

Ma, China unite against independence

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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It is nothing new to see Chinese media outlets producing dubious coverage of issues related to Taiwan and providing nothing to back up their claims — and the coverage of the talks between US President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) at the APEC summit last week was no exception. What is surprising is that President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) rushed to back reports only run by Chinese media by saying that Obama had told Xi the US does not support Taiwanese independence, despite Washington making no mention of that in its statements about the talks.

Ma told the Nikkei Asian Review in an interview on Thursday, a day after the Obama-Xi meeting: “President Barack Obama also mentioned during the summit that the US is happy to see relations between the two sides across the Taiwan Strait improve, while it does not support Taiwan’s independence.”

Since he came to office in January 2009, neither Obama nor his administration are believed to have ever said on record that the US does not support Taiwanese independence. Ever since the declaration of Washington’s “three noes” policy by then-US president Bill Clinton during a trip to China in June 1998 — that the US does not “support independence for Taiwan, or ‘two Chinas,’ or ‘one Taiwan, one China’” — Taiwan gets the jitters ahead of US-China summits due to concerns that the two sides will make a statement afterward that harms the nation’s interests.

The pledge of non-support for Taiwanese independence, which can be traced to 1971 or earlier, when former US president Richard Nixon’s administration launched its diplomacy with China, has remained dormant for several years.

According to last month’s Congressional Research Service report by Shirley Kan, a specialist in Asian security affairs, the last time a US administration official mentioned not supporting Taiwan’s independence was in February 2007, when then-president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) began changing the names of entities as part of his “de-Sinicization” efforts to emphasize Taiwanese identity in the latter stages of his tenure.

Regarding the US’ stance on Taiwan’s sovereign status and future, Kan said in the report that Washington’s “one China” policy differs from Beijing’s version and that there have been questions about whether the US’ policy is one of support, non-support or opposition to

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unification or independence. In short, she said that the US' policy stresses the process — peaceful resolution, cross-strait dialogue, with the assent of Taiwanese and no provocations or unilateral changes by either side — rather than the outcome (for example, unification, independence or confederation).

That means that although the stance of non-support for Taiwanese independence has been reiterated by various US administrations, it, along with other pledges under the “three noes,” was not a key statement made in the foundation of the complex interplay among Taiwan, the US and China. It was not put in writing in the US-China Three Joint Communiques, nor in the US' Taiwan Relations Act. A look back at history shows that how US presidents have addressed the issue of Taiwan with their Chinese counterparts during US-China summits carries special meaning in the triangular relationship because it reflects whether and to what extent Taiwan's interests are taken into account by the US in its dealings with China.

The coverage in Chinese media of the Obama-Xi meeting was reminiscent of the pair's encounter in February 2012. At the time, Xinhua news agency reported that Obama said the US “rejects any call for Taiwanese independence” at his meeting with then-Chinese vice president Xi at the White House. Obama set a precedent by issuing such a strong statement.

Did Obama really say that to Xi again? If Ma did not base his remarks on the briefing of the Obama-Xi meeting that Washington gave to Taiwan, one is left wondering if there is a difference between Ma and China or if both are trying to stymie Taiwan's independence.

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