

'No support' for referendum, AIT says

Written by Taipei Times

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Former minister of national defense Michael Tsai, right, calls for amendments to the Referendum Act at a news conference organized by the Formosa Alliance in Taipei on Jan. 31.

Photo: Peter Lo, Taipei Times

The American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) yesterday said it does not support a referendum on Taiwanese independence, after a former AIT chairman penned an open letter advising against the proposed plebiscite by pro-independence group Formosa Alliance.

"The US has a deep and abiding interest in cross-strait peace and stability. Taiwan is a reliable partner, and we appreciate Taiwan's efforts to maintain peace and stability," AIT spokeswoman Amanda Mansour said in a statement.

Mansour reiterated that the US has long been opposed to unilateral actions aimed at altering the "status quo."

"It has been our long-standing policy that we do not support a referendum on Taiwan independence," she said, but cited a speech by US Vice President Mike Pence in October last year in which he said that the US would always believe that Taiwan's embrace of democracy shows a better path for all Chinese.

The statement came just two days after former AIT chairman Richard Bush's public letter was published on the Web site of Washington-based think tank the Brookings Institution, addressed to Formosa Alliance convener Kuo Pei-hung (郭佩宏) over the alliance's call for amendments to the Referendum Act (公投法) to pave the way for an independence referendum.

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The act does not allow referendums that seek to amend the Constitution or touch upon the nation’s sovereignty.

Kuo’s proposal touches on the US’ national interest in peace and security in the Taiwan area, as well as its long-standing view that neither side of the Taiwan Strait should unilaterally change the cross-strait “status quo,” Bush wrote.

He also warned that such a move could trigger Article 8 of China’s “Anti-Secession” Law, which authorizes the use of non-peaceful means to respond to what it deems separatist actions by Taiwan.

“I am sure you agree with me that a war in the Taiwan Strait, however it began, would be a tragedy for the island and for all that its people have achieved,” Bush added.

While there is an implied commitment of the US to come to Taiwan’s defense if China resorts to non-peaceful means to deal with separatist moves by Taipei, Bush said “that commitment has never been absolute.”

He also said that to his knowledge, US President Donald Trump is skeptical about any US security commitment to Taiwan.

“At a meeting of the National Security Council on Jan. 19, 2018, Mr Trump asked his senior national security team, ‘even more than [South Korea], what do we get from protecting Taiwan?’ The implication of that question is the US commitment to Taiwan is not justified, as far as he is concerned,” Bush wrote, adding that he has not seen evidence that the skepticism has changed.

One of the reasons that the US has expressed support for President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and her administration is because she is cautious and careful, he said.

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When asked for comments yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not directly respond to the AIT's statement, but said that the government has always dealt with cross-strait relations with discretion, and a steadfast and pragmatic attitude.

The ministry called for continued support from the international community for Taiwan, which it said would allow the nation to stride farther and be more determined on its path to defend democracy, freedom and sovereignty.

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