

# An open letter to Mr. Kuo Pei-hung and his colleagues

Richard C. Bush Monday, February 11, 2019

## *Editor's Note:*

After *Taiwan's local elections* on November 24, 2018, in which the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) lost a number of mayor and magistrate positions, there was increased finger-pointing in the party. People in the base of the DPP, the so-called "Deep Greens," criticized President Tsai Ing-wen, the party's leader, for having been insufficiently aggressive in pursuing their agenda of resisting China and taking steps toward *de jure* independence for Taiwan. Deep Green politicians formed groups to pressure President Tsai to move in their policy direction. At stake is not only the DPP's policy and ideological direction but the face it presents to the voters in presidential elections that will be held in January 2020.

One of these activists is Kuo Pei-hung, who is chairman of pro-independence Formosa TV. With a number of like-minded colleagues, he has formed the Formosa Alliance (literally "Joyful Alliance" in Chinese) to promote a Deep Green agenda and specifically to liberalize the use of referendums. Currently, the requirements for holding referendums on domestic policy issues are relatively modest, but more restrictive regarding questions of Taiwan's sovereignty and, by implication, its relationship with China. The open letter below to Mr. Kuo argues that such an effort would, if successful, have significant implications for the United States.

I have read the statement that the Formosa Alliance released on January 31 and your own related press statement in which you say that "Taiwan next year should create in independent state and advance towards being a normal country." You wish to amend the referendum law to make it easier to have a popular vote on these issues. But given China's clear opposition to an independent Taiwan and the position of the United States that it does not support Taiwan independence, the Alliance's proposals are certain to stimulate controversy.

It is probably not appropriate for me to comment on the substantive wisdom of the Formosa Alliance's proposal. It is up to people in Taiwan to render a judgement on ideas such as making Taiwan a "normal country" through a referendum.

Yet on two aspects of your proposal, I believe it is proper for me to offer my views for your consideration. The first aspect is that the proposal touches on the national interests of the United States, specifically its abiding interest in peace and security in the Taiwan area and its longstanding view that neither side of the Taiwan Strait should try unilaterally to change the status quo. One reason for this American policy, of course, is that the People's Republic of China holds that Taiwan is a part of China, and Article 8 of its 2005 Anti-Secession Law authorizes the use of "non-peaceful means" to respond what it regards as a Taiwan move on towards "secession."

Now I know that you reject China's claim concerning the legal status of the territory of Taiwan, but that happens to be its formally held position. Also, neither you nor I can control how the Beijing government interprets developments on Taiwan and whether they trigger Article 8 of the Anti-Secession Law. I'm 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.

If China were to use "non-peaceful means" in response to what it concluded was secession by Taiwan, that in turn would raise the at least implied commitment of the United States to come to Taiwan's defense. Yet that commitment has never been absolute. If the men and women of the U.S. armed forces are to risk their lives for the safety of Taiwan, American leaders would want to be certain that such a sacrifice was clearly necessary in light of U.S. interests. At a minimum, U.S. leaders would insist, if actions by Taiwan created the risk of war and might trigger American intervention, that they be consulted in advance by the Taiwan authors of those actions. I wonder, therefore, whether you have thus consulted with anyone in authority in the U.S. government about the risks that your proposal might create. Or do you assume that the Trump administration's support for Taiwan is so strong that it will support initiatives from Taiwan that might create the risks of conflict?

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