

US port calls might unsettle China

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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A move by the US to renew naval port of call visits to Taiwan might serve as the greatest challenge to the “one China” policy since the 1972 Shanghai Communique that led to its inception.

Although US President Donald Trump called the policy into question when he spoke with President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) by telephone last year, he later accepted it and on Feb. 9 reiterated the US’ commitment to upholding it.

No doubt Trump was pressured into reversing his position to maintain stability in the region and to secure China’s support against a defiant North Korea. However, while US-China relations have been soured numerous times since Trump’s inauguration — over his accusations of Chinese currency manipulation, allegations of espionage by both sides and, most recently, by US patrols in the South China Sea following a Chinese military buildup — none of these issues has directly challenged the issue of greatest concern to Beijing: the “one China” policy.

Even the US’ renewal of weapons sales to Taiwan, while criticized by China, has not become a destabilizing factor in US-China relations, because it is merely the continuation of the Taiwan Relations Act.

Port of call visits, which were stated in a version of next year’s National Defense Authorization Bill, which was approved by the US Senate Committee on Armed Services, are a new development that Beijing would be forced to respond to if ratified by the US Senate.

While the move would better equip Taiwan militarily — it would direct the Pentagon to help Taiwan develop an indigenous undersea warfare program and recommends improved strategic cooperation with Taipei — of greater significance to Beijing is the challenge it poses to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) legitimacy.

The CCP has always sought to distract Chinese from its authoritarianism by projecting an image of strength in the face of foreign threats, but if it cannot respond to a threat to its claimed sovereignty over Taiwan it loses that legitimacy.

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China's denial of a US Navy request in April last year for its carrier group to visit Hong Kong is now better understood in the context of the arrival of China's Liaoning at the port on Friday.

Hong Kongers were invited to tour the vessel, which Chinese navy spokesman Liang Yang (梁阳) said was intended to show off China's "military might."

The move was clearly meant as a show of force against Hong Kong independence activists, and China did not want the visit to be overshadowed by recent memories of a larger US vessel.

It remains to be seen how China will respond to US Navy vessels making calls at Taiwan ports, but so far Beijing has only lodged protests with Washington.

Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Lu Kang (陆慷) said that "China cannot accept" the move and called it "meddling in China's internal affairs."

This is similar to the "soft" reaction from China last week after patrols by US Navy destroyer the USS Stethem within 12 nautical miles (22.22km) of Triton Island (Jhongjian Island, 冲绳岛) in the Paracel Islands (Xisha Islands, 西沙群岛).

Lu said the patrols were a "serious political and military provocation," but Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) spoke on the telephone hours later about mounting tensions on the Korean Peninsula, not even mentioning the South China Sea.

Bonnie Glaser, director of the China Power Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank, said that she thinks China is "keen to keep Sino-US relations on an even keel," but added that China "can't appear to be making concessions or taking steps in response to US pressure."

China might have some tough decisions to make once US carriers and destroyers are anchored at Taiwan's ports.

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