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CHINA

U.S. Ambassador to China Defends Restrictions on Beijing's Diplomats as Overdue

Terry Branstad calls the move a step toward reciprocity



U.S. Ambassador Terry Branstad with Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2017. PHOTO: LINTAO ZHANG/PRESS POOL

By Jonathan Cheng

Oct. 21, 2019 6:26 am ET

BEIJING—U.S. Ambassador to China Terry Branstad rejected Beijing's criticism of increased regulations on Chinese diplomats in the U.S., calling Washington's move a long overdue step toward reciprocity.

Mr. Branstad said U.S. diplomats are regularly blocked from traveling around China and that long-planned meetings with bureaucrats or university students are often canceled for what he called "not very plausible" reasons.

The State Department on Wednesday began requiring Chinese diplomats in the U.S. to report in advance any official meetings in the country, saying thousands of planned meetings by U.S. diplomats had been blocked by Chinese officials over the years.

Mr. Branstad called Beijing's complaints about the new notification requirements "really outrageous." Restrictions on diplomats "have been in place as long as there's been a People's Republic of China," he told a group of reporters Monday.

He said there weren't any particular recent incidents that prompted the State Department's move and framed it as an attempt by Washington to persuade Beijing to loosen its restrictions on the roughly 800 American diplomats stationed in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Shenyang, Wuhan and Guangzhou.

"The State Department finally came to the opinion that to try to improve our access, we need some reciprocity," he said. "It's been a long time coming, and you might say it's probably long overdue."

The Chinese Embassy in Washington described the U.S. move on Twitter last week as a violation of the Vienna Convention, which established rules of diplomacy, saying that China doesn't have similar requirements and that American diplomats had paid more than 160 visits to Chinese universities last year.

On Monday, at a regular briefing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying called on Mr. Branstad to clarify how his activities were restricted in China. She said the ministry had always welcomed and facilitated U.S. diplomatic contacts with people in different Chinese regions.

"We hope that, in this matter, the U.S. will face the facts and facilitate the normal interaction of personnel from the two sides, rather than setting up obstacles, much less making false accusations," she said.

Last week, a Foreign Ministry spokesman said China had lodged formal complaints with Washington, accusing the U.S. of being "the guilty party blaming the innocent one."

Mr. Branstad said China has blocked diplomats, including those focused on law enforcement and environmental issues, from paying official visits and holding meetings with Chinese counterparts.

"Sometimes we plan months in advance, gotten permission and then it's, oh, they've decided it's inconvenient at the last minute," he said.

One recent attempt by U.S. diplomats in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou to meet with university students was scuttled after officials said no students had signed up. According to Mr. Branstad, Chinese officials said the students were too shy to meet with the Americans.

In Xining, the capital of the northwestern Chinese province of Qinghai, the ambassador's attempts to speak with patrons in a coffee shop fell flat after officials instructed customers not to speak to the diplomats, Mr. Branstad said.

Mr. Branstad's own plans to travel to Tibet—a particularly sensitive region in China's west where tourists need special travel permission—were canceled twice, he said, before he was permitted to make a trip in May.

Asked whether he feared retaliation from Beijing, Mr. Branstad said he was optimistic that Beijing would respond by loosening restrictions on U.S. diplomats.

“We hope it'll be the other way around, that China will come to the realization that we've had a very imbalanced, unfair system and that they need to give more access to American diplomats.”

—*Jeremy Page contributed to this article.*

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