

Warming ties between Taiwan, US

Written by Sumit Kumar
Saturday, 23 June 2018 00:25

In a major attempt to boost US-Taiwan ties, a new American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) complex was inaugurated in Taipei on Tuesday last week.

“We should all be proud of this milestone, which is a symbol of the close cooperation and enduring friendship between the United States and Taiwan,” AIT Director Kin Moy said at the event.

US Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs Marie Royce said that the new building was a symbol of the strength and vibrancy of the US-Taiwan partnership.

Dedicating the building, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) said: “We also rededicate ourselves to our common sense of purpose... As free and open democracies, we have an obligation to work with one another to defend our values and protect our joint interests.”

Not surprisingly, in a stern message to the US, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged Washington to “scrupulously abide by its promises to China over the Taiwan issue, correct their wrong actions, and avoid damaging China-US relations and peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.”

Close ties between Washington and Taipei are not a new phenomenon. Despite having severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 1979, successive US administrations have continued to boost military and other ties with Taiwan. Improving relations with Taiwan has also become a priority of US President Donald Trump’s administration. He received a telephone call from Tsai in December 2016 and has also questioned the “one China” policy.

In December last year, Trump signed into law the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018, which calls for strengthening the defense partnership between the US and Taiwan.

The act states that the US should invite Taiwan to participate in military exercises, consider

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“reestablishing port of call exchanges between the navies of the two sides” and emphasize continuing US legal commitments.

In March, Trump signed the Taiwan Travel Act, clearing the way for visits by high-ranking US officials, such as Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs Deputy Assistant Secretary Alex Wong (黃亞歷), who visited Taipei and met Tsai that month.

As for Beijing’s letter asking dozens of international airlines to change the way they refer to Taiwan on their Web sites and threatening to disrupt their operations in China if they did not comply, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders slammed the demand, calling it “Orwellian nonsense.”

These developments show that the latest one — the inauguration of the de facto US embassy in Taipei — is only part of a well-thought-out plan by the Trump administration to sustain ties with Taiwan.

Of course, the transforming efforts by the Trump administration have been necessitated by various factors.

One of them is Trump’s distrust of China. He is disturbed by the fact that Beijing has not shown a willingness to cooperate with the US on several bilateral and international issues, including the US trade deficit, Iran and North Korea.

As such, while slapping tariffs on China, risking a trade war between the two nations, the Trump administration has also been stepping up pressure on Beijing on all sides, including expanding relations with Taiwan.

China’s extremely assertive posturing has also propelled the US leadership to ensure that Taiwan can effectively meet any existential threat from Beijing. As Beijing takes efforts to militarize the South China Sea, the strategic location of Taiwan — which is a key link in the “first island chain” from South Korea in the north to the Philippines in the south — can play a vital role in restricting China’s expansionist policy in the western Pacific.

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Another reason for a marked shift in US policy toward Taiwan could be the appointment of John Bolton as national security adviser, given his pro-Taiwan approach. This sentiment is also reflected in US Secretary of Defense James Mattis warning China at this year's IISS Shangri-La Dialogue against disrupting the "status quo." Swelling bipartisan voices in the US to take strong steps to protect Taiwan's interests against China have also emboldened the Trump administration to infuse new vigor in the relationship.

As China uses its economic clout to force several nations — Nigeria and Panama among others — to derecognize Taiwan, unilaterally opened a new air route over the Taiwan Strait and increased its military in the vicinity, Taipei has all the more reasons to see enhanced support from the US. Taiwan's security concerns are among the reasons Washington withdrew an invitation for China to participate in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise this summer.

A Taiwanese think tank has called on the Tsai government to lease out military bases for US defense use, which would enhance the US' presence in the South China Sea and help Taiwan uphold its sovereignty.

As Taiwan and the US step up their relationship, their shared interests in maintaining peace and security in the Taiwan Strait and effectively tackling China's power maneuvering in the region will continue to shape bilateral ties.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2018/06/23](#)