

What Trump means for Taiwan

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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After US president-elect Donald Trump's stunning victory at the polls, Taiwan faces the question of what it means for US foreign policy and how Taipei should respond to a post-US President Barack Obama world.

Taiwan has long maintained a relatively close relationship with the US Republican Party due to the party's anti-communist stance, not to mention that in July, the Republican National Convention included, for the first time, the "six assurances" — given to Taiwan by then-US president Ronald Reagan in 1982 — in its official platform.

However, given the glaring divide between Trump and the Republican Party establishment during his presidential campaign, it is an open question whether Trump will follow the party line on various issues, including foreign policy.

From what he has said about Asia, Trump wishes to punish China, which he has described as a "grand master" of currency manipulation, vowing to impose tariffs of up to 45 percent on Chinese products and initiate unfair trade lawsuits. While this might be an economic blow to China if he follows through on his rhetoric, Trump's complaint about the US having to defend Japan and South Korea might be music to Beijing's ears, because it suggests a reversal of Obama's "pivot to Asia" policy. Democratic US presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton was expected to maintain the pivot if elected, as she was a major architect of the strategic shift during her stint as US secretary of state.

This so-called "rebalancing" has been regarded by Beijing as an attempt to contain Chinese interests, while highlighting Taiwan's geostrategic value. A withdrawal from Asia as Trump has suggested would accelerate the realigning of some Asian countries with China, with the Philippines and Malaysia having started to warm to Beijing, and potentially marginalize Taiwan. Considering how ASEAN members rely on China for trade, Beijing having more say and sway in the region would undoubtedly undercut President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) "new southbound policy."

Trump's opposition to the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership is also likely to hurt Taiwan's prospects of joining a trade agreement that would help it bypass efforts by Beijing to hinder Taipei's formation of economic ties with the global community.

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Ironically, Trump's isolationist stance could mean he would be more willing than previous US administrations to sell arms to Taiwan, as a Taiwanese academic said before election day when asked to imagine a Trump presidency.

The weapons Trump might be prepared to sell to Taiwan could include those the US had not considered before, such as stealth fighters, AEGIS-equipped guided missile destroyers or the latest missile defense systems, the academic said.

However, there is also the possibility that "president Trump" will be a different proposition from "presidential candidate Trump," as he will have to learn how to form an effective team and work with other Republican, if not Democratic, politicians.

The makeup of Trump's foreign policy team will have to be closely examined, before Taiwan works out measures it needs to prepare itself for the change in US administration. Trump will have to rely on veteran Republican politicians and existing institutions to make significant decisions and formulate effective policies. In that sense, his foreign policy stance, at least in regard to Taiwan, might not be too remote from what is expected of a Republican US administration.

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