after what was a very productive series of meetings between President Bush and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. This, of course, was his first visit to the United States in his role as Premier.

The two leaders met for 40 minutes in the Oval Office. Then the press came in, asked a few very pertinent questions. Afterwards we retired to the Cabinet Room where leading U.S. economic officials met with their Chinese counterparts, along with the two leaders, and discussed economic and trade issues for 40 minutes. Then after they went up for a very small, intimate lunch up in the Residence.

Some of the topics that came up of course were Taiwan. I would like to say a few words along those lines. I think the President made a very clear comment in response to the question on Taiwan and the cross-Strait relationship. I want to stress here that the President's top goal is preserving the peace in the Taiwan Strait. We are in no way abandoning support for Taiwan's democracy or for the spread of freedom. Indeed, on that regard, I would like to point that we think the spread of freedom is important to all countries, and that's a topic that we discuss with the Chinese very frequently, and did today.

However, though, we're seeing developments on both side of the Strait, forcing us to drop some of the ambiguity that has been in the policy in the past. I will stress here that the President did tell the Chinese in no uncertain terms that we, the United States, would have to get involved if China tried to use coercion or force to unilaterally change the status of Taiwan. And it was in that context that we have been telling Taiwan increasingly clearly that we would likewise not welcome any moves on the part of Taiwan to unilaterally change the status quo.

The President was clear, there are things going on on Taiwan in the context of a hotly contested election that give us -- give us pause. We will speak out if that is necessary.

The two Presidents also discussed such issues as human rights, religious freedom. The President once again expressed his own deeply held convictions on the issue of religious freedom and urged the Chinese to move forward and grant greater religious freedom to their own people. They discussed nonproliferation to some degree. The President applauded the new Chinese white paper on nonproliferation but noted that there is a need for tough implementation of the commitments contained in that white paper.

The two Presidents also discussed exchange rates. The President reiterated that we strongly believe that the most prosperous future is ensured by free markets, free trade, and a market-determined floating exchange rate. And the Chinese did reiterate their commitment towards the goal of a floating exchange rate.

Finally, the two did discuss their desire to use high-level contacts, something that was referred to as the JCCT, the Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade, a body that has existed for some time at the bureaucratic level, but to up that body to the political level, to try to energize our attempts to lessen the trade deficit, and also to make it clear that the President has a strong commitment to the preservation of U.S. jobs, to ensuring that free trade is fair trade, that we all play by the same rules and that the Chinese market is as open to U.S. goods as the

U.S. market is to Chinese goods.

The two leaders also discussed the North Korea issue. I would like to bring up another senior administration official who is dealing very closely with Korean related issues to go over some of that.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think the President, in his statement during the photo opportunity, was quite specific. He took the opportunity to note the importance of the six-party talks, note the ongoing U.S. commitment, rather steadfast commitment to a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear weapons issue through diplomatic means, and to thank the Chinese for the role they've had in doing it.

The President wanted to emphasize that he's not interested in a freeze, he's interested in the complete, verifiable and irreversible end to North Korea's nuclear weapons program. And for the Chinese side, they indicated that they felt there was a developing consensus on this issue, but that we had not yet reached the point where a new round -- the second round of the six-party multilateral talks could be convened.

The discussion also touched on the importance of this issue, of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula to both Chinese and American interests, indeed the interests of all of the Northeast Asia partners -- Russia, Japan and the Republic of Korea itself in coming to a good and peaceful resolution of this issue. So that did not break new ground, but it certainly covered the areas we've been talking about.

The leaders did not specifically address the new DPRK statement that came out today, which seems to be setting possible preconditions for reconvening the six-party talks. I think the attitude of both sides is clear; we're going to continue to work on this issue and get the six-party talks reconvened. The U.S., China, Japan, Russia, the ROK certainly have no preconditions to getting the talks going as soon as reasonably possible.

MR. McCORMACK: We'll go ahead and open it up for questions.

