

Neutrality needed from Beijing and Washington

Written by Nat Bellocchi ☐☐☐

Wednesday, 28 December 2011 08:02

It is a bit peculiar to see that suddenly so many US government officials are visiting Taiwan these days. During the past few weeks, there was US Deputy Secretary of Energy Daniel Poneman. The week before that it was USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah, while in September US Assistant Secretary of Commerce Suresh Kumar visited Taipei. And earlier in the year, US Assistant Secretary for Public and Indian Housing Sandra Henriquez swung by.

One observer stated that there have been more US high-level visits during the past three months than in the previous three years. Is US President Barack Obama's administration suddenly becoming responsive to repeated suggestions from the US Congress to pay more attention to Taiwan and to have a better dialogue with the nation?

Perhaps so, but some critical minds have also voiced a concern that the Obama administration is implicitly taking sides in Taiwan's presidential election next month and by sending in one senior official after another, is showing undue preference for the present government in Taipei. This would indeed be a contravention of the stated policy of the US.

At a US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing in October, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell said: "We, as Americans, are excited about this [election] process because it highlights one of the key values that we share with the people on Taiwan. We do not believe any one party or leader on Taiwan has a monopoly on effective management of the relationship and we do not take sides in the elections. We will work closely with whatever leadership emerges from Taiwan's free and fair elections to build on our enduring commitment to Taiwan's people, its prosperity and peace."

There are other points where the US needs to be very careful with its timing. One of those is its Visa Waiver Program, of which the US Department of State recently nominated Taiwan as a candidate country.

While visa-waiver privilege for Taiwan is widely supported, it would have been elegant for the State Department to wait with any announcement on its decision until after the elections, lest it give the appearance of taking sides.

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However, US neutrality does not mean simply a hands-off approach: It does mean that Washington needs to watch carefully and ensure that Taiwanese enjoy free and fair elections. On that front there are two major challenges: both from within Taiwan and from across the Taiwan Strait.

In Taiwan, all parties need to work hard to make sure there is a level playing field. Democracy can only thrive if Taiwanese can have a civilized debate on the urgent issues before them, such as jobs, income distribution, energy security, housing, the environment and cross-strait relations. Mudslinging or using the judiciary should have no place in such a campaign.

However, it is also important that China starts to respect the voice and the choices of Taiwanese. Democracy is here to stay and that means changes in government will take place, now or in the future. The sooner Beijing gets accustomed to that idea, the better.

Nat Bellocchi was chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan from 1990 to 1995. The views expressed in this article are his own.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2011/12/28](#)