

Groups accuse government of M503 route deal

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The Executive Yuan is surrounded by barricades yesterday as protesters rallied against China's M503 flight route.

Photo: Liu Hsin-de, Taipei Times

Several groups yesterday rallied outside the Executive Yuan in Taipei, accusing the government of conceding to Beijing on the controversial M503 flight route in exchange for easing regulations on Chinese air passengers making transit stops in Taiwan.

Beijing launched its first flights using the new M503 route — which runs close to the median line of the Taiwan Strait — on Sunday.

Led by Economic Democracy Union convener Lai Chung-chiang (賴清德), the protesters accused the government of engaging in a “deal with the devil,” saying that the M503 route would threaten Taiwan's national security.

Beijing does not allow Chinese nationals to make transit stops in Taiwan en route to other nations, as it reportedly does not want them to have to show their passports in Taiwan during such stops — a requirement that some observers have said would signify that Beijing sees Taiwan as a separate country.

The Straits Exchange Foundation last year launched negotiations on the transit issue, saying the prohibition has put Taiwanese airlines at a disadvantage against their regional rivals.

Critics say President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration has jeopardized national security with its “careless” negotiations and the M503 route should not be used as a “bargaining chip” in

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exchange for economic growth spurred by Chinese tourists.

“While China advances step by step, the Ma Ying-jeou administration has ordered a total retreat,” Lai said.

The protesters demanded that Premier Mao Chi-kuo (馬英九) and Mainland Affairs Council Minister Andrew Hsia (夏立言) resign over the matter.

Yesterday’s rally also drew support from residents affected by the Taoyuan Aerotropolis project — a proposed development that would see commercial and residential areas, as well as a free economic pilot zone, established near Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport.

The aerotropolis project is being built primarily to accommodate the expected massive influx of Chinese tourists on transit stops in Taiwan, the protesters said.

They said they opposed the development plan because it would lead to the relocation of Taoyuan Naval Base — where P-3C maritime patrol aircraft are stationed — to Pingtung County, creating a gap in national defenses against China.

The aerotropolis project is expected to require the seizure of about 3,130 hectares of land that is home to about 46,000 people, making it the largest eviction plan in the nation’s history.

Meanwhile, lawmakers questioned Hsia yesterday about a discrepancy in the number of flights that used the M503 route on Sunday. China said 33 civilian flights used the route, while Taiwan said it counted 32.

Hsia said the total was 31 on Sunday, plus one Cathay Pacific flight at 1am yesterday.

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“China had the 33 figure because it was the total number scheduled for Sunday,” Hsia said in response to a question during a meeting of the legislature’s Internal Administration Committee.

In presenting a report and answering questions at the meeting, Hsia said that surveillance did not detect any Chinese military aircraft using the new flight route.

Ministry of National Defense officials said that radar stations that can track Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) jet fighters detected no such military activities in the M503 flight zone on Sunday.

“Our military intelligence units and radar stations will continue their round-the-clock surveillance and tracking of Chinese PLA aircraft activity,” the ministry said in a statement.

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