

Opportunities and independence

Written by Liberty Times Editorial
Sunday, 16 July 2017 01:01

A major general of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) revealed that former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), while he was in office, intended to send four military officials to China for a military exchange, and Beijing had likewise wanted to send four military officials to Taiwan.

However, these plans were hindered by the US before they were realized.

Ma's office rejected the Chinese military officer's report, saying: "There was nothing of the sort."

The major general also said that the US had drawn five "red lines" regarding Taiwan: The two sides of the Taiwan Strait cannot establish military confidence-building mechanisms; cannot unite against other claimants in South China Sea disputes; cannot unite against Japan over the issue of the Diaoyutai Islands (釣台島); cannot communicate on military technology; and cannot establish institutional interactions between their retired personnel.

Obviously, unlike their political liaisons, ties between the militaries controlled by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are taboo to the US.

Last year, the China Military Power Report by the US Department of Defense said that Washington would continue to help Taiwan maintain its own self-defense capacity, but it would not support Taiwanese independence.

The administration of US President Donald Trump has repeatedly stressed the message that it is committed to its own "one China" policy, and is against any change to the "status quo" by any party.

Despite repeated opposition from Beijing, successive US administrations still comply with the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) "to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character."

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On June 29, the Trump administration approved its first arms sales to Taiwan, worth US\$1.42 billion, causing a subtle shift in the relationship between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平).

Trump does not play cards the way Xi wants, but this is incomprehensible if Taiwan is not considered “a substantive independent state,” a fact with which US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson also agrees.

The reason that KMT-CCP military exchanges are so disturbing is because deep down, the US regards China as an opposing power.

Therefore, arms sales to Taiwan, but failure to support its independence is a curious mix-and-match of action and rhetoric.

In public, the US sells arms to Taiwan and assures its defense to ensure the peaceful resolution of cross-strait disagreements.

However, as long as the peace in the strait is guaranteed, it is not only beneficial to the US, but to Taiwan as well.

On the issue of so-called “peaceful unification,” as long as peace is a prerequisite, nearly all Taiwanese would choose independence.

As for unification by force, the US has always clearly said through its Pacific Command that it would not allow Chinese aggression.

The US Department of Defense and the US Congress support strengthening Taiwan’s defense capabilities and US presidents have always realized the strategic scenario of defending the nation at critical moments.

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Determining motivation from action, it is reasonable to say that on the surface, the US supports the defense of the nation, but under the table, it supports independence.

At Xi's demand, the Trump administration said that: "There is no change ... to our long-standing one China policy."

The similarities and differences between the US' "one China" policy and Beijing's "one China" principle are becoming clearer in practice.

They both agree that there is only one China in the world, and the People's Republic of China is its only legitimate government.

The difference is that Beijing claims that Taiwan is part of China, while the US has its own ideas.

The US' concept has always remained blurred and unspoken so it meets Beijing's needs while also leaving wiggle room.

This space seems abstract, but it allows arms sales, military cooperation and military action to warn Beijing against threatening Taiwan. It also allows it to oppose any party that would seek to change the "status quo."

Selling arms to Taiwan, but not supporting its independence is like pretending to advance along one path while secretly going along another.

Beijing is clearly not happy about this and demands at every opportunity that the US clarify its position.

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The supposed lack of support for independence by Washington means it does not contribute to it, but also does not deliberately obstruct it, which is distinct from Beijing's unscrupulous stance against Taiwanese independence.

On May 17 last year — toward the end of former US president Barack Obama's final term — the US Congress passed a resolution reaffirming the TRA and the "six assurances" as cornerstones of Taiwan-US ties.

Before the Trump administration announced arms sales to Taiwan, the US Senate Committee on Armed Services passed the National Defense Authorization Act, which is to re-establish regular visits to Taiwanese ports by US Navy vessels after it goes into effect next year.

So what exactly does the US oppose?

Having experienced the "vague advance" of successive US administrations, is the nature of the US' stance not intriguing?

The size difference between Taiwan and China is huge, but geopolitics minimizes the difference.

Taiwan is at a key location of the West Pacific's first island chain, as it is a partner of the democratic world.

Taiwanese might not be fully aware of their nation's importance, but imagining the democratic world without Taiwan clearly exposes the severity of the situation.

Then-US general Douglas MacArthur identified this vital point more than 60 years ago.

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It can be said that Taiwan is the key to the balance in the western Pacific. The key might be small, but it can open the door to fortune or calamity.

The greatest contribution of President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) administration would be to act as a teammate of the democratic world.

If the nation demonstrates its determination to defend itself, it would sway how the democratic world responds to a possible change in Taiwan's status.

Maintaining independence and self-determination is the common cause of Taiwan and the rest of the democratic world.

The words of the PLA major general correspond to Ma's tendency to support China, shun Japan and alienate the US.

The US and Japan did not learn of the "black box" conspiracy of the 2015 Ma-Xi meeting until later, which shows how confused the nation's relationship with its allies and enemies has gotten.

Tsai not only has to solve the mess left by the KMT, but must also transcend internal political entanglements and keep her eye on the bigger picture to see strategic geopolitical opportunities to expand Taiwan's space in the international community and normalize the nation.

A small step in the geopolitical flow often results in a big step toward the nation's normalization.

There is an opportunity in front of Tsai. History waits to see if she can identify and seize the strategic opportunity.

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