

Growing support for Taiwan in US Congress: expert

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As China continues to expand, the US Congress is becoming increasingly more interested in Taiwan, George Washington University professor of international affairs Robert Sutter said on Friday.

He said that US attitudes toward China were “hardening” and that those who had talked about pulling back from Taiwan — or abandoning the nation — were now silent.

Sutter said that as more people were asking what the US should do about China, Congressional attention to Taiwan was rising.

“I am not saying there is a sea-change — but it’s significant,” he said.

Congress is seeking options, and Taiwan is at the center of some possibilities.

“If you are going to be firmer with China, you need a defense strategy, and if you are going to have a defense strategy, you need Taiwan — just look at the map,” Sutter told a conference on Taiwan at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies at George Washington University.

He said that as a result of Chinese assertiveness, growing numbers of important members of Congress were visiting Taiwan.

Sutter said that if China continued to undermine the US position in the Asia-Pacific region — “establishing a new order, with the American position being discredited” — it would become a very serious matter.

“You have to show China the cost of this behavior so that they will stop it,” he said.

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And as Washington considers its options, Sutter said: "Taiwan looms large."

One option would be for Taiwan to re-evaluate its position on disputes in the South China Sea, because that could undermine China's broad claims, he said.

Another option might be to go ahead with arms sales to Taiwan and sell sensitive weapons systems such as F-16C/D jets.

Another possibility would be for the US to take a stronger view on Taiwanese self-determination, with US officials opening talks with members of the Sunflower movement.

"The bottom line would be to find a way to avoid the US being constantly in a reactive position," Sutter said.

He said that US President Barack Obama did not want a "big problem" with China over Taiwan and President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) did not want trouble either.

Nevertheless, Sutter said that if China's behavior continued along recent lines, "the Congressional interest in Taiwan will grow and it could become an issue in the upcoming mid-term US elections."

"Will politicians say that we are becoming too passive in dealing with Taiwan and that we should take a more supportive approach to Taiwan?" he asked. "I think it could easily happen in 2014 and it will definitely happen in 2016."

Former US Department of Defense official Joe Bosco told the conference that Taiwan was the "strategic epicenter" of the US' "values commitment" to Asia.

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“Friends and allies see Taiwan as a bellwether of US reliability,” he said.

“Washington’s refusal to make an explicit public commitment to defend Taiwan sows doubts in the region and encourages China to continue deploying submarines and ballistic missiles,” Bosco said.

“And the test may come sooner rather than later,” he said.

Bosco said that if the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) appeared to be winning the 2016 presidential election, China — fearing the DPP could declare independence — might invoke its “Anti-Secession” Law and invade.

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