

Influential figures in Washington are calling for the establishment of a bilateral free-trade agreement with Taiwan, even as U.S. and Chinese officials move toward a resolution of their long-running trade dispute.

"We have a lot of issues with Beijing, and a lot of opportunities with Taiwan," said Edwin J. Feulner in an interview with VOA. Feulner is the founder and former president of the Heritage Foundation, an influential think tank in Washington known for its conservative views and ties with the Republican Party.

Feulner thinks trade negotiations between Washington and Beijing will most likely conclude within 60 days, at which point a full-force push for a bilateral trade agreement with Taiwan could begin. Those talks would be "more or less independent of what's going on with bilateral negotiations with Beijing," he said.

Feulner predicted "huge bipartisan support on Capitol Hill" for such an agreement. "Both Republican and Democrat, both House and Senate members, are overwhelmingly positive that a free China can exist, and can be there in the world community today," he said.

However, any such deal could be expected to anger authorities in Beijing, who see Taiwan as a renegade Chinese province and adamantly oppose any initiatives that treat the island as an independent country or entity.

The international community has seen how Beijing tries to make Taiwan pay for any inroads it makes toward international recognition, said Scott W. Harold, a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, a global policy research group. But ***Beijing's problem, he said, "is that they've dialed the pain up so high, so often, that it's hard to see what more they can do."***

On Wednesday, Feulner invited Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen to participate by Skype in a conference at the Heritage Foundation in Washington. Tsai, on a stopover in Hawaii after visiting three Indo-Pacific nations that still maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, told the audience her government was enthusiastic about the prospect of bilateral trade talks with the U.S.

"If we can have a breakthrough in trade with the U.S., this will be very helpful in terms of encouraging many other trading partners to do the same," she said, adding that a trade deal with the United States would reduce Taipei's reliance on China "as they increase their political influence in Taiwan, primarily using economic actors."

Technology theft

Tsai expressed hope that talks with Washington will include discussion about Taiwan's role in the global high-tech supply chain "amid concerns of technology theft and control over 5G networks" by Beijing.

Two prominent members of the U.S. Congress joined Feulner in welcoming Tsai to the U.S. and expressed their support for a bilateral free-trade agreement. Sen. Cory Gardner of Colorado, a Republican and a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, called the pursuit of a bilateral free-trade agreement with Taiwan "imperative."

Common values

Rep. Ted Yoho of Florida, a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the most senior Republican on its subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific and Nonproliferation, told Tsai and the audience that "trade is important between our nations, but more important than that is our common belief in the values we hold, the democracies that we have together. That in itself is the thing that really binds us together."

Steve Yates, former U.S. government official and longtime observer of U.S.-Taiwan relations, told VOA that ***President Donald Trump has "unhesitatingly signed" a series of resolutions and bills in support of closer ties between Washington and Taipei.*** To him, this signals it might be time "for the administration and Congress to be able to cross that bridge and get some results."