

US may try to sway vote: ex-AIT head

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Former American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) chairman Richard Bush on Friday said that the US was likely to try to “influence” Taiwan’s 2016 presidential elections.

While he did not speculate about what might happen, Bush indicated that Washington would declare a preference for the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) candidate because there were lingering doubts about the Democratic Progressive Party’s (DPP) cross-strait policies.

This is possibly the first time a former US official of Bush’s standing has spoken about Washington’s purported involvement in Taiwanese politics.

Bush, now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, told a conference on cross-strait relations that the 2016 election could change the role the nation plays in the way the US and China interact, and alter the nature of Taiwan-US-China relations.

It would depend on which party won the presidency, and on the politics and policies the new president would pursue, he said.

Bush said that it was too early to predict results and that current polls were probably meaningless.

Taiwan is seen, particularly by Chinese, as an integral part of Washington’s efforts to contain, restrain and obstruct Beijing, Bush said.

“An important point is that while Taiwan might have been a passive actor in this, it is not a passive actor anymore,” Bush said, adding that the nation had been “an active participant” for the past two decades and that through its actions, Taipei shaped many of the conclusions that Washington and Beijing reached.

The question to be considered is what Taiwan might do to shape these conclusions, Bush said.

He said that for the next couple of years cross-strait relations would be quiet, but they could change with the 2016 election.

“What I am prepared to say with some confidence is that the US government at some time and in some way will express itself about the implications of the 2016 election for US interests,” Bush said.

“I recognize ... that Washington is caught in a bit of a dilemma here,” he said. “On the one hand, we have the general principle that it is the voters of friendly democratic countries who should be the ones to pick their leaders at the ballot box, and the US should not try to influence their votes by questioning one candidate or the other; but on the other hand, the United States has interests in the policies of any leadership, whether it is Taiwan or any other place.”

“In spite of this dilemma, Washington has not been quiet,” Bush said.

He said that in 1996, the administration of then-US president Bill Clinton influenced Taiwanese elections by making statements and did so again in December 1999.

“I myself made a public statement in Taiwan where I laid out our view about Taiwan’s democratic election,” Bush said.

At that time, Bush was chairman and managing director of the American Institute in Taiwan.

He said that almost exactly four years after his statement, the White House made an announcement that was clearly critical of former president Chen Shui-bian’s (陳水扁) policies and that in September 2007 there was another “long and detailed” critique of the Chen administration’s policies issued in advance of the 2008 election.

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Then, four years later, in September 2011, the administration of US President Barack Obama let its views be known by having an anonymous official give an interview to the Financial Times, Bush said.

“So this is something we do,” Bush said. “We feel there is a need for us to express our views on how our interests will be affected by Taiwan’s elections.”

To “say nothing” as some in Taiwan might want, would actually be like making a statement anyway, he said.

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