

Bullying Lithuania can only fail

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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State-owned Taiwan Tobacco and Liquor Corp on Monday announced that it had purchased a shipment of 20,000 bottles of Lithuanian-produced dark rum. Originally destined for China, Beijing blocked the consignment as part of its campaign to punish Lithuania for allowing Taiwan to open a de facto embassy in its capital, Vilnius, on Nov. 18 last year.

Beijing had already retaliated by recalling its ambassador to Lithuania, downgrading diplomatic ties with the country, ordering Chinese businesses to enforce an embargo on Lithuanian goods, and threatening multinational corporations to do the same or risk being locked out of the Chinese market.

Lithuania last month was forced to shutter its embassy in China after Beijing ordered all Lithuanian diplomats and their dependents to turn in their diplomatic identification cards.

In its punishment, China is adhering to well-worn methods of applying intense diplomatic and economic pressure to isolate weaker nations and coerce them to fall into line with its political objectives. However, Lithuanians should take heart: Beijing's strong-arm tactics are destined to fail.

China last year attempted to punish Taiwan by placing an embargo on imports of Taiwanese pineapples. The plan backfired spectacularly. Taiwanese consumers responded en masse, offsetting the shortfall by ordering 41,687 tonnes of domestically produced pineapples in just four days.

To coincide with the announcement of Taiwan's purchase of Lithuanian rum, the National Development Council on Monday published a collection of rum recipes on Facebook, including rum-and-raisin French toast, and "dark 'n' stormy" cocktails. Taiwan's talented chefs and mixologists will no doubt get to work developing a range of rum-based cocktails and recipes to tickle Taiwanese tastebuds and feed Taiwan's booming cocktail trade.

Beijing tried the same trick with Australia, imposing "anti-dumping" tariffs on Australian wine, beef, barley, lobsters, sugar and coal. However, friendly nations immediately stepped up. Australian wine exports to Europe in 2020 jumped 22 percent, with UK shipments surging 29

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percent, helping to offset the damage. Australians also mopped up the surplus, and consumers in Taiwan have been doing their bit.

In October last year, faced with an energy crunch and rolling blackouts across many Chinese cities, Beijing caved, releasing an estimated 1 million tonnes of Australian coal that was being held in Chinese warehouses by customs officials.

Another reason Lithuania need not worry is that China comprises just 1 percent of Lithuania's exports and this is likely to diminish in the near future as China's economy continues to contract due to myriad systemic problems.

There was further good news for Lithuania on Wednesday with the announcement that Taiwan has created a US\$200 million investment fund for Lithuanian industries, including semiconductors. Lithuania produces rare high-grade quartz sand, essential to manufacture silicon chips, and a delegation of Taiwanese businesses last year traveled to Lithuania to explore the construction of a silicon processing plant in the country.

It should come as no surprise that it is eastern European nations such as Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Slovakia that have been most receptive to engaging with Taiwan and most willing to stand up to China. They know a thing or two about totalitarian regimes, and the memories are still raw. Like Taiwan, they are young democracies that cherish their hard-won freedoms.

Taiwan must continue to do everything in its power to assist plucky Lithuanians in their hour of need. Not only is Taiwan morally bound to do so, but there are major diplomatic prizes to be won if Taipei can present itself as a key trusted ally in Europe's struggle to rebalance its relationship with China.

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