

Obama staff changes may affect policies on Taiwan

Written by Taipei Times

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As US President Barack Obama reshuffles his top staff in preparation for next year's presidential election, there could be substantial change in the administration's Asia team with implications for US policy on Taiwan.

The White House doors are spinning with a series of major developments in the past week and more are expected in the weeks and months to come.

In the past few days, Wall Street executive William Daley has been appointed as the president's new chief of staff; Gene Sperling, a counselor to US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, was given the top economic policy job; and press secretary Robert Gibbs, a close presidential confidant, stepped down to become an outside political adviser.

These big moves within the administration are thought certain to herald other changes further down the ladder, including within the Asia team.

"Several senior Obama administration Asia officials are set to either leave government or move to new jobs within the bureaucracy as the White House tries to hit the reset button on US-China relations," Foreign Policy magazine reported.

A post on the magazine's Web site, dealing with behind the scenes foreign policy developments in Washington, said that US Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg "has been rumored to be leaving State for a long time now, but still remains at his post and is very active on Asia policy."

Sources have told Foreign Policy magazine that Steinberg never intended to stay more than two years, "but has not yet found the right job to justify him leaving."

However, the magazine added that Jeffrey Bader, the National Security Council senior director for Asia, will leave soon. Bader and US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell have been jointly responsible for driving current US-China policy.

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According to insiders, Campbell — who could eventually get Steinberg's job — is rather more sympathetic toward Taiwan than Bader, who is less hawkish on China.

Bader could also be replaced by Japan expert Daniel Russell, who currently works under Bader. In Bader's position, Russell would likely push for a closer relationship with Tokyo, which in turn could benefit Taiwan.

Foreign Policy magazine also said that Campbell's principal deputy Joe Donovan is being considered for an ambassadorship, possibly to South Korea or Cambodia. Another of Campbell's deputies, David Shear, is to be the next US ambassador to Vietnam. Thus, there could be two vacancies in an area that is heavily involved in US-China-Taiwan relations.

On top of these developments, Newsweek has reported that US ambassador to China Jon Huntsman — a former governor of Utah — might resign this year to seek the Republican Party presidential nomination for next year.

Huntsman, who once served as a Mormon missionary in Taiwan, is widely praised for his work in Beijing and is believed to retain a strong interest in Taiwan.

If he was to win the Republican nomination to challenge Obama — something that is far from certain — he would be one of the most knowledgeable presidential candidates ever on Asian affairs in general and Taiwan policy in particular.

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