Q On Taiwan, you said that the President made it clear in a private meeting that the U.S. would feel the need to get involved if China were to take unilateral action. Should the President have made that statement more forcefully publicly, as well?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: If you recall -- if you recall back to April 2001, I think the President made that statement as explicitly as possible. Nothing he has said in the interim has walked that statement back. So we can keep on reiterating these things, if you want. But I think that while we continue to be concerned about the growing military threat on the one side of the Taiwan Strait, we are also concerned about recent statements and actions on Taiwan. That is rather a new development and that's why I think the President emphasized in his public comments that specific portion of it.

Q When you say we would have to get involved, what does that mean? Intervene militarily, or what exactly?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, even though I say we're dropping the ambiguity, I'm not going to give you a precise formula. But let me tell you the President was very, very forceful on this issue. He made it clear that, look, you know, if you force us to, if you try to use force or coercion against the Taiwanese, we're going to be there.

Q Can I ask, is that even the case if we think that it's been provoked by Taiwan going ahead with this referendum?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We didn't get into hypotheticals like that. Again, there is a -- there are two separate messages here. One is for the Chinese that, look, you can't use force, you can't use coercion. The other one is for the Taiwanese, look, you shouldn't be moving towards independence.

Q But have we told them? What have we told the Taiwanese government we would do if, in fact, they do go ahead with this referendum and it provokes action by China?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We haven't discussed that specifically with them. We have made it crystal clear to them that we don't want to see them moving in this direction.

Q President Chen already said that he will go ahead with or without U.S. support. So I wonder then what is U.S. response to him? Also, he reiterated this referendum, especially on missile threat from China, which did not violate the commitment for one -- I wonder why you still this as a provocative action?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, again, we're obviously not going to get into a public contest of wills here. We are making clear our views that any steps by either side to move unilaterally to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, we believe, is dangerous. We don't welcome it. We urge caution.

Q Did the President specifically make mention of the missiles, the 500 missiles targeting Taiwan? And second, Premier Wen said that the President used the word "oppose." And the President said, we oppose independence in Taiwan. Is that correct?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Again, we've danced this dance before. I'm not going to get into specific semantics. I think if you look at what we're saying, it's as clear as we can get. Were either side moving unilaterally to change the status quo, we oppose that, we don't want to see it, we think it's dangerous. I'm like the robot going off, "Danger, danger, Will Robinson." We are trying to let both sides of the Strait know that certain actions can be dangerous. We think anything that looks like a unilateral move towards independence on the part of Taiwan can start down a dangerous road.

Q To clarify on that point, could you explain what it is that the Taiwanese have done that makes it look like they're starting down that road?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not going to go into specific actions, but I will tell you that recent actions are, indeed, raising our concern. You can go back through, do your LexisNexis search. I'm not going to define what specific statement, what specific action. But if you look at the totality of the campaigning in Taiwan, there is reason for concern.

Q And the missiles?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And the missiles? Oh, excuse me. Missiles he did not specifically raise, but he has raised in the past. Again, this is in the context of a very clear statement to the Chinese that, look, don't use coercion, don't use force, or else we'll have to get involved.

Q You referred back to the April 2001 statement, and then talked about the clear statement that was made today. And you said that the 2001 statement wasn't walked back. But can you articulate why you think that today's statement isn't at least some sort of walking back of that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Because again, in the comments to the Chinese, the President did make it very clear that he still sticks by what he said in the year 2001.

Q The "do what it takes" comment? Which comment are you talking about?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: He said, again, in his comments with Premier Wen, he said if there's -- I want to be clear that if there is coercion or force used by the Chinese side, we will have to get involved.

Q Could you explain the timing? If the President wanted to deliver a tough message to China -- or, excuse me, to Taiwan, why do that standing beside the Chinese Premier? Doesn't that look very much like a strong tilt towards China?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll tell you, there was some concern about that. But again, I think the Taiwanese and Chinese reporters here have a better handle on this.

The situation is constantly evolving on Taiwan, and there are constantly new statements being made. And there was felt a need to make it clear that Taiwan must be careful, it shouldn't start unilaterally attempting to change the status quo.

Q Has the Hong Kong issue been brought up during the discussions?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There actually was a brief discussion of Hong Kong. I'm not going to go into any of the details but, yes, there was a discussion of Hong Kong.

Q In your assessment, in the year and two months since you first confronted the North Koreans about the uranium project, has North Korea gone ahead and built more nuclear weapons?

