

At the recently concluded US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) in Washington, top US officials rebuked China's behavior in cybertheft and demanded that China terminate its island-building in the South China Sea, which has heightened tensions in the region.

At the opening of the meetings on June 23, US vice president Joe Biden said that China was not a "responsible competitor" in cyberspace.

"Nations that use cybertechnology as an economic weapon, or profit from the theft of intellectual property, are sacrificing tomorrow's gains for short-term gains today," he said.

Biden also implicitly chided China, saying that "responsible countries respect international sea lanes," and said "nations that disregard diplomacy and use coercion and intimidation to settle disputes."

US Secretary of the Treasury Jack Lew raised the topic of cyberattack more than once at the S&ED, saying, "we remain deeply concerned about government-sponsored cybertheft from companies and commercial sectors."

US Secretary of State John Kerry also criticized China for plans to expand construction of outposts in waters in the South China Sea that are in dispute with neighboring nations.

On May 30, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter called on China to stop construction of new islands and military installations on the new islands, as China has built 809 hectares of land on the outcroppings in the past 18 months and created a runway at Fiery Cross Reef (Yongshu Reef, 永暑礁) for fighter jets.

To reduce tensions with the US at the S&ED, Beijing announced on June 23, one week prior to the annual conference, that China would confine its island-building to seven reefs and shoals, and would soon stop construction in the South China Sea.

Even more important, Beijing wishes to remove this and other potential trouble issues, which could poison the forthcoming US-China summit. At the invitation of US President Barack Obama, Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) is scheduled to make his first state visit to the US in September; hence Chinese officials may feel compelled to take actions to make Xi's state visit a success.

Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi (楊潔希) made an ameliorative, nonresponsive statement to calm US officials' hacking complaints at the S&ED.

"We believe that cybersecurity is very important," he said. "We think that countries should work together to develop an international code of conduct for cyberinformation sharing."

Will these superficial gestures from Beijing be sufficient to appease the US? There are clear signs that the US is implementing its "pivot" (or rebalance) to the Asia-Pacific strategy in earnest and is strengthening alliances with Japan and the Philippines to cope with China's rising hegemonism.

Changing mood and political dynamics in Washington may also have induced a shift in US policies. In addition to China's expansionism in the Asia-Pacific and its persistent cyberattacks on US government and commercial sites, the US-China disputes over trade and human rights, among other issues, have prompted congressional leaders and analysts from across the political spectrum to call for a "far more active rule" from the US and a "policy of containment" against China.

Underlining these changes are the abrupt departures of two high-ranking pro-China officials from the Obama administration last month.

One was the most senior US intelligence official on China, Paul Heer.

According to national security expert Bill Gertz of the Washington Times, Heer "was known for

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a steadfast bias that sought to play down the various threats posed by China in favor of more conciliatory views.”

The other was US National Security Council (NSC) senior China specialist Evan Medeiros, who, Gertz said, was “regarded by critics as among the most pro-China policymakers.”

Gertz quoted Congressional Republicans as saying Medeiros was behind the White House decision to deny sales of US F-16 jet fighters to Taiwan.

Medeiros was extensively involved in US relations with Taiwan and China. When Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) visited Washington in September 2011 as the party's presidential candidate, Medeiros was reported to have “sabotaged” her chances in the 2012 election by telling the Financial Times that the Obama administration had doubts about whether Tsai was able and willing to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

The Obama administration also took actions to help the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) win re-election in 2012.

Even since 1990, Beijing has tried to influence every presidential election in Taiwan, in an attempt to recruit a possible Taiwan quisling. Observers in the US and abroad, and especially Taiwan's attentive public, were shocked to see the Obama administration behave like the Chinese Communist Party, interfering with and undermining Taiwan's democratic process.

Worse, many were resentful because the US made a huge mistake by helping install the inept, dogmatic, egocentric and dysfunctional Ma as Taiwan's president for another four years.

The Sunflower movement and the KMT candidates' landslide defeats in the nine-in-one elections last year are unmistakable manifestations of a popular rejection of Ma's regime and his pro-China policies. There are discernible signs everywhere in Taiwan's polity today that the KMT will be thrown out of power in January's elections, and Tsai will be the next president.

When Tsai visited Washington last month, Medeiros was courteous and friendly receiving her delegation. He made painstaking efforts to help arrange her schedule, including a meeting at the NSC on June 3. Medeiros did not call the Financial Times or any media this time, but he quit his NSC job the following day.

By most accounts, Tsai's visit was highly successful. Her policy statement on maintaining the "status quo" in cross-strait relations at the NSC, US Department of State and Capitol Hill appear to have gone well, as there was no expression of concern, nor US pressure on Tsai to accept the so-called "1992 consensus" that Xi has defined as the indispensable cornerstone of cross-strait relations.

Has the US given Tsai the "wrong" message? Chinese Central Military Commission Deputy Chairman General Fan Changlong (范长龙), who made a high-profile visit to the US last month, seems to be concerned.

In a press conference, he urged the US to abide by Beijing's "one China" policy and refrain from "sending wrong messages to the forces seeing [Taiwanese] independence."

Will Beijing try once again to influence Taiwan's next presidential elections? Inasmuch as the probable KMT candidate, Deputy Legislative Speaker Hung Hsiu-chu (洪秀柱), is a pro-China ideologue and favors rapid cross-strait economic and political integration, Beijing may find her preferable.

However, uncertainty remains because Hung is out of sync with the mainstream political spectrum, and the KMT may see her as a poor and self-defeating choice and try to look for an alternative before July 19 — the date on which the KMT must approve its presidential nominee.

In any case, most Taiwanese voters value the principle of the "consent of the governed" and wish to choose their next president without external interference or pressure.

Safeguarding Taiwan's democracy

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The US should respect the rights of Taiwanese to select their next leader and determine their future.

The US and other democratic nations need to safeguard and support Taiwan's democratic system by opposing any undue interference and obstruction by third parties.

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