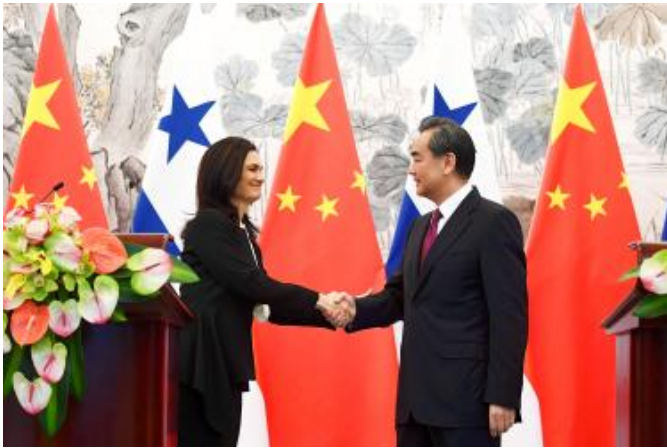


Taiwan severs official ties with Panama

Written by Taipei Times

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Panamanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Isabel de Saint Malo, left, shakes hands with her Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, during a joint press briefing yesterday after they signed a joint communique agreeing to establish diplomatic relations in Beijing.

Photo: AFP

Taiwan is cutting diplomatic ties with Panama after the Central American country switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, Minister of Foreign Affairs David Lee (李顯赫) announced yesterday.

“To safeguard our nation’s sovereignty and dignity, we have decided to terminate diplomatic ties with Panama immediately,” Lee said at a news conference, in which he also expressed Taiwan’s “deep anger and regret” about Panama’s decision.

Taiwan is also to halt all bilateral cooperative projects, cut all assistance to Panama, and pull out its diplomatic staff and technical missions from the country, Lee said.

Even though the two nations had maintained diplomatic ties for more than a century, Panamanian President Juan Carlos Varela caved in to Beijing for “economic interests” and ignored Taiwan’s long-term assistance that supported its overall development, Lee said.

Lee described Panama’s diplomatic switch as “most unfriendly” and accused Panama of “deceiving the Republic of China government until the last moment.”

He said that Taipei felt