And, secondly, did the subject come up today in terms of any kind of time limits that the United States may have for how long you can let this process go on before the strategic balance has been changed?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The discussion today did not touch on how much time before we would think this has gone beyond some red line. I don't think there is any red line that's specifically defined. It's very clear, though, that North Korea has been energetically working.

With the loss of even limited international inspection last December, we don't know how much more, but North Korea has been working on nuclear weapons for a long time, and we presume they've made some increment of further progress along that line, and that's very much of joint concern to China and the U.S., as well as the other partners in the dialogue.

Q When you say implemented further progress, do you mean full weapons or do you mean just the production of fuel?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would mean both. But I can't be specific because I don't think we know.

Q Just to finish up a point you were making before, can you imagine any other situation in which this President has intervened in a referendum in a democratic country and said, don't hold the referendum? I'm sorry, a democratic entity, and said don't hold the referendum? And how do you square this with the President's speech about how the mission of his presidency was to spread democracy a month ago?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, he obviously didn't try to intervene to stop a referendum in California from going forward. You're right there.

Q That's not a democratic entity. (Laughter.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I disagree. It was very, very democratic before the referendum.

All kidding aside, though, I mean, it's an interesting philosophical point. You know, are we opposed to referenda? No. We specifically said we don't oppose referenda. We don't oppose Taiwan holding referenda. You know, referenda are a valid tool for determining the role of the people in democratic society. That's legitimate.

What we are saying is we oppose anything that looks like a unilateral attempt to begin changing the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. End of story, that's our position.

Q Even though it's a democratic referendum?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Oh, sure, if there was an independence referendum, I guarantee we will publicly say, this is dangerous, what are you doing, and call upon the people of Taiwan to exercise restraint.

Q What about constitutional reforms in Taiwan?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not going to get into a --

Q Well, Scott --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, and let's talk about specific reforms --

Q Scott raised that at the briefing earlier today. He threw in that there was opposition to constitutional reforms, so this is this --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You have to look at the totality. You have to look at what is being attempted in a specific constitutional reform. Taiwan has a constitution that could well be reformed. But the question is, what would be the intention of the reforms, themselves, and what would be the intention of pushing for reforms at a specific time.

Q Isn't what you're saying that movements toward democracy and toward liberty are sometimes out-weighed by regional concerns, and in this case, the concern is conflict, the concern is losing support in denuclearizing the peninsula, the Korean Peninsula?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, no, I think you're making a false equation here, in the sense that if you look at polls from 1994 in Taiwan and you compare them with polls in the year 2003 in Taiwan, you will find that over that nine-year period, consistently, over 80 percent of the people on Taiwan have said that they want to maintain the status quo with respect to their relationship with the mainland. So to somehow assert that by denying -- by not denying -- by advising against referenda that somehow move the island towards independence, we're thwarting the democratic impulses of the people of Taiwan, I don't really buy that. I'm not sure I buy that.

Q You mean as a campaign ploy, in other words. You think this referendum is more of a campaign ploy than a legitimate democratic impulse?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, obviously this is being done in the context of the Taiwan campaign.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Could I try that?

Q I'm sorry, but is that, yes, you believe, just as the Chinese Premier does, that this is about a campaign agenda, and not a real impulse toward democracy?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Ultimately, you'll have to ask the Taiwanese about that. But there is obviously that concern.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Our opposition is to proposals, statements, comments that would change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and it would raise the tensions there. Now, I think it would be a mistake to say that the referendum, or any referendum is the essence of democracy. Democracy is far much more than that. And there are referenda in some places that decide bitterly disputed issues. There are other referenda that are more of a statement or commentary or a political document. And there's a whole range of things. But I think it would be a big mistake to say that any particular referenda is the essence of democracy. Democracy is alive and well in Taiwan, and the U.S. is strongly in support of it.

Q You were in Taiwan now for a few days, and obviously delivered the same message to President Chen and to people in the government. Was it your impression that maybe the message did not get across, the fact that President Bush -- that it was up to the level of a presidential statement today is a result of you thinking, or not being sure of whether or not the message had indeed gotten through, or you wanted to put more emphasis on it?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, first of all, I don't discuss my travel plans or -- but I will tell you that, obviously the President made the statements that he made today because there is some concern that the people of Taiwan should understand our worry about any attempts to unilaterally change the status quo.

