

Major changes to US ties not necessary: ex-envoy

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Former American Institute in Taiwan director William Stanton speaks at an event in Taipei on Saturday.

Photo: Wang Yi-sung, Taipei Times

Practical measures of support for Taiwan by the US government are more important than diplomatic recognition of the country, former director of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) William Stanton said on Saturday at a forum in Taipei.

Stanton said that he does not foresee any major changes in the US' engagement with Taiwan, which is why he was surprised when former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo in Taiwan earlier this month called for the US to recognize Taiwan as a "free and sovereign country."

"Setting aside whether secretary of state Pompeo had ever proposed this to [former US president Donald] Trump, a more important question, from my perspective, is whether he had discussed this first with the Taiwanese government, either before or during his visit," Stanton said.

Stanton, a chair professor at National Chengchi University and a lecturer at its International College of Innovation, said he believes that any shift in the US' position on cross-strait relations must be coordinated with the Taiwanese government.

"It is easy for a US politician to take a forward-leaning stand on Taiwan, but Taiwan will always bear the brunt of any People's Republic of China reaction to policy shifts," said Stanton, who served as AIT director from 2009 to 2012.

Pompeo was "one of the few top officials in the Trump administration who really cared about Taiwan," Stanton said.

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However, there is no reason for a shift in the US' diplomatic policy on Taiwan, he added.

“The Taiwanese government needs to consider not only the practical potential gains of diplomatic recognition but also the possible costs,” he said.

The US should avoid rhetoric and take practical steps to strengthen its relationship with Taiwan and boost its defense capabilities, he said.

US President Joe Biden and his administration “have repeatedly said the US' support for Taiwan is ‘rock-solid,’ but no one knows what that specifically means,” Stanton said. “Even the metaphor is troubling. Not all rock is solid. Shale is usually soft and brittle, and limestone is soft as well.”

He said that Washington should consider supportive measures such as signing a bilateral free-trade agreement, lifting the existing range restrictions on Taiwan's missiles and expanding exchanges so that more young Americans can visit Taiwan.

Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs declined to comment on Pompeo's call for the US to recognize Taiwanese sovereignty, saying that the former US official is now a private citizen and it respected his right to comment.

The AIT was established in 1979 to represent US interests in Taiwan when diplomatic ties between the countries were cut.

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