

China's New Year gift is unpalatable

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Friday, 05 February 2010 07:54

The Ministry of Transportation and Communications cried foul this week after China took advantage of Taiwan in the allocation of cross-strait flights for next week's Lunar New Year holiday.

Of the 350 extra flights laid on for the expected increase in cross-strait travel during the holiday period, Taiwanese airlines were only allocated 98, compared with 252 flights for Chinese airlines. To add insult to injury, the departure slots awarded to Taiwanese airlines for major Chinese cities are at extremely inconvenient times.

The imbalance occurred after the Chinese rejected numerous flight requests by Taiwanese carriers on "technical" grounds, while Taiwan accepted all of China's applications.

While the government may have expected it would be granted the same number of flights as China during this busy period, it should not be news to officials that China does not view Taiwan as its equal and will resort to almost anything to get the upper hand.

What was the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) doing while this was playing out? If it wanted to ensure flights were distributed equally, then why did it not notice a pattern developing and bring it up with its Chinese counterpart?

CAA Director-General Lee Long-wen (李龍文) may have been right on Tuesday when he said the Chinese airlines would not necessarily benefit from the extra flights as the occupation rate for Taiwanese airlines was currently much higher, but his comments smack of closing the stable door after the horse has bolted, and hint at an official trying to cover up for his organization's incompetence.

The government would be well within its rights to inform China it is canceling a certain number of flights in retaliation for the lack of fairness in distribution, but that is highly unlikely given this administration's lack of backbone when it comes to dealing with its cross-strait adversary.

In fact, this order of affairs is fully consistent with the pattern that has developed over the last 20 months of exchanges between Taiwan and China since this government came to power.

Before any talks start, Taiwan announces its bottom line, saying the announcement will not compromise the nation's interests or sovereignty while putting on a show for consumption by the Taiwanese public. Then, when China refuses to budge, Taiwan caves in to its demands and tries to pass off its capitulation as a show of Chinese "goodwill" that serves the best interests of Taiwan.

The pattern is all too familiar, while the outcome is always the same. China gets exactly what it wants while Taiwan ends up compromising.

And while this issue may not be that important to most people — as long as passengers get home, they probably don't care which airline they take — it has ominous implications.

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If this government and its agencies are unwilling to stand up to China on such a trivial matter as flight arrangements, there is little chance they will stand up for Taiwan's interests and block Beijing's trickery on more important issues.

With negotiations over an economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) now under way, this is an extremely worrying prospect.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2010/02/05](#)