Q Just to clarify, did you say earlier -- or your colleague -- that the two leaders decided there would not be the prospect of six-party talks this month?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, indeed. They favor them as soon as they can be reasonably held. And there was no discussion on the precise timing, whether this month, next month, or any time. The consensus of the two leaders was that the six-party talks are a potentially very useful, perhaps even indispensable vehicle for resolving the issue, and we need to move along with them.

Q Could I just ask you to clarify one thing, if I could? You said just a moment ago in response to David's question that polls overwhelmingly favor maintaining the status quo in Taiwan. So what's your great cause for concern vis a vis this referendum?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Again, any referendum that seems to be a political statement that begins leading towards a change in the status quo, a unilateral attempt to change the status quo, causes us concern.

Q You suggested that it would be doomed to failure, given the sentiments of the Taiwanese. So why this great concern?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Because, again, we think it's a -- we're worried that specific types of referenda -- and, again, we don't have a specific wording in front of us. But the specific types of referenda could be used to try to push the island towards independence. We think that's dangerous.

Q Trade question? What was the proposal that the Premier said he was going to outline during the Cabinet room discussions? He said he had five basic principles, as well. Could you tell us those?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, he had -- I could if I could find my notes on that.

Q The short version.

Q Danger Will Robinson. (Laughter.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, first of all, I'll start out by noting that these were, to a large extent, building on prior conversations and proposals that we had. For example, one of them was specifically the raising of the JCCT to a political level, in effect, a leadership level, if you would like. We agree with that wholeheartedly, and more importantly, we want to see talks even before the leaders get together to try and see whether we can concretely move on some of the trade issues that we have between us.

A lot of the other principles were sort of like guiding, philosophical questions. And I'm finding my notes here. Basically that China agreed that even though there's currently a large deficit, it does not treat -- does not seek a permanent surplus in its trade with the U.S. Secondly, that the best method in trying to narrow that trade surplus or the trade deficit on our part is, in effect, by increasing U.S. exports rather than decreasing Chinese imports into the United States. Third, as I said, was raising the level of the JCCT. Fourth was that -- the fourth was that there should be consultations as trade frictions arise. And the fifth was a request from the Chinese side that economic and trade issues don't get politicized.

Q Could I just clarify one point? Premier Wen said today in the photo op that the President reiterated U.S. opposition to Taiwan independence. Did the Premier misspeak or was he accurate?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not going to characterize the Premier's statements.

Q On the currency matter, you've substantially dropped the rhetoric on the yuan and the dollar -- I was going to ask a question about currency, so let me back up.

Can you tell us what changed since the last time you briefed us on currency in Bangkok? What progress was made today and what progress made specifically? Was there any timetable announced? What was the discussion like and what specifics indicate progress?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, again, the tone was very receptive in the sense that the Chinese reiterated that their longer term goal is to have a market-determined, free-floating exchange rate. That was all to the positive. The President did note that we have to see concrete -- concrete progress in that regard. We are beginning the discussions on this next month, I believe. This will be a working level team from Treasury will be going out to discuss concrete steps that the Chinese can begin taking to liberalize the currency markets.

These are, again, concrete questions and concrete issues that I don't have a super good handle on. But there are regulatory issues that have to be looked at before you can liberalize the currency.

Q Can I follow up on that? In general, Premier Wen seemed to an untutored eye to be something of a different kind of Chinese politician, more direct, informal. Did you all get the sense, the President get the sense that this is a part of a generational change? And does it make any difference in how the Chinese government behaves and how it will relate to the U.S. in the future?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think generational change will be important. I mean, you have new people coming up with new concepts. They are obviously committed to economic reform. I think Wen Jiabao himself has noted that political reform will be necessary at some point, too.

So I think there is a sense of hope that we're seeing people that we can work with well. And maybe over time, you'll see not only cooperation on the big strategic spheres but also a lessening of the differences in some of the social and governmental and human rights spheres that have caused us problems in the past. Yes, I think your characterization is a good one.

END 4:03 P.M. EST

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