

The great naval exercise mystery

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Maybe it was an error by the US Navy staff in charge of its Web site — a common one in which Taiwan is confused with Thailand. Or maybe it really did happen — but was intended to be kept quiet to avoid creating a diplomatic incident. Either way, news last week that a Taiwanese vessel had participated in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) created waves in defense circles.

Photo captions underneath pictures depicting the USS Ronald Reagan with dozens of vessels in its wake stated that the ships were from South Korea, Japan, Singapore, France, Canada, Australia, the US ... and Taiwan.

While Ministry of National Defense officials quickly denied Taiwan was participating in the exercise, it took days before the US Navy removed Taiwan from the captions — and even then, the job was a patchy one at best. Given the likelihood of Chinese retaliation for Taiwan's first participation in RIMPAC since the exercise was launched 39 years ago, we can assume that the Pentagon would have corrected the mistake as soon as it was discovered. The fact that it did not raises the possibility of a disconnect between the US State Department and the US Department of Defense, with the latter — usually more pro-Taiwan than the State Department — using the misnomer to send a signal to Beijing.

Absent an official explanation, this remains in the realm of conjecture, but it should serve as a lesson to Beijing, whose presence in the South China Sea and off the waters of Japan is becoming increasingly belligerent. The message Chinese officials should take home is that if the People's Liberation Army's Navy continues on its current course, the participation of Taiwanese vessels in future RIMPAC maneuvers could be more than a typo. In fact, an expansionist Chinese Navy could force Pacific powers to turn to Taiwan to reinforce a naval security chain to contain Beijing and prevent provocative transgressions.

Incidents over the past decade involving Vietnamese, Philippine and Indonesian vessels and Chinese boats (some of which resulted in clashes), Beijing's claims over the South China Sea and a series of contested islands, are forcing a reassessment of military postures not only in the US, but also in Japan. The more threatening the Chinese navy becomes, the more likely its neighbors will seek to contain it to protect their interests.

Taiwan's proximity to China makes it a strategic point whose value is well understood by the major powers. If the situation were to reach boiling point in the Pacific, it would be inconceivable for the US or even Japan to overlook the option of bringing Taiwan into the fold as a way to strengthen their alliance.

For about 10 years, China has managed to convince its neighbors of its "peaceful rise" — something it has done with considerable skill. As a result, Beijing has been able to isolate Taiwan and whittle away at international concern for the safety of this small democracy.

A sudden shift in posture, perhaps emanating from an increasingly strident Chinese nationalism, could undermine this achievement and result in the greater integration of Taiwan

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into the regional security alliance. One potential offshoot could be the invitation for Taiwan to participate in RIMPAC as a full member.

What the Chinese leadership should keep in mind is that while building trust takes time, it can be lost in the blink of an eye.

While on this occasion it may have been a clerical error on the US Navy's Web site, it could just as well be a portent of things to come.

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