

A new front in the diplomatic war

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Friday, 07 July 2017 07:07

The past month has been tumultuous for international relations. Panama switching diplomatic recognition to Beijing in the middle of the month saw the number of Taiwan's diplomatic allies reduced to 20. It was followed by the Nigerian government sending troops to seal off Taiwan's trade office in Abuja, despite having already ordered the office's relocation from the capital in January due to apparent pressure from China.

Ordinary Taiwanese have grown numb to the gradual, one-at-a-time drop in the number of diplomatic allies.

Increasing Taiwanese indifference to Beijing's retaliation against President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) administration in the form of poaching diplomatic allies can be attributed to three causes.

First, people have realized that diplomatic allies exist on paper only, except for their occasional lobbying for Taiwan in the international arena.

Second, the allies are of little strategic importance, compared with the nation's substantive friends like Japan and the US.

Finally, the public's growing weariness over China's diplomatic revenge against Taiwan — which has employed similar tactics that barely changed over the past decades — is another cause.

If China's goal is to hit Taiwan where it hurts the most by taking away its allies, dwindling concern over such issues would defeat such a purpose.

With the exception of Panama, most of Taiwan's diplomatic allies have little to offer China in strategic terms, as they are small nations that require substantial financial assistance.

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There is no point for Beijing to keep luring them with handsome sums of money if it no longer inflicts the kind of pain on Taipei that it hopes.

However, China is unlikely to stop using diplomacy to make the Tsai administration “pay” for its non-compliance with the so-called “1992 consensus.”

An op-ed by retired diplomat Hsu Mien-sheng (許敏生), which was published on Wednesday by the Chinese-language United Daily News, said that Beijing might go after the visa-free privileges Taiwanese enjoy in 167 nations.

Hsu, who was based at the Taipei Representative Office in the EU and Belgium between 2003 and 2008, said that although the government had been trying to obtain Schengen visa exemption for Republic of China passport holders since he joined the office, little progress was made during his time.

Hsu quoted an EU official as telling him prior to his departure in early 2008 that Taiwan had met all the requirements but one: being free of “political concerns.”

However, as the “concerns” were assuaged after former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) took office later that year and significantly improved cross-strait relations, Taiwanese were granted visa-free entry into the Schengen area in 2011.

Taiwanese have enjoyed the convenience provided by their visa-free privileges. The cross-strait diplomatic war has had effects mostly at the state level. Suspending cross-strait communication has only affected government-level dialogues and exchanges, while reducing the number of Chinese tourists to Taiwan has mainly hurt the tourism industry.

However, taking away visa-free privileges would upset many ordinary Taiwanese, given that they recorded 14.5 million overseas trips last year.

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If that does happen, it is unlikely that the public would remain indifferent to the diplomatic war.

The question is who would the public blame; China or the Tsai administration?

If the latter is blamed, the Democratic Progressive Party could face a wave of public pressure and discontent at an unprecedented level. It could see the party either be forced to reconcile with Beijing, or stand its ground, but lose public support.

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