

**INTERVIEW-Washington's Taiwan envoy bemoans rigid China.**By **Chaitanya Kalbag** and Tiffany Wu

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TAIPEI, Sept 16 (Reuters) - Douglas Paal, Washington's unofficial ambassador to Taipei, must choose his words carefully as he navigates the treacherous shoals of politics across the Taiwan Strait.

Yet on the subject of SARS his language is unusually blunt.

Faced with a medical emergency when the deadly Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome struck Taiwan this year, the Chinese government initially refused to allow experts from the World Health Organisation to visit the island to organise a quick response.

"China took a very ideological position, a very rigid position," said Paal.

In its efforts to isolate Taiwan, Beijing has succeeded in shutting out Taiwan from virtually every important multilateral institution, including the WHO.

"The isolation Taiwan experiences is something that Beijing has really sunk its teeth into maintaining," Paal said.

Paal, who took up his job as director of the American Institute in Taiwan last year, puzzles over the contrast between China's new-found pragmatism on issues such as North Korea's nuclear threat, and its refusal to budge far on Taiwan policy.

"We're seeing a greater deal of pragmatism and creativity in other aspects of China's foreign affairs," he told Reuters in an interview, his first with the foreign media in Taipei.

"North Korea is a big change," he said, as was Beijing's approach to the United States. "That kind of attitude so far has been a little more moderately displayed towards Taiwan."

MILITARY MARCH, PASTORAL MELODY

Paal relishes life in Taipei after a career that included brief stints in the embassies in Beijing and Singapore and then in the National Security Council of former Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush Snr.

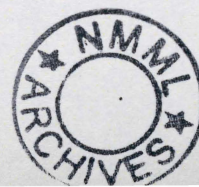
Not least of his pleasures is eating in Taipei, a culinary melting-pot boasting cooks from every corner of China, although he joked that the chef in his official residence is so good he rarely dines out.

"I'm the last person to ask about restaurants," he deadpanned.

His time in Taiwan has been notably free of crisis in cross-Strait relations, a relief for Washington which underwrites Taiwan's security. But neither has there been any progress.

The stalemate began when President Chen Shui-bian, a former pro-independence firebrand, was elected in 2000. Beijing demands Taiwan accept the principle of "one China" as a precondition for talks. Chen refuses.

"We've had some hints from the mainland that it can open up links without having to address the 'one China' principle," said Paal.



"Unfortunately, that has remained only hints without it becoming official policy. The 'one China' policy and rhetorical principles stand in the way of a pragmatic solution."

On the one hand, Beijing threatens Taiwan with a missile build-up in coastal Fujian province opposite the island. On the other, businessmen from Taiwan have poured \$100 billion into the mainland, and commercial ties are flourishing.

Paal called it "a military march set against a pastoral melody".

MISSED CHANCE

"I do think the PRC missed an opportunity the first year of Chen's administration, when he was most open to blandishments," Paal said, referring to the People's Republic of China.

Chen's efforts to open to China were rebuffed and "it's the natural political course that you close the door".

Paal declined to be drawn into discussion of next year's presidential election, which many analysts in Taiwan see as too close to call. Previous elections have led to open threats from China and the tension has sent ripples of anxiety around the region.

"A new election presents a new situation," he said cautiously. "China should presumably take stock and not simply continue on as before."

Neither is Paal too concerned about a popular campaign gaining steam for the island to change its official name to Taiwan from the "Republic of China", a move that Beijing views with alarm as part of a grab for independence.

He noted that Chen ruled out a name change when he took office.

Beijing is similarly outraged by a move to introduce a law permitting a referendum, but Paal said China was likely to hang back on the issue.

"I think Beijing will probably keep its powder dry until it sees exactly what is in the language of a referendum, if one is held," he said.

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