

The US rebalances its relations

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US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on Thursday spoke at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, saying that the US was seeking stronger economic and military ties with India to balance an increasingly defiant China.

“The United States seeks constructive relations with China, but we will not shrink from China’s challenges to the rules-based order and where China subverts the sovereignty of neighboring countries and disadvantages the US and our friends,” he said.

The remarks were the culmination of a year fraught with conflict in the two nations’ relationship, starting with US President Donald Trump in April accusing China of “currency misalignment,” which he said was more significant than “currency manipulation” as a cause of trade deficits. In the following month, two Chinese aircraft conducted an unprofessional intercept of a US Navy surveillance aircraft over the South China Sea, and in July, Trump blasted China on Twitter for doing nothing about North Korea despite making “hundreds of billions of dollars a year in trade” from the US.

Tillerson at the time said that relations between the two nations had reached a “pivot point,” while Orville Schell, the head of the center on US-China relations at New York’s Asia Society, said that Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) had missed the chance for convergence and that Trump was “starting to turn on him.”

In a hearing in Washington on Oct. 12, the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs unanimously passed the Taiwan Travel Act, which seeks to encourage visits between Taiwan and the US at all levels.

The move immediately drew criticism from China, with Chinese Ambassador to the US Cui Tiankai (崔天凯) urging US leaders to use their power to block the bill. US Representative Eliot Engel, a ranking member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, responded by saying that “the letter stood out because of its threatening tone” and that “it is interesting to me that they [China] now feel that they can get away with these kinds of threats and vague pressure tactics with the US Congress.”

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In seeking to strengthen ties with Taiwan and India, the Trump administration should remain cordial with Pakistan and China, while asserting its right to define its own foreign relations despite protests.

The US is highly unlikely to stop recognizing the PRC, but it might refuse China's insistence on the so-called "one China" principle. Taiwan should stress with US lawmakers its intention to restructure its Constitution and to assert its sovereignty, whether under the ROC framework with a redefined national territory or as a newly named nation.

Meanwhile, US military officials on Monday allegedly inspected the Republic of China (ROC) Navy's fast combat support ship Panshi to evaluate its capacity for battlefield medical support. Sources said that the inspection was to prepare for potential conflict with North Korea, but the choice to work with the ROC Navy instead of China's People's Liberation Army Navy, which has five hospital ships, the largest of which houses 300 beds, is evidence of the deteriorating US-China relationship.

Taiwan will become increasingly important to the US, both militarily and politically. The US has a tradition of continuously shifting geopolitical alliances to maintain balances of power, and Taiwan will once again be important in facilitating this strategy as it applies to China.

The US maintained relations with Taiwan and India in the 1960s, under the administrations of presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, as a bulwark against communist China and Russia. However, under former US president Richard Nixon's administration, the US switched alliances to Pakistan and China to counter the greater threat of Russia.

Relations between the US and Pakistan began to sour from the early 2000s with the US accusing Pakistan of harboring terrorists, and Pakistan accusing the US of doing nothing to control security in Afghanistan.

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