

Tsai Ing-wen visits frigate, vows that the nation will safeguard its interests

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President Tsai Ing-wen yesterday addresses dignitaries and the crew of the Dyi-huah frigate at Zuoying naval base in Kaohsiung.

Photo: courtesy of the Ministry of National Defense

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) yesterday vowed to demonstrate the nation's determination to safeguard its national interests as she boarded a Kang Ding-class frigate at the naval port in Kaohsiung's Zuoying District (左營) ahead of its mission in the disputed South China Sea.

"Today [Wednesday], the Kang Ding-class Dyi-huah frigate is to embark on a patrol mission in the South China Sea," Tsai said in a morning speech to the crew of the frigate. "The mission was moved forward by one day and carries particular significance, as new developments occurred in the region yesterday [Tuesday]."

Tsai said a ruling handed down by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, Netherlands, on Tuesday, especially the part pertaining to Itu Aba Island (Taiping Island, 太平島), constituted a severe impairment of the nation's rights regarding its islands and territorial waters in the South China Sea.

"This frigate represents the Republic of China. The uniforms you wear represent the public's trust in you," Tsai said. "As for this mission, it is aimed at demonstrating Taiwanese determination to defend our national interests."

A paragraph in the court's ruling states that all of the high-tide features in the Spratly Islands (Nansha Islands, 南沙群島) — which Taiwan claims — including Itu Aba, are legally "rocks" that do not generate an exclusive economic zone or continental shelf.

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The government has refused to recognize the ruling and deemed it as having no legal effect on the nation on the grounds that Taiwan was not invited to participate in the arbitration process, nor was it consulted about its opinions.

Tsai's presence on the warship was apparently prompted by the downgrading of Itu Aba, the largest naturally occurring island in the Spratly Islands group, which has been administered by Taiwan since 1956.

It is also claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines and China.

The president was accompanied by National Security Council Secretary-General Joseph Wu (吳敦義), Minister of National Defense Feng Shih-kuan (馮世寬), Chief of General Staff Yen De-fa (嚴德發), National Security Council Deputy Secretary-General York Chen (陳水扁) and Naval Commander Huang Shu-kuang (黃淑光).

Tsai said that it has been the nation's long-standing stance that South China Sea disputes should be settled peacefully via multilateral negotiations.

"On the foundation of equal negotiations, we are also willing to join hands with other parties to promote peace and stability in the region," Tsai said.

The president urged the armed forces to strive for their dignity, which she said does not fall from the sky, but must be earned gradually through implementation of discipline and development of professionalism.

"Now, a greater mission has fallen upon your shoulders," Tsai said, urging the navy to put its skills to use and sail to the South China Sea to safeguard the nation's interests.

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