

Political Maneuvering: Kiribati severs diplomatic relations

Written by Taipei Times

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The national flag of Kiribati, fifth right, is pictured yesterday alongside the Republic of China flag, right, and the flags of Taiwan's other diplomatic allies in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building in Taipei yesterday.

Photo: CNA

Taiwan yesterday lost a second diplomatic ally in a week after Kiribati decided to switch recognition to China.

Taiwan "regrets and strongly condemns" Kiribati for disregarding the years of assistance and friendship that Taipei had extended to Tarawa, Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu (吳志瑜) told a news conference at 1pm yesterday, adding that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs received a formal notice of the termination of relations from Kiribati at about 11am.

The government "hereby declares that it is terminating diplomatic relations with the Republic of Kiribati effective immediately, ending all bilateral cooperative projects and recalling the staff of its embassy, technical mission and medical mission stationed in Kiribati," Wu said.

The Solomon Islands cut ties with Taipei on Monday, making Kiribati the seventh to switch allegiance to Beijing since 2016, following Sao Tome and Principe, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Burkina Faso, and El Salvador.

Taiwan now has only 15 diplomatic partners, including four in the Pacific.

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Kiribati had demanded that Taiwan help it acquire airplanes for “commercial purposes,” which is not consistent with the spirit of the International Cooperation and Development Act (國際合作及發展法), which aims to develop public infrastructure, Wu said.

Taipei’s proposed program to obtain the aircraft under a commercial loan was rejected, while Beijing promised to offer Tarawa several civilian aircraft and commercial ferries, he said.

Since taking office in 2016, Kiribatian President Taneti Mamau and some members of his ruling Tobwaan Kiribati Party have engaged in frequent exchanges with China, Wu said, adding that Beijing has used fisheries and other commercial investments to extend its presence in the Pacific country.

Beijing’s campaign to push Taiwan’s allies to sever formal relations aims to suppress the nation’s international presence and force Taiwanese to accept China’s “one country, two systems” framework, he said.

Asked if the government has a strategy to “stop the bleeding,” Wu said that the ministry has required overseas officials to maintain close communications with local officials at each allied nation.

Despite some “minor signs” of crisis in the four remaining Pacific allies — Palau, Nauru, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands — their ties with Taiwan “are nothing to worry about,” he said.

The government has not yet discussed whether to adjust overall foreign policy, Wu said, adding that informal relations with other countries are also crucial for Taiwan.

Presidential Office spokesman Ting Yun-kung (丁允恭) later yesterday confirmed that Wu had asked President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) to take disciplinary action, but added that Tsai has asked Wu to stay in his position, as China’s actions are clearly to blame for Taiwan’s diplomatic setbacks.

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“China has chosen this time to strike a series of blows against Taiwan, because only slightly more than 100 days remain until the presidential election,” Tsai said, adding that Taiwan would never accept the “one country, two systems” formula.

Kiribati has made a big mistake by leaving as sincere a friend as Taiwan to become China’s pawn, she added.

Separately yesterday, the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) expressed disappointment over Kiribati’s decision to abandon its ties with Taipei, saying that Taiwan is a democratic success story, a reliable partner and a force for good in the world.

“We continue to express concerns with China’s campaign to pressure countries to discontinue ties with Taiwan. We continue to have an interest in cross-strait peace and stability,” the AIT said in a statement.

Additional reporting by agencies

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