

US' flag removal points at real shift

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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The removal of the Republic of China (ROC) flag from the Web sites of several US government agencies has raised concerns about whether one of Taiwan's most strategically important allies is slipping away amid pressure from China.

On Wednesday, the Chinese-language United Daily News reported that the ROC flag, which until recently was displayed on pages about Taiwan on the Web sites of the US Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs and the US Trade Representative, had disappeared.

The discovery dashed already slim hopes that the state department's removal of the ROC flag from its official Web site in September last year was simply a design change after US President Donald Trump's administration took office — or an “isolated case,” as Representative to the US Stanley Kao (高志彬) put it — rather than a shift in Washington's policy toward Taiwan.

Even though the American Institute in Taiwan, which serves as the US' de facto embassy in Taipei in the absence of diplomatic ties, reiterated the US' commitment to the Three Communiques and the Taiwan Relations Act in the wake of the two separate events, the lack of any explanation is certainly cause for worry.

For a long time, the US has carefully balanced its ties with Taiwan and China.

Washington has tried not to poke the bear that happens to be its biggest creditor and trading partner. On the other hand, the US is bound by past commitments to assist the nation of 23 million people in maintaining effective military defenses and to stand with it on matters of shared values, such as democracy and human rights.

It is naive to think that this cautiously maintained balance can last forever, as too many variables are involved and even a minor policy change by one of the nations involved could increase its precariousness.

This is particularly the case if the change comes from Beijing, an unpredictable regime known

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for its attempts to influence others.

Instead of being characterized by outright hostility and provocations, as seen during former president Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) administration between 2000 and 2008, cross-strait relations today are more of a tug-of-war, with both sides testing each other's limits.

On one side, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) has held her ground and withstood mounting pressure from China — and also from people with a vested interest there — for her administration to make political compromises.

In her year-end news conference on Dec. 30, Tsai said negotiations were not necessarily conducted through language, because “sometimes your posture and attitude can also be a form of negotiation.”

This could be seen as a strategy of “playing it cool,” a stance that seeks to avoid letting the enemy know how their actions truly affect you.

Ostensibly fazed by Tsai's lukewarm responses to its periodic attempts to oppress Taiwan, Beijing has upped its game, going to extremes with browbeating tactics — such as putting pressure on foreign relations and international organizations — and exploring other uncharted territory.

Chances are high that if the US government is systematically removing the ROC flag from its official Web sites, the reason behind it is China.

Such incidents could truly undermine Taiwanese perceptions of US-Taiwan ties, as the moves could be interpreted as reduced support from the US, an important player in the maintenance of cross-strait peace.

However, we should conduct an overall examination of US policies before overreacting and jumping to the scary conclusion that our ally is walking away from us.

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