

## Brandishing a double-edged sword

Written by John Lim 林俊

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Since the very beginning of this year, China has on several occasions taken unilateral action both at sea and in the air, effectively building up tension in the Taiwan Strait. This highlights Beijing's power-oriented policy toward Taiwan in the era of Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) following the Chinese Communist Party's 19th National Congress.

Beijing's strategy is most likely to increase pressure and erode the effectiveness of Taiwan's jurisdiction bit by bit so as to gradually and substantially change the "status quo" of cross-strait relations.

Taiwan is likely to be very busy from now on, reacting to the constantly increasing threats posed by Beijing.

The question is whether China's strategy will lead to a further worsening of the Taiwanese public's confidence in Beijing, and if it will prompt the US and Japan to adjust their security cooperation strategy so that it more clearly includes Taiwan.

On Jan. 4, Beijing unilaterally announced that it was launching the northbound M503 flight route, which runs very close to the median line of the Taiwan Strait, as well as three other extension routes — W121, W122 and W123. The announcement provoked a very strong reaction in Taipei.

Mainland Affairs Council Minister Katharine Chang (張善政) said that aviation safety is of primary concern and that it is something that is required by every country in the world.

"China not only breached the terms of the 2015 agreement, but it is also attempting to cover its malicious intentions toward Taiwan — both politically and militarily — under the guise of civil aviation. The move has generated concerns that it could potentially change the 'status quo' across the Taiwan Strait," she added.

Even though Beijing continues to claim sovereignty over Taiwan and has never formally

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recognized the de facto existence of Taiwan's government, it has at least complied with regulations related to the median line of the Taiwan Strait and respected Taiwan's jurisdiction over the airspace east of the median line for the past 70 years.

According to the International Civil Aviation Organization's regulations, countries must leave a safe distance of at least 10km between their air routes and a median line. However, China created the M503 flight route in 2015 along the west side of the median line, which is the border of the Taipei flight information region, and the closest distance between the route and the median line is only 7.8km.

It is this breach of the regulations that is the basis for Taiwan's strong reaction.

Beijing's unilateral action is a sign of its disregard for the agreement reached in negotiations between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait in March 2015.

At that time, Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) was president, the cross-strait relationship was calmer and the two sides had restarted the negotiation platform between Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation and China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits. Communication between the two sides was smooth.

However, after President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) won the election and was inaugurated on May 20, 2016, Beijing broke contact between the two organizations because it thought that Tsai was refusing to acknowledge the so-called "1992 consensus."

There is no doubt that the unilateral launch of the M503 flight route is yet another way for Beijing to punish the Tsai administration.

While national security authorities in Taipei were under huge pressure following Beijing's launch of the M503 flight route, the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning, accompanied by several other warships, sailed southwest along the median line on the morning of Jan. 5, all the way through the Taiwan Strait. The Taiwanese military closely monitored the Liaoning's movements and raised the alert level by dispatching missile-equipped F-16 jets as well as other aircraft,

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while Keelung-class destroyers and Cheng Kung-class frigates patrolled the surrounding waters.

However, the Taiwanese military assumed that the aircraft carrier would first cross the Miyako Strait and then sail south along the eastern side of Taiwan before crossing the Bashi Channel, traveling toward Hainan Island. The military thought it would only sail through the Taiwan Strait on its way back.

This miscalculation shows Taiwan's weakness and its inability to grasp Chinese military information in advance.

Since Tsai's inauguration, the Liaoning has sailed through Taiwan's surrounding waters on four occasions, while Chinese military aircraft have reportedly conducted drills in the airspace surrounding Taiwan on 23 different occasions, according to information provided by the Taiwanese military.

It is not very difficult to predict that unilateral actions by China will become even more frequent in the near future, and the possibility of the Chinese air force performing drills along the new air routes cannot be ruled out.

The pressure unilaterally imposed on Taiwan by China, both at sea and in the air, will become the normal state of affairs.

In the short run, such measures aim to maintain and intensify pressure on Tsai's administration and force her to acknowledge the "1992 consensus." China's long-term objective is to erode Taiwan's de facto jurisdiction little by little, while weakening the effectiveness of the government's ability to administer that jurisdiction and gradually incorporate Taiwan into its own administrative system.

The ultimate goal for China is to unify the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. However, whether the pressure that Beijing is imposing on Taiwan will bring about the expected results is something that will have to be closely watched.

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For Beijing, the best outcome would be that the Taiwanese public lose confidence in Tsai's cross-strait policy, thinking that she is incapable of dealing with the cross-strait relationship properly, and they stop supporting the Tsai administration. That way, China hopes to lower support for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and put an end to DPP rule in 2020.

However, after having undergone several stages of democratization, including six presidential elections and three changes of government, as well as the Sunflower movement, the Taiwanese public have formulated a more mature and independent view of the direction of Taiwan's development and its relationship with China.

Although China's growing strength has allowed it to increase its overall pressure on Taiwan, this exercise of power could be a double-edged sword. China must use it judiciously and gradually, lest it causes resentment among Taiwanese and increases their sympathy for the Tsai administration.

What is more, China's push toward changing the cross-strait relationship could cause the US and Japan to make adjustments to their security cooperation strategy and strengthen their military deployments so that they more clearly include Taiwan.

After Beijing's unilateral launch of the M503 flight route, both the US Department of State and the American Institute in Taiwan expressed concern over China's actions and US opposition to any unilateral action taken by either side of the Taiwan Strait aimed at changing the cross-strait "status quo."

It is also worth noting that on Dec. 12 last year, US President Donald Trump signed into law the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) after it was approved by both houses of Congress. The passage of the NDAA will strengthen military exchanges between the US and Taiwan, and will allow Taiwan to maintain its self-defense capabilities. The act even provides a legal foundation that enables Taiwanese and US naval vessels to visit ports in each others' countries.

As for Japan, since Prime Minister Shinzo Abe took office in 2012, his administration has

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adhered to a foreign affairs and national security strategy aimed at containing China, and an essential part of the strategy is to co-opt Taiwan.

From a Japanese perspective, changing the “status quo” in the Taiwan Strait is not in line with its national interest. The Japanese National Institute for Defense Studies China Security Report published in February last year clearly points to concerns over Taiwan’s self-defense capabilities. In addition, there is nearly no collaboration between Japan and Taiwan in terms of maintaining regional security.

If China’s push for gradual changes to the cross-strait “status quo” becomes more explicit, it could lead Japan and Taiwan to discuss opportunities for security collaboration within a framework of unofficial diplomatic relations.

How to formulate a mid to long-term timetable for this gradual change to the cross-strait relationship, including different stages and goals, as well as how to continuously make strategic adjustments to this timetable based on the results to lessen the potential double-edged effect will be Beijing’s focus from now on. This is also an issue that Taiwan must not ignore.

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Translated by Chang Ho-ming

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