

US President Donald Trump’s meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) at the Mar-a-Lago retreat in Florida is to take place on Thursday and Friday next week and pundits in Washington are lining up with advice for the US president.

One of these was former American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) chairman Richard Bush, now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, who penned a list of recommendations, titled “A One-China Policy Primer” which in Taiwan has now been dubbed “The eight do’s and four don’ts.”

First, it is highly commendable that Bush is trying to clarify the US’ “one China” policy. The need for this became abundantly clear after the famous telephone call on Dec. 2 last year between President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and then-US president-elect Donald Trump.

Most commentators and US news media reports did not have the foggiest idea what the US’ “one China” policy was, usually implying that it meant that the US “recognized” Taiwan to be part of “China.”

Bush’s effort is a step in the right direction, but it is a bit disturbing that the policymaking world and the media need a 30-page report to explain what the US’ policy really means. It is a sign that the US has worked itself into too many pretzel wiggles to come up with a “policy.”

Bush goes down the long list of well-known elements, such as the Taiwan Relations Act, the “six assurances” and the Three Joint Communiques, among others.

Even this list has its faults: Bush’s own predecessor as AIT chairman from 1990 to 1995, Nat Bellocchi, always reiterated that the US was agnostic on Taiwan’s future status. He emphasized that Washington neither supports nor opposes unification or independence, but insists that it be determined peacefully.

Regrettably, this broader message was somehow lost in translation in the subsequent

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Written by Gerrit van der Wees
Sunday, 02 April 2017 00:15

one-sided “non-support for de jure independence” phraseology of former US president Bill Clinton’s administration.

After extensively discussing how the US’ “one China” policy came about, Bush elaborates a list of 12 do’s and don’ts for Trump in his upcoming meeting with Xi.

While most of these are rational points that Taiwan supporters probably would not dispute, the main problem with Bush’s overall approach is that it is too much wedded to a static “status quo,” and does not display any vision, a “change we can believe in” (Thank you former US president Barack Obama!)

It is process-oriented and fails to show any support for an end result that is in line with the basic principles that the US and Europe believe in: A free democracy that is accepted by the international community as an equal. Taiwan is now a vibrant democracy — relations should be normalized.

Another problem with Bush’s approach is that it inextricably links US policy toward Taiwan to its China policy. There are important linkages between the two, but the fundamental difference between the 1970s — when the present “one China” policy was formulated — and now is that Taiwan has made a momentous transition to democracy.

It is essential that the US starts seeing and treating Taiwan in its own light: It is a vibrant democracy, where people see themselves as Taiwanese and resent the unfair strictures imposed on them by a distant past when decisions between Washington and Beijing were made over their heads, without any consultations with Taiwanese.

The third problem is that Bush’s approach seems to subscribe to a “do not challenge China” mindset. This still lets a repressive Beijing dictate how and how fast the US could improve its relations with Taiwan.

This is not right. The US and Europe need to develop concepts and policies toward Taiwan that are based on freedom, democracy and self-determination and are not constrained by the

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vagaries emanating from a communist regime. Taiwan deserves better from the democratic West!

Gerrit van der Wees is a former Dutch diplomat and former editor of Taiwan Communique, who now teaches Taiwanese history at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2017/04/02](#)