

High-ranking US official may attend AIT opening

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The American Institute in Taiwan's new compound is pictured in Taipei's Neihu District on Sunday.

Photo: Chang Chia-ming, Taipei Times

A high-ranking official from the US Department of State is likely to visit Taiwan to mark the opening of the American Institute in Taiwan's (AIT) new compound in Taipei's Neihu District (新湖) in June, a government official said.

The rank of the US official would be an important indicator to the state of the Taiwan-US relationship, especially after US President Donald Trump signed into law the Taiwan Travel Act last month, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The National Police Agency (NPA) and other national security organizations are to provide assistance if requested by the US government, the official said.

Democratic Progressive Party Legislator Wang Ding-yu (王定宇), who sits on the legislature's Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committee, on Sunday said that the nation should keep in mind that the US government decides which official to send for the occasion, but added that he is optimistic about the visit.

The opening of the new AIT compound is one of many diplomatic events between the two nations this year, he said.

For example, the Taiwan-US Defense Business Forum is to take place in Kaohsiung next month, and US diplomats and defense officials are expected to attend, in addition to defense industry groups, he said.

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The opening of US Marine barracks, known as a Marine House, at the compound is to be marked by a separate ceremony and a US military officer is expected to attend that event, Wang said, adding that the rank of the military officer could be politically significant.

An annual high-level defense dialogue, known as the Monterey Talks, is scheduled to be held in Hawaii in August, although the US administration prefers to hold it in Washington, Wang said, adding that in any case, Taipei respects Washington's wishes on this issue.

Meanwhile, according to a former official familiar with access to the AIT, the US government has laid down strict security requirements for the institute's new compound.

A multi-layered security perimeter is likely to incorporate US Marines and Diplomatic Security Service agents, local security guards and NPA personnel, the former official said on condition of anonymity.

The police agency has in response stepped up its collaboration and communication with the US government in counterterrorism and security-related operations around the site, pledging to relay intelligence pertinent to site security immediately to US officials, he said.

US Marines are tasked with maintaining security for the crucial structures in the compound's interior, while Diplomatic Security Service agents guard the remaining buildings, he said.

Communication lines between the inner and outer layers are to be guarded by local guards hired by the US government and the NPA would be in charge of security around the compound, he said.

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