

Trump shake-up may save Taiwan

Written by Huang Tien-lin 黃天麟
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US president-elect Donald Trump's victory at the polls caught the majority of observers off-guard, although a cool-headed analysis of the result shows that Trump's rise to power was primarily driven by a backlash from disadvantaged white and middle-class Americans against the mainstream elite, which centered on issues such as globalization and free trade.

A political novice, Trump's brand of "nativism" runs contrary to the doctrine of economic integration with China espoused by the pro-China camp in Taiwan. Since the US election, Taiwan's pan-blue media have described Trump as a "madman," a "clown" and "unpredictable."

There has even been feverish talk of the US "abandoning" Taiwan in an attempt to persuade President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) administration to rethink its strategic shift away from China toward the US and Japan and revise her stance on the so-called "1992 consensus."

Could a Trump presidency be disadvantageous to Taiwan and will Taiwan lose US strategic support? If Democratic US presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton had won the election it would have been advantageous to Taiwan, but a Trump administration may in fact be even more beneficial to Taiwan.

First, the assertion of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the pan-blue camp that Trump is "unpredictable" is false. Trump's thinking process is clear, as are his domestic and international policies: He wishes to slash US corporate tax from 35 percent to 15 percent, reduce the number of federal tax brackets from seven to three, declare China a currency manipulator, withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and demand that the US' allies contribute more toward the cost of US military bases in their countries.

There is a clear context, and the goal is to strengthen the US and guarantee the country's continued status as a major world power.

The first foreign leader that Trump has asked to meet after assuming office is Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. One can therefore see that the theory of a US withdrawal from Asia is nothing more than wishful thinking on the part of the pan-blue camp.

Second, the origin behind Trump's "America first" policy lies in his family background. Trump is a German-American and a devout Christian. Protestant and Catholic advocacy groups helped Trump by consolidating his support base, and he gained 81 percent of the evangelical Christian vote. The Christian worldview has always encompassed a rejection of atheism, authoritarianism and communism. Trump's setting up of China as a supposed economic enemy of the US is founded on the logic of these beliefs: Trump will not change his position on China easily.

Third, in the past two years, under the threat of Chinese President Xi Jinping's (習近平) "China dream," international momentum has been moving in favor of Taiwan. Former president Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) treacherous application to join the China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank was the catalyst that brought about a successful visit by Tsai to the US last year in the run-up to Taiwan's presidential election.

In addition, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, Netherlands, earlier this year issued a ruling on the Philippine government's lawsuit against China over disputed territory in the South China Sea, which had the effect of bolstering Taiwan's sovereign status. With Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's brutal "war on drugs," Taiwan has become an even more important ally for the US within the Asia-Pacific region.

All these events contributed to the US House of Representatives passing a joint resolution in May affirming the Taiwan Relations Act, followed by the Republican Party choosing to include the "six assurances" in its party platform at its National Convention in July.

Five days after winning the election, Trump chose Republican Party National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus to be his White House chief of staff: a clear signal of the direction his administration plans to take. Unless Tsai blunders by offending Trump, it is difficult to envisage a situation whereby the US would "abandon" Taiwan.

Fourth, if Clinton had been elected the 45th US president instead of Trump, her pledge to persist with US President Barack Obama's strategic "pivot" toward Asia would no doubt have been in Taiwan's interest. However, Trump has strongly criticized the policy, saying it is feeble and unable to curb Beijing's expansionist ambitions. Trump — not Clinton — has the strength and determination to resolve the issue of trade imbalances with China.

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A trade war and a currency war between the US and China could spell disaster for the global economy. However, Trump, having taken the position that China is a currency manipulator, has issued a direct attack on Beijing for harming the US economy with what he views as unfair trade competition.

From the perspective of Taiwan's economy, a US assault on China's economy would be felt almost as keenly in Taiwan as it would be in China, but this is the consequence of successive governments having pursued a policy of economic integration with China over a period of 16 years: Taiwan must now accept the consequences.

If Taiwan wishes to rise from the ashes, it has no choice but to swallow the bitter pill. Trump's election will bring challenges in the short term, but in the long term it promises much for Taiwan's economy.

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Translated by Edward Jones

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