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Taiwan Ex - President Seeks US Support for 'Freedom'

By REUTERS

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Former Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui on Wednesday decried political opponents in Taipei who he said would have the island state absorbed by "authoritarian" China, and he urged greater support among Americans for Taiwan's continued self-reliance, democracy and freedom.

On a trip to Washington that has drawn official protests from Beijing, Lee argued that self-governing, democratic Taiwan should be accepted into the international community and treated like a "normal country."

"The people of Taiwan will persist in their pursuit for freedom, democracy and independence," Lee promised, in remarks that seemed tailored to remain within diplomatic constraints.

The 82-year-old former president stepped down in 2000 after 12 years but retains much influence in Taiwan, where he is venerated by some as the father of Taiwan's democracy and remains a leading advocate of independence from China.

Protesters outside a hotel where he headlined a dinner for Taiwanese-Americans mocked those accolades. "Mr. Democracy, What A Joke," read one demonstrator's sign.

China views Taiwan as part of its territory and says the island must be reunited with the mainland, by force if necessary. It refuses to deal with the independence-leaning government of President Chen Shui-bian.

U.S. policy officially recognizes the Beijing government but permits unofficial ties with Taiwan and mandates U.S. support for the island's defense.

Lee was earlier feted at a reception on Capitol Hill attended by 25 members of the U.S. Congress, and met separately with Republican Rep. Henry Hyde of Illinois, chairman of the House of Representatives' International Relations Committee, organizers said.

During the Capitol Hill reception, he said, "We hope that our American friends will understand and accordingly support the Taiwan people's desire to be free and to choose our own future."

When Lee visited the United States in 1995 to attend a reunion at his old university, Cornell, he so outraged China that it fired missiles into the Taiwan Strait in menacing war games.

In the speech, the fiercely pro-independence Lee exhorted Taiwanese-Americans to "firmly object against Chinese absorption of Taiwan."

He complained of "authoritarian China" and "internal forces within Taiwan that try to have Taiwan succumb back under the influence of the Chinese empire, by conspiring with the Chinese," in development of Chinese markets and other goals.

Those people "create a false hope for cross-strait relations but also sing Taiwan's swan song and block the revolution and development of Taiwan," he said, according to an English text provided by dinner organizers.

Beijing has sought to isolate Chen by meeting opposition parties. The Nationalists, or Kuomintang, who once ruled all China, oppose Taiwan's independence and advocate closer trade ties with the mainland.

In his speech, Lee said Taiwan was in "the most important time in its history (and hence) needs our care and firmer support."

He told The Washington Post in an interview published on Wednesday that a growing military imbalance with China

made it increasingly necessary for Taiwan to acquire ``some kind of long-range missiles."

Richard Bush, who oversaw U.S.-Taiwan ties during the Clinton administration, said the U.S. commitment was to provide defensive, not offensive arms, and there was no sign the Bush administration was considering a change.

``Taiwan's best deterrent is the United States and so the best thing for Taiwan is to have as good a relationship with the United States as it can," said Bush, now with the Brookings Institution.