

Huntsman's US run could draw attention to Taiwan

Written by Taipei Times

Friday, 04 February 2011 07:50 -

The announcement earlier this week by US Ambassador to China Jon Huntsman that he was resigning from his post to seek the Republican Party's nomination for the presidential election next year could have substantial implications for Washington's Taiwan policy.

A billionaire and former governor of Utah, Huntsman was a Mormon missionary in Taiwan from 1987 to 1988 and is said to be fluent in Mandarin and Hoklo (also known as Taiwanese).

While it is far too early to speculate on Huntsman's chances of winning his party's nomination, his political campaign could bring issues concerning Taiwan to the fore.

Political insiders said he would formally announce his candidacy late this summer.

Huntsman, 50, told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee during his confirmation hearings in July 2009 that Taiwan, human rights and Tibet were major problem areas between the US and Beijing and that he expected "robust engagement" on these issues.

He said he felt "personally invested in the peaceful resolution of cross-strait differences, in a way that respects the wishes of the people on both Taiwan and the mainland."

Huntsman said US policy "supports this objective and I have been encouraged by the recent relaxing of cross-strait tensions."

Some sources say US President Barack Obama considers Huntsman a formidable opponent and potentially the most difficult-to-defeat candidate the Republicans could field.

US media said Obama appointed Huntsman as ambassador to China in the first place because he believed it would take him out of the presidential race next year, when Obama will be running for a second term.

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The attractive and charismatic Huntsman also has a certain star quality that most of the other Republican hopefuls seem to lack.

However, winning the nomination will be an uphill battle because the Republican Party is heavily influenced by conservative Christians who are very wary of Mormons, who don't like the fact that Huntsman has worked for Obama and who decry the ambassador's moderate stance on key social issues such as immigration.

The White House confirmed on Tuesday that Huntsman would be returning to Washington in April and the New York Times said he was going to explore "a potential 2012 Republican presidential bid."

Huntsman, a former ambassador to Singapore, has seven children, including an adopted daughter from China who was abandoned in a vegetable market in Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province.

His fortune comes from the family plastics business, Huntsman Corp.

A Wall Street Journal report said that in 1971, as an 11-year-old, Huntsman accompanied his father, a plastics tycoon and special assistant to then-US president Richard Nixon, to the White House and met then-national security adviser Henry Kissinger as he was heading to the airport on a secret mission to open diplomatic contact with China.

Huntsman recalls being allowed to carry Kissinger's briefcase to a waiting car.

His campaign for the presidency is almost certain to make a major issue of China policy and arms sales to Taiwan, which he is believed to support.

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Source: [Taipei Times - 2011/02/04](#)