

## What can Taiwan do for the US?

Written by Parris Chang 000

Saturday, 21 January 2012 09:42

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Two months after the US' decision in September to provide defensive weapons to Taiwan and upgrade its fleet of F-16A/B aircraft, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton gave a speech in which she said emphatically that Taiwan was an important security and economic partner of the US ("Clinton issues call for US 'Pacific Century,'" Nov. 12, page 1).

Soon afterward, two senior US officials were sent to Taiwan to highlight the importance of US-Taiwan ties.

These rare visits were not courtesy calls. Rajiv Shah, head of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) visited Taiwan early last month, ostensibly to deliver a speech at the "American Footprints in Taiwan" exhibition sponsored by the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), but actually to solicit Taiwan's help on US global development aid programs. Shah took note of Taiwan's humanitarian and relief assistance after the natural disasters in Haiti and Japan.

In his meetings with President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) and leaders from the private sector, the USAID boss encouraged the people and government of Taiwan to broaden their participation and become more active in US global partnership projects to eliminate hunger and disease, as well as to promote social and economic development in less-developed countries.

Is Taiwan able and willing to take part? Taiwan gave US\$380 million in foreign aid in 2010, or only 0.1 percent of its GDP, well below the UN standard of 0.7 percent and the OECD's average of 0.3 percent. Worse, in this year's budget, Ma's government will cut foreign aid by 13 percent.

US Deputy Secretary of Energy Daniel Poneman, whose three-day visit to Taiwan began on Dec. 12, was the highest-ranking US official to visit Taiwan since 2000. While this may appear to some to show the new importance that Washington attaches to the nation, the blessings seem mixed.

Whereas Poneman's lecture on nuclear safety in the aftermath of the nuclear crisis at Japan's Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant was both informative and useful, in fact he was

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speaking in favor of the nuclear power industry, in which the US has high stakes as the country has been exporting much of the machinery and fuel used in the nuclear plants built in Taiwan (and Japan). By promoting nuclear energy, Poneman was taking sides in Taiwan's presidential elections, wittingly or not, as he was seen as endorsing Ma's energy policy, and running counter to the goal of a "nuclear-free homeland" advocated by the Democratic Progressive Party's presidential candidate, Tsai Ing-wen (000).

Another important mission for Poneman was to tell Ma's government to strengthen its anti-proliferation security measures. Some unscrupulous Taiwanese businesspeople were found to have been exporting to third countries precision instruments and other dual-use high-tech components needed for the development and production of nuclear arms and missiles, which were then trans-shipped to Iran. Poneman requested Taiwan to tighten export control.

As the US Congress has passed comprehensive sanctions on Iran, the administration of US President Barack Obama is putting pressure on Japan, South Korea and Taiwan to stop buying oil from Iran. Will Ma's government comply with US demands and force private petrochemical firms, particularly Formosa Plastics Co, to stop importing oil from Iran?

Recently US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said that terrorism, nuclear proliferation and other threats demanded a shared response. The Pentagon is facing at least US\$450 billion in budget cuts over the next 10 years, and he is calling for allies to share the military burden. On Jan. 5, Obama issued the latest US Defense Strategic Guidance and the AIT gave government officials in the National Security Council, Foreign Ministry and Defense Ministry a detailed and formal briefing the following day.

The new guidance signals a renewed US emphasis on East Asia, underlies a heightened commitment to security in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as a desire to strengthen political, economic and military cooperation with its allies, including Taiwan.

How will the government respond to and interact with the new US strategy? Is Taiwan willing and able to offer "host regional support" or other forms of burden-sharing to ensure and sustain the US' security presence in East Asia? Will Ma continue to tilt toward China, at the expense of Taiwan's relations with other key democratic countries in the region, such as the US and Japan?

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Now that Ma has been re-elected, he must make a choice. Economically, Taiwan's over-dependence on China is dangerous, even without political complications. To redress the imbalance, the nation must strengthen trade and investment connections with the US and India. If Taiwan chooses to stand with the community of democratic nations, it must foster economic and security cooperation with like-minded friends and nations.

As an island and a responsible international stakeholder, Taiwan must work closely with the US and other democratic friends in the region to safeguard security and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and all the waterways surrounding Taiwan, and to settle disputes through peaceful means and on the basis of international law.

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