

Trump sees Taiwan as reliable ally

Written by Parris Chang 蕭齊
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The US did not invite the Chinese navy to participate in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise this year. This presents a good opportunity to bolster Taiwan-US military ties. The question is how the government should go about ensuring its participation in the exercise in accordance with the 2018 US National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

In comparison with former US president Barack Obama's brain trust, US President Donald Trump's national security team is better at telling friend from foe and seeing Beijing for what it really is. Trump's team is also capable of proposing strategies to counter the challenges posed by China.

The China analysts in Trump's administration think that the Chinese regime is emulating the Qin Dynasty by undertaking political reform through the "four modernizations" and the "reform and opening up" under the leadership of former Chinese premier Zhou Enlai (周恩來) and former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平), greatly enhancing China's economic and military capacity, and national strength to become a wealthy and militarily strong nation aiming for hegemony.

Over the past few years, radical forces among the Chinese leadership have questioned Deng's policy proposed in the 1990s to conceal China's strengths and bide its time, suggesting that this defense-oriented strategy is outdated. They think the US is clearly in decline and China will defeat and supersede the US to become the world hegemon.

China's land reclamation in the South China Sea and its hegemonic ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region have provoked intense antipathy in the US, causing the US government to change its strategic thinking and come up with more powerful countermeasures against China's rise. The Trump administration has been watching China over the past year as it has constrained Taiwan's diplomatic space and increased its military threat.

The US Congress has therefore incorporated provisions in the NDAA aimed at enhancing US-Taiwan military collaboration and helping increase Taiwan's military capabilities.

More importantly, both the US National Security Strategy (NSS) issued in December last year

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and the National Defense Strategy released in January recognize China as the primary threat to the US, accusing it of being a “revisionist power” that threatens the US’ values and interests, and introducing countermeasures.

The trade war initiated by the US is directed at China’s “economic aggression.” The US is also promoting its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which calls for cooperation between democratic allies and partners such as Japan, India, Australia and Taiwan to collectively restrain China’s hegemony.

Trump in the NSS emphasized peace through strength and attaches more importance to military power. He has abandoned Obama’s policy of cutting military expenses every year and is instead increasing the national defense budget, strengthening the military and expanding the US Navy.

The NDAA authorizes the US Navy to increase the size of its fleet from 274 ships to 355 and its headcount to 350,000. It also features several provisions to bolster the US-Taiwan defense partnership. For example, the US secretary of defense is to submit a report on the “advisability and feasibility of re-establishing port of call exchanges” between the US and Taiwanese navies before September, support Taiwan’s development of underwater warfare capabilities, “invite the military forces of Taiwan to participate in military exercises” and “carry out a program of exchanges of senior military officers and senior officials with Taiwan.”

The idea of port-of-call exchanges between the US and Taiwan “would be entirely consistent with our ‘one China’ policy as we define it,” US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs Randall Schriver said during his nomination hearing.

The US pays great attention to the strategic importance of Taiwan’s position in the Asia-Pacific region and it has also noticed that President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) differs from her predecessor Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), who ingratiated himself with Beijing.

Tsai has repeatedly said that Taiwan is an important and reliable partner for the US in Asia-Pacific regional security and that it is willing to play a vital role in maintaining regional peace and safety.

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The US has in response reiterated its commitments to Taiwan pursuant to the Taiwan Relations Act in the NSS, treating Taiwan as a strategic partner for upholding safety.

Trump signing the Taiwan Travel Act into law in March had profound political implications. In the face of Chinese warships and military aircraft constantly encircling Taiwan and posing a threat to regional safety, Trump has made it clear that he will not sit idly by and watch whether China will take military action against Taiwan.

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