

US must not meddle in 2016 polls

Written by Lee Shyu-tu 李修圖

Saturday, 17 January 2015 08:05

Soon after the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) suffered a crashing defeat in the elections on Nov. 29 last year, speculation was raised that the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) could win next year's presidential election. That, in turn, has caused concerns over whether ties with China will sour and whether the White House would make efforts to influence Taiwanese voters as it did in 2012. Although there is no answer to the first concern at present, there is sufficient evidence to show that it is in the US' national interests not to try to influence Taiwanese before an election.

On Sept. 14, 2011, Democratic Progressive Party Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) — the party's candidate for the 2012 presidential election — had a meeting with members of the US' National Security Council; the same afternoon, the Financial Times quoted a senior official as saying that the White House did not feel comfortable with Tsai's position on cross-strait relations.

This statement was broadly seen as an unwarranted violation of diplomatic protocol; even the US Department of State distanced itself from the move and strongly criticized it.

On Jan. 12, 2012, two days before the presidential election, a former director of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) arrived in Taipei, and said in a TV interview that "if she [Tsai] won, the United States would have to massively and quickly engage to try to help her come to a formula that would preserve peace and stability ... both Washington and Beijing would breathe a huge sigh of relief if Mr Ma were elected."

Those comments were criticized as "irresponsible" and "inexcusable" by former Alaska governor Frank Murkowski. The comments also prompted a protest letter signed by 14 Taiwanese-American organizations.

The two incidents were widely reported in Taiwan. Taiwanese were frightened by the comments, as well as by the economic threats made by Taiwanese doing business with China. As it turned out, in that fiercely contested election, President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) won re-election, an outcome presumably favored by the US.

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It is understandable that while the US was fighting two wars, maintaining stability across the Taiwan Strait was one of its foremost national interests. Nevertheless, was this strategy to threaten Taiwanese before they walked into the voting booth the best strategy? Did the benefits outweigh the possible negative impact? Was there a better strategy that could have been followed?

Taiwanese have always had a high regard toward the US in many aspects, in its upholding the principles of human rights, democracy, freedom and justice, in its success in economic achievement, advancement in science and military strength, as well as appreciating how the US lent a helping hand when Taiwan was fighting for human rights, freedom and democracy during the Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) regime. Nonetheless, after these two incidents that were widely believed to have influenced the 2012 election, sentiment has changed.

There is a petition to propose a plebiscite — to be on the same ballot as next year's presidential election — for Taiwan to become a permanently neutral power. The petition is led by well-respected constitutional experts, a former minister of national defense and former vice president Annette Lu (呂秀蓮).

“In the 21st century, there is competition between the dragon China and the eagle America, and we Taiwanese do not want to be involved,” Lu said.

Her comment shows some frustration and distrust toward a once respected and trusted old friend.

Is gaining the friendship, respect and trust from a strategically important nation such as Taiwan a national interest to the US?

Since the second half of his first term, Ma has been perceived by most Taiwanese as an incapable president without a heart for the nation he serves. However, although knowing Ma was unfit for the presidency, Taiwanese, lacking the confidence to resist external influence, still re-elected him in 2012.

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Since he was re-elected, Ma has been ruthlessly trying to sell Taiwan to China under the table in the name of increasing cultural exchange and economic cooperation. He ignores the constitutional principle of a checks-and-balances system by trying to influence the legislature and manipulate the legal system.

His Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) fueled an outflow of capital, technology and industries from Taiwan, resulting in the loss of employment and greater disparities in income. He further attempted to pass the cross-strait service trade agreement without legislative review: If passed, the pact would bring the lives of the next generation of Taiwanese under greater Chinese control.

Fortunately it was stopped by the Sunflower movement's almost-23-day protest, which began on March 18 last year.

On Dec. 18 last year, radio host Clara Chou (周子瑜) alleged that Ma had received a NT\$200 million (US\$6.34 million) donation from Ting Hsin International Group (鼎新國際), which has received favorable treatment by regulatory agencies, including securing a 37.5 percent share of Taipei 101.

Now that three weeks have passed and more accusations have erupted, Ma has not yet made an explicit denial of receiving a bribe. If Chou's accusation is true, many wonder whether there was a conspiracy by Ma to help Ting Hsin, which has connections with Chinese bureaucrats, to acquire important enterprises critical to Taiwan's survival, to later sell to Chinese, making it easier for Beijing to penetrate the Taiwanese economy. There is so far no way to know how much damage has been done to Taiwan.

China has a strategy to use soft power to eliminate the "identity" and "national consciousness" of Taiwan by "penetrating the island, penetrating the household, and penetrating the brain." How much of the penetration has been done in the name of cultural exchange and economic cooperation? If Taiwan is being seriously infiltrated by China, is this not a threat to the US' national interest?

Was the possibility that Ma would allow and help Chinese penetration of Taiwan expected when a senior White House officer and a former AIT director warned Taiwanese not to vote for

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Tsai? If not, then the strategy should not be applied again, as it involved unknown variables. Thus, the US should not try to interfere with Taiwanese before next year's election.

There is a better way to protect US national interests: Do nothing before the election, then conduct dialogue with Taiwan's next elected leader, whoever that is. Thus, if the DPP's candidate loses, the US can save the effort; if the DPP candidate wins, that person must understand their responsibility to maintain regional stability.

This approach could make the US look impartial by promoting democracy while retaining the moral high ground.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2015/01/17](#)