

## Surface maneuvering from all sides

Written by Taipei Times Editorial  
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President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) yesterday set sail from a naval base in Yilan County's Suao Township (蘇澳) to observe a military-readiness drill, less than 24 hours after Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) went aboard the Chinese destroyer Changsha to watch his navy's largest-ever military display.

Unlike Xi, Tsai felt no need to play dress up by donning military fatigues for her voyage aboard the Keelung, her first on a warship since taking office nearly two years ago.

Much has been made of the fact that just hours after Xi watched a sail past by a People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy flotilla of 48 warships and submarines, Beijing announced that it would hold a live-fire drill in the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday, its first in almost three years.

Some analysts see Xi's flexing of the PLA's muscles as a warning to Taiwan amid a show of increased support from Washington, with last month's enactment of the US Taiwan Travel Act, last weekend's announcement that the US Department of State had approved a marketing license for US manufacturers to sell submarine-building technology to Taipei and hawkish John Bolton taking office as White House national security adviser on Monday.

Bolton, as recently as January, promoted the idea of Washington diplomatically recognizing Taiwan if Beijing does not back down from its militarization program in its artificially enhanced islets in the Spratly Islands (Nansha Islands, 南沙群島).

Wire agencies' reports and other international media spoke of next week's planned exercise coming amid heightened tensions over increased US support for Taiwan, which is at least a bit of a change from the standard boilerplate language of "rising tensions since independence-leaning Tsai's election."

However, it appears more likely that the messages Beijing is sending with yesterday's and next week's exercises are aimed more at Washington, Pyongyang and Moscow than Taipei.

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The past two weeks have seen an increasing tit-for-tat war of words between US President Donald Trump and China over trade that still has the potential to become a real trade war.

Meanwhile, with North and South Korea and the US gearing up for crucial summits between their leaders and discussions of Pyongyang's nuclear program, Xi, miffed at being left out of those talks, has been taking steps to ensure that Beijing's interests are not forgotten — hence the secrecy-shrouded trip to Beijing by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un at the end of last month.

Xi could also be seeking to divert the attention of Washington and its NATO allies from their anger with Russian President Vladimir Putin, first over the poisoning of a former Russian spy and his daughter in England, which led to a round of diplomatic expulsions from Russian embassies in more than two dozen nations, and second over the alleged chemical weapons attack one week ago by Syrian government forces on the rebel-held town of Douma.

While Syria and its main ally, Russia, have denied that chemical weapons were used or that Syrian forces carried out the attack, Trump is reportedly mulling a military response, as have the leaders of several US allies.

After a similar attack last year in Khan Sheikhou, Trump approved dropping US Tomahawk missiles on a Syrian airbase. Something similar, by the US and/or other nations, is expected this time around; while the military target(s) would be in Syria, their message would aimed at the Kremlin.

Xi making noise in the Taiwan Strait would be a welcome diversion for Putin, since the Strait has been repeatedly listed as a key flash point for potential geopolitical conflict.

All this great power posturing and maneuvering could leave Taiwan suffering either from collateral damage, such as Taiwanese manufacturers being hit by higher US tariffs on goods made in China, and Beijing stepping up its efforts to entice this nation's diplomatic allies and restrict it from the international stage, or by being as seen little more than a bargaining chip.

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