Beijing might overreact if Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (□□□) wins next year’s presidential election, a US expert said on Friday.

Richard Bush, director of the Center for East Asia Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution, was speaking at a Brookings panel discussion on the implications of China’s “rise” for US national security.

He said it was “way too early” to make a sound judgement about the upcoming elections.

“We do not know who the candidates will be, although people think they know,” Bush said.

He also said that neither candidates’ cross-strait policies nor the potential victor were known.

“A lot of things are in play,” Bush said. “I do fear there may be an overreaction on Beijing’s part if Tsai Ing-wen should win and become Taiwan’s next president. I hope they will not overreact, remain restrained and see how the situation develops.”

Earlier in the panel, US National War College professor Bernard Cole said that China’s military modernization focuses on specific strategic situations: Taiwan and the East and South China seas.

He said the Chinese military did not see Taiwan’s military as a significant problem, but that it remained concerned about US intervention in the case of a conflict.

“I do not mean to [imply] that Taiwan’s importance in China’s strategic thinking has been reduced,” he said.

Cole said that calculations by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) were not always very accurate and that the PLA had “grossly underestimated” the capability of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces.

“For strategic importance, I think Taiwan remains at the head of the list,” he said.

Bush said that Chinese development of ballistic and cruise missiles and fighters had changed the “military calculus” across the Taiwan Strait and created a formidable deterrent to separatism.

“The improvement of China’s air and naval capabilities is such that some experts believe it would be difficult for Taiwan to defend itself with the traditional strategy of trying to establish air and sea control over the Taiwan Strait,” Bush said. “We may have ... a challenge coming up because Taiwan is having an election about this time next year.”

Bush said it was not known how China would perceive election results or what it might do.

“We have the capacity to play the kind of role we have played in the past — and that would be a good thing — but whether we have the will to do so, and the political system to express that will, is another question,” he said.

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