

After the US government passed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act late last month, the Chinese government announced early this month that it would retaliate by suspending visits to Hong Kong by US military ships and imposing sanctions on five US non-governmental organizations for instigating the “anti-extradition” protests in the territory.

The US Navy has a long history of making port calls in Hong Kong. Although it has military bases in the region, including the Port of Manila and Da Nang Port in Vietnam, the US still favors Hong Kong for several reasons, including the high level of English proficiency in the territory, the living standard and the safety of the food supply.

After the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China, Beijing and Washington signed an agreement for Chinese reviews of US applications for US military ships and aircraft visits to be done on a case-by-case basis. Beijing’s indefinite suspension of all applications is a breach of that agreement.

The US presumably is not too surprised at this, as China has repeatedly denied US naval vessels permission to dock in Hong Kong since 1997 for political reasons at times of high tension between the two countries, such as the 2001 collision between a US EP-3 surveillance plane and a Chinese J-8 fighter, the 2006 sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea, last year’s climax in the US-China trade war and when Washington passed the act in support of Hong Kong.

US Senator Ted Cruz, who is known for his friendliness to Taiwan and even attended Republic of China National Day celebrations this year, once suggested that the US make port calls in Taiwan. There are signs that Washington might be making preparations for this.

In June 2017, the US Senate Committee on Armed Services passed a provision in a 21-to-six vote that would allow US warships to make port calls in Taiwan. Due to protests from China, the bill was never voted on in the US Senate. At the end of that year, the American Institute in Taiwan reportedly contacted local marine supply operators, hoping that private companies would take over the supply of food, fresh water and daily commodities for US warships in the Taiwan Strait. In October last year, the US Office of Naval Research’s Thomas G. Thompson docked at the Port of Kaohsiung for three days. Although the Taiwanese and US sides called the visit an academic exchange, there was no lack of replenishment for the ship.

Taiwan the right choice for helping the US Navy

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This shows that as China rejects port calls in Hong Kong by US warships, Taiwan — which has the geographic advantage of being between the South China Sea north of the Philippines and the East China Sea south of Japan — is the best choice to take over.

From the perspective of the US' "one China" policy, this could perhaps be seen as going a bit too far, but politically speaking, it is not at all impossible that Washington will use port calls as bargaining chip in its attempts to restrain Beijing.

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Translated by Eddy Chang

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