

A leading US academic on Taiwan said Beijing understands that it has an interest in keeping President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) in power and for that reason is "not currently pushing its larger agenda."

Richard Bush, director of the Brookings Institution's Center for Northeast Asian Policy, told a Washington conference that how China deals with the Taiwan issue would be a "litmus test" on what kind of great power it would eventually be.

Addressing the conference on regional security in East Asia organized by the Foreign Policy Research Institute and the Reserve Officers Association, Bush said broad support did not "yet" exist among Taiwanese voters for agreements with China on political and security matters.

He added that despite some progress and a lowering of tensions, it remained "most worrisome" on the security front.

"The PLA's [People's Liberation Army] acquisition of capabilities relevant to Taiwan continues without reduction. Deployments of advanced assets opposite the island have not eased and the military balance is shifting in China's favor," he said.

"Beijing's policy runs the risk of creating suboptimal outcomes. A continuing military buildup intensifies the Ma administration's desire for closer security cooperation with the United States, which the PRC [People's Republic of China] opposes. Beijing's reluctance to be flexible on international space undercuts its basic goal of winning the hearts and minds of the Taiwan public," Bush said.

Many expect that the ultimate outcome will be the unification of Taiwan with China and Taiwan's submission to the PRC, he said.

"I believe there are significant substantive and political obstacles to resolving the cross-strait dispute in the foreseeable future, perhaps in my lifetime," Bush said.

He said that theoretically there were approaches that would reconcile China's desire for unification and Taiwan's claim of sovereignty, but that Beijing had rejected them.

He believed there were now five possible scenarios for the future: The current situation might continue; it could stall; the Democratic Progressive Party could return to power and resume what China perceives as a provocative approach; the stabilization of relations might morph into a resolution of the fundamental dispute; or China might lose patience and use military power to compel Taipei to negotiate on Beijing's terms.

"My own guess is that either of the first two is the most likely — either continuation of the current process or stalemate," Bush said.

Continuation of the current stabilization process is positive for US interests, he said, but if that stalls, "I don't think it is terrible for the US, but it does raise the prospect that the PLA buildup will continue rendering Taiwan more vulnerable."

If the DPP returned to power with provocative policies, it would not be a good outcome for Washington. He said the US would then have to maintain a delicate balance, which would be extremely difficult because with its power growing, China might be less willing to heed US warnings.

Bush said that unification might well pose "serious challenges" to US interests.

"Of course the terms of unification would be the key. If China conceded to Taiwan on the sovereignty issue that would say something significant and positive about what kind of major power it is becoming. That is not a bad outcome," he said.

"If, on the other hand, Taiwan accepted both political unification and a PLA presence, the consequences for our security position in Asia are more severe," he said.

"The possibility that Beijing would lose patience within the context of a shifting military balance would pose a serious challenge to the US. It would represent a failure of the long-term American strategy to shape China into a constructive member of the international community," Bush said.

However, if current policies begin to accelerate toward unification, and do so on terms that allows China to project military power from Taiwan or threaten freedom of navigation, "Washington would have to consider quietly shaping the negotiations most likely by trying to work with our Taiwan friends," he said.

"If unification resulted in the PLA's deployment to the island [Taiwan], Washington would face the challenge of fundamentally adjusting US security policy in Asia and the Pacific," he said. "If China chose to coerce Taiwan, the US would face the choice of meeting that challenge or standing down and that has broader regional implications."

An alternative to this scenario would be for Taiwan to engage in a proactive program of "self-strengthening economically, diplomatically, militarily, politically and ultimately psychologically," Bush said.

However, Bush concluded: "Whether Taiwan has the leadership to undertake that effort is another question."

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