Written by Stephen M. Young
Monday, 05 February 2018 06:50

The end of 2017 and the first weeks of the new year saw several notable developments involving cross-strait relations. In late December and early January, in an alarming new practice, People's Liberation Army bombers several times conducted reconnaissance flights that circumnavigated Taiwan. On Jan. 4, the People's Republic of China (PRC) also unilaterally announced a new northbound flight path for its civilian aircraft (the M503 route) along the middle of the Taiwan Strait that violated a longstanding practice to keep such aircraft away from the centerline of this sensitive body of water.

Beijing has also made it clear, despite urging from Washington and other interested parties, that it would oppose a Taiwan delegation attending the annual meeting of the World Health Assembly in Geneva. It will be recalled that during the Ma Ying-jeou (□□□) administration, Taiwan did send delegations to this gathering.

Meanwhile, Taiwan's friends in the US Congress have advanced several new bills aimed at improving Taiwan's access to the US. The Taiwan Travel Act, passed by the House in early January, will presumably be taken up by the Senate soon. This seeks to liberalize access by Taiwan military and diplomats in visiting the US. The Taiwan Security Act, currently before the Senate, seeks to do much the same with regard to Taiwan military personnel visiting the US.

Should these bills advance to the White House, it is unlikely the president would sign them,

given pass indications that the Executive Branch is loath to have the Congress press policy prescriptions like this on it. That said, this strong support for Taiwan reflects the broad favor Taipei continues to enjoy on the Hill.

In the Executive Branch, in January, the Pentagon's National Defense Strategy, in its unclassified summary, singled China out as a "strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features of the South China Sea." This piece also listed addressing "long-term competition with China and Russia" as the "principle priorities" of American defense strategy.

This hardening attitude in US politics toward China reflects growing impatience over China's assertive approach in the Asia-Pacific. Imbedded in this is specific concern regarding the threat to our longtime friends and allies in the region, which includes Taiwan, along with Japan, South Korea, ASEAN countries and Australia to the south.

All this occurred as the second anniversary of President Tsai Ing-wen's (□□□) election approaches, and at a time when the Taiwan government has studiously avoided taking any actions that might be perceived as provocative by the mainland. True, tourism by Chinese nationals to the island has dropped significantly since Tsai took office, as has the cross-strait trade which flourished under Ma Ying-jeou's administration.

With the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) continuing to show significant decline in voter appeal, it is unclear whether Beijing is trying to bolster its favored party's standing through these actions. Or perhaps it is simply acting in a fit of pique at Madame Tsai's continued unwillingness to emulate her predecessor's accommodating approach to cross-strait relations.

It will be recalled that Ma embraced the amorphous and controversial "1992 consensus" as president, and attended the precedent-shattering Singapore meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping (□□□) in late 2015. While Tsai has avoided thus far any move to endorse the "1992 consensus," neither has she repudiated it. Nor has she or her ruling Democratic Progressive Party taken any steps toward pushing independence, a clear red line for Beijing.

So why this new show of aggressive hostility toward Taiwan and its people by the Chinese leadership?

One would have expected moves of this sort to occur during the run-up last October to the Chinese Communist Party's Party 19th National Congress. Or perhaps during the annual spring gathering of the public, but non-substantive National People's Congress. Nor has there been a significant shift in the Trump administration's generally benign approach to Sino-US relations, at least until the announcement last month by the trade-leery president that his administration is levying new tariffs on PRC solar panels and washing machines. This despite criticism by some analysts that this will be more damaging to American business interests.

President Trump is known to thrive on developing sympathetic personal relations based on a fair amount of fawning toward him personally. Following the rocky start when president-elect Trump perhaps naively accepted a congratulatory phone call in December 2016 from President Tsai, his relations with the mainland began to improve. President Xi played to the new American leader's fragile ego by lavishing him with praise when they first met early last year at Trump's Mar-a-Largo Club in Florida.

This astute approach on Mr Xi's part continued during Trump's "state-plus" visit to China in the fall. The two then met at the annual APEC summit in Manila, and the bilateral relationship appears to have stabilized. As this is being written, it is too early to say that Sino-American relations are now trending downward, but recent events bear scrutiny.

Given the strong military role in this administration, Defense Secretary [Jim] Mattis' upcoming visit to China will be closely watched. The Pentagon has generally taken a skeptical view of Chinese military modernization efforts, and shares widespread regional concern over Beijing's aggressive approach to territorial claims in the South China Sea. Pacific Command's Freedom of Navigation operations in the area, while fully consistent with international law, have also not been well received by Beijing.

Turning to Taiwan internal developments, local elections are nearly a year away, and historically focus mostly on domestic issues. Legislative and presidential elections are still far over the horizon. Though Tsai's popularity has sagged — a seeming generic trend in Taiwan politics — she does not as yet face a serious challenge to her candidacy in 2020.

The once mighty KMT still does not appear to have gotten its act together after its historic losses back in 2016. Nor has a dominant third force emerged in Taiwan politics, though the

New Power Party has shown an ability to galvanize young voters around a number of primarily domestic issues.

The key question now is whether China plans to further ratchet up tensions with Taiwan this year. Any attempt to do so will likely be as much aimed at deflecting domestic unhappiness toward President Xi's policies as to meddle in Taiwan domestic politics. But the latter is something that always holds the danger of backfiring to Beijing's disadvantage.

In sum, 2018 is starting out with as many questions as answers concerning future trends in cross-strait relations. Will Mr Xi's bromance with Mr Trump sour over trade disputes? Will Beijing seek a new flare-up in cross-strait relations? Can President Tsai and her party regain their domestic footing? Or will they face a real challenge in the series of elections that lies ahead? Observers in all three countries, as well as the rest of East Asia, will be following this closely.

Postscript: As I was finishing this piece, news of the removal of Republic of China flag images from some US government Web sites broke. Though I am now safely out of government, I do not see this as a major cause for concern. The fundamentals of US-Taiwan relations are firm and longstanding, regularly reaffirmed by administrations of both parties and solidly backed by the US Congress and the American people.

Stephen M. Young was director of the American Institute in Taiwan from 2006 to 2009 and served as US ambassador to Kyrgyzstan and consul-general in Hong Kong.

Source: Taipei Times - Editorials 2018/02/05