

Beijing unease calls for boldness

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Thursday, 31 May 2018 08:37

Taiwan's loss of two diplomatic allies in less than a month says much about the recent state of mind of China's leaders, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) said on Thursday last week in response to news that Burkina Faso had cut ties with Taiwan.

Beijing's increased suppression and bullying tactics are due mainly to its sense of unease and lack of confidence, and they do not demonstrate strength, Tsai said.

She said the reason for this was Taiwan's strengthening of ties with powerful nations, especially the US.

Burkina Faso severed ties with Taiwan less than a month after the Dominican Republic did so. In the middle of June last year, Panama ended a century of diplomatic relations.

It seems that Taiwan, under Tsai, is hemorrhaging allies at an accelerating rate. Is she correct that this phenomenon is symptomatic of an increasingly unsure and worried Beijing?

Certainly, the acceleration matches the apparent resolve of Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) to address the "Taiwan question" with urgency. During his opening address to the Chinese Communist Party's 19th National Congress in October last year, Xi left little to the imagination regarding his intentions toward Taiwan.

"We have the resolve, the confidence and the ability to defeat separatist attempts for Taiwanese independence in any form," he said.

Since then, there have been several significant developments in the US, demonstrating revitalized interest in protecting Taiwan and improving security ties.

Although not yet passed by the US Senate, the US House of Representatives passed the

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National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 on Thursday last week. The law would require the US secretary of defense to develop plans on how to “support US foreign military sales and other equipment transfers to Taiwan, particularly for developing asymmetric warfare capabilities.”

US President Donald Trump in March signed into law the Taiwan Travel Act, which allows for high-level visits between Taiwanese and US government officials.

US Senator Cory Gardner, chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific and International Cybersecurity Policy, on Saturday visited Taiwan and met with Tsai at the Presidential Office before attending a dinner hosted by Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu (吳德斗).

Together with US Senator Edward Markey, Gardner has just proposed a bill calling for the US to advocate for Taiwan’s participation in international organizations.

On his arrival in Taiwan, Gardner said that the US “has an obligation to do everything it can to strengthen Taiwan’s international standing,” adding that “the success and security of Taiwan is in the greater interest of the United States.”

The US continues to demonstrate its presence in the South China Sea, with two US Navy warships on Sunday sailing near islands claimed by China.

What is the reason for the US’ willingness to be more assertive and apparently pro-Taiwan? Is it a return to the more pro-Taiwan stance of the Republican Party after the more conciliatory approach of former US president Barack Obama’s administration?

Is Trump trying to put the squeeze on China for other reasons, using Taiwan as a bargaining chip, albeit in a more benign way than had been feared when he first took office?

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Or, is it because Trump is more willing to leave military decisions to his generals, who are looking more at the strategic situation — Taiwan as a “permanent aircraft carrier” in the region, located in the first island chain?

Whatever the case might be, if Tsai is right, then she could start planning to be more assertive.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2018/05/31](#)