

Taiwan a ‘flashpoint’: US group

TENSIONS RISING: A former US Department of State official said that the election results would ‘more likely than not’ make the nation a top security problem in Asia

By William Lowther
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Taiwan is poised to become a “worrisome flashpoint” in US-China relations, according to a Washington think tank.

It is the latest in a series of warnings issued over the past few days by pundits who see last month’s nine-in-one election results, coupled with unrest in Hong Kong, as a recipe for high tension across the Taiwan Strait.

“A key question now is whether Beijing will tolerate even a mildly less cooperative Taiwan,” said Ted Galen Carpenter, senior fellow in Defense and Foreign Policy Studies at the conservative Cato Institute.

In a commentary on the Cato Web site, Carpenter said Chinese leaders believe that greater cross-strait economic relations would erode Taiwanese enthusiasm for any form of independence.

“That does not appear to have happened,” he said.

Carpenter said that the adoption of a confrontational stance by Beijing regarding Taiwan would quickly reignite the nation as a source of animosity in US-China relations.

The US “pivot” of US forces to East Asia intensified Beijing’s suspicions over Washington’s motives, and sharp differences regarding territorial issues in the South China and East China seas have also been a persistent source of friction, he said.

“The slumbering Taiwan issue is now poised to join that list of worrisome flashpoints,” Carpenter said.

His views were echoed by Gary Schmitt, codirector in Security Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, who wrote that, following the recent elections, “increased tension across the Strait appears inevitable.”

With China’s more assertive behavior in the region, Taiwan’s strategic geographic position becomes ever more important for both the US and the region’s stability, Schmitt wrote on the institute’s Web site.

“Cross-strait political waters may be calm now, but they are not likely to stay that way in the years ahead,” Schmitt said.

“Whether future American and Taiwanese presidents will have the political, military and diplomatic savvy to prevent those tensions from boiling over into a serious crisis is a question both electorates ought to be asking come 2016,” he added.

Former US Department of State official Robert Manning, who is now senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, wrote in The National Interest magazine that Taiwan’s election results are “more likely than not” to make Taiwan the No. 1 security problem in Asia over the next two or three years.

All of this comes on top of testimony to the Asia subcommittee of the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs by Heritage Foundation senior research fellow Dean Cheng (成斌).

Cheng said that developments in Hong Kong meant that the “one country, two systems” idea was likely permanently off the table as a settlement approach for cross-strait relations.

“In fact, any kind of political reconciliation between China and Taiwan has been set back for the foreseeable future,” he said. “This has obvious implications for the US, given the commitment Washington has made to ensuring that the future of Taiwan is determined through peaceful means.”

Cheng said that if the fallout from the Hong Kong protests was a revived debate on Taiwan about its future with Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) might find himself confronted in 2016 with tense cross-strait relations.

“The US needs to be able to send a clear signal that it remains committed to the peaceful management of the Taiwan Strait situation, which requires a military posture ... to assure that outcome,” Cheng said.