



## **U.S. diplomat backs consulate's HK role**

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The US consulate in Hong Kong will continue its "deep engagement in all aspects of life" in the city, and its role is "understood and appreciated" by Beijing, a top US diplomat said yesterday.

The comments by Dr Kurt Campbell, US assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, come two weeks after Beijing warned the consulate to stop meddling in Hong Kong's affairs. Campbell is on a whirlwind tour of Asia that will end this week in Beijing.

Campbell defended the consulate in an interview with the South China Morning Post yesterday, saying Washington was very pleased that it had been able to maintain a close partnership with Hong Kong through a "very strong consulate" deeply engaged in all aspects of life in the city.

The Foreign Ministry in Beijing, through its Hong Kong office, rebuked the US consulate late last month, citing cables released by the anti-secrecy website WikiLeaks. These showed that the consulate was interfering in the city's constitutional development by holding meetings with various people, it said.

A spokesman for the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the US of contravening the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, which forbids diplomats from interfering in the internal affairs of host states.

WikiLeaks released 960 diplomatic cables from the US consulate in Hong Kong at the end of August. Some messages mentioned discussions about the city's democratic development, its financial markets and how it handled waste and water supplies.

Campbell said of Beijing's accusations: "We all believe that the [US] consulate continues to play a vital role and function [in Hong Kong]. I think that role, frankly, is also well appreciated by Chinese friends."

Asked whether Beijing's criticism would prompt changes on the US side, Campbell said: "We will continue the deep engagement in all aspects of life here, and I think that role is welcomed by the Hong Kong people, the Hong Kong government and, frankly, also understood by the

Chinese." The commissioner's office in Hong Kong could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Campbell ended his two-day visit to Hong Kong yesterday and is scheduled to meet Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Cui Tiankai tomorrow for the second round of US-China consultations on the Asia-Pacific region. The consultations are an outcome of the third US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue in May. Campbell's trip to East Asia, which began on Wednesday, also covers countries including Japan, South Korea and Thailand.

Asked whether he would prefer to see a contested chief executive election in March, he said Hong Kong had thrived because Hongkongers recognised competition as an "essential part of life". "Ultimately it is a matter for Hong Kong people to decide among themselves."

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