

Taiwan will come up when Obama, Xi meet: Richard Bush

Written by Taipei Times

Wednesday, 05 June 2013 07:57 -

There is no question that Taiwan will come up when US President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) meet in California this week, former American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) chairman Richard Bush said.

In view of Beijing's regular statements that Taiwan is the "most sensitive and important" issue in US-China relations, the topic will be raised at some point during meeting between the two leaders, added Bush, who is now the director of the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at the Brookings Institute.

Obama and Xi are scheduled to meet on Friday and Saturday at the Sunnylands estate in Palm Springs for the first time since Xi assumed the Chinese presidency in March.

In an article that appeared on the think tank's Web site on Monday, Bush said that in some bilateral meetings between China and the US, the discussion of Taiwan is "a ritualized set-piece."

"The Chinese side stresses the importance of the issue and what it would like the United States to do" — which is to not promote de jure Taiwanese independence and to end arms sales to Taipei, he said.

The US frequently reiterates that Washington has a "one China" policy, adheres to the three communiques with China, respects the Taiwan Relations Act and has an abiding interest in the peaceful resolution of differences between Taipei and Beijing, Bush said.

"That's all that happens when Taiwan is not a very salient issue between Beijing and Washington. And that may be all that happens at Sunnylands because Taiwan is not terribly salient between the United States and China right now," he said.

However, Xi could try to engage the US on the issue during the meeting for several reasons, Bush said.

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The main one is that progress in cross-strait relations is likely to slow over the next few years and political issues are unlikely to be discussed, something that Beijing would prefer, he added.

Beijing also fears that the Democratic Progressive Party could return to power in Taiwan's 2016 presidential election, Bush said.

He speculated that Xi might ask Obama to express rhetorical support for unification and opposition to Taiwanese independence.

However, Washington has been focused more on finding a solution to Taiwan Strait issues than on the outcome, Bush said.

"It's up to Beijing to convince the leaders and people of Taiwan that unification is a good idea. There is no need for the United States to help it out," Bush wrote in the article.

He said Xi might also seek bilateral negotiations on a framework "for limiting and ultimately ending US arms sales to Taiwan."

China's assumption is that Taiwan will be unlikely to strike a political truce as long as it has the US' security support, Bush said.

"But that assumption is flawed," he added.

US security backing does enhance Taiwan's confidence, but historical precedent indicates that Taipei is more willing to negotiate with Beijing when it is feeling confident, Bush said.

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However, a Taiwan that feels weak and isolated is unlikely to negotiate at all, and certainly not on China's terms, he said.

"In fact, the reason Taiwan is reluctant to engage with Beijing on political issues, either medium or long-term, is not US arms sales, but China's own formula for resolving the political dispute," Bush wrote.

Source: [Taipei Times - 2013/06/05](#)