

US intervened in Jan. 14 election

Written by Chen Ching-chieh 陳景輝
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Evidence shows that the US government failed to live up to repeated public statements that it would remain neutral in the Jan. 14 presidential election.

First, in September last year, right after Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) met with US National Security Council and State Department officials, including US Deputy Secretary of State Thomas Nides and US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Kurt Campbell, in Washington, the Financial Times reported an unidentified senior official as saying that Tsai had left US President Barack Obama's administration with "distinct concerns" about her ability to maintain stability in the Taiwan Strait. The US Department of State immediately made known publicly that this was not the administration's view.

The unidentified official has subsequently been identified by observers in the US and Taiwan as a White House official, and, this official's talking to Financial Times has been interpreted by some as an attempt to scupper Tsai's presidential campaign.

Later developments have also shown that the US did exercise its enormous influence to affect the outcome of the election.

Former American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) director Douglas Paal wrote an opinion piece on Jan. 11, titled "Taiwan Election has the US and China on Edge," for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where he is vice president for studies.

In this piece, he said, "To reinforce its policy preference, the Obama administration has successfully approved a US\$45.852 billion arms sales package for Taiwan ... arranged visits by American officials of five agencies at increasingly high levels that had not been seen in more than a decade, and signaled its intention to admit Taiwan to the valued visa waiver program next year — all in advance of the election."

The AIT's announcement last month that the visa waiver program was nearing approval was an especially valuable gift to President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) in the run-up to the election.

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However, the role Paal played a few days before the election is most controversial. In the above-mentioned article he wrote, “When Tsai was in the US last September, she suggested vaguely that the four-month interregnum should give Americans some room to see that she will handle things smoothly.”

“It was this vagueness, however, that prompted administration officials’ doubt and did not reassure them. Subsequently, officials let it be known widely, but anonymously, that on the basis of what she had to say, they lacked confidence in her ability to manage cross-strait relations effectively,” he added.

Apparently not content with having expressed his view in writing, he flew to Taiwan knowing full well that the presidential election “appeared to be tight.”

On the evening of Jan. 12, Paal talked to a local TV station suggesting that Washington was unhappy with Tsai and her tougher approach to dealing with China. He further made it clear that both Washington and Beijing would breathe “a huge sigh of relief” if Ma were re-elected.

Paal thus rattled Taiwan before the election, according to a New York Times report on Jan. 13.

The same report also said that Frank Murkowski, the former Republican senator from Alaska who was leading a delegation of election observers in Taiwan, called Paal’s remarks “careless,” “irresponsible” and “inexcusable” in a press conference and accused Paal of deliberately trying to aid Ma’s campaign.

Despite claiming that he did not speak for the US government, Taiwanese newspapers nevertheless stressed that Paal was a former de facto US ambassador to Taiwan. Taiwanese voters thus perceived that Paal spoke for the US State Department.

Although he said that he spoke “when I’m asked to give my opinion,” I would say he went to Taiwan not so much to observe the election as to make a difference to its outcome.

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Now that Ma has won re-election, it is hard for people to believe the US government did not appreciate Paal's efforts to make a difference.

Although there is no way of knowing to what extent the US intervention affected the election result, the damage was done. In the eyes of many freedom-loving people, it is clear that the intervention has also tainted the US' long-cherished reputation for fostering democracy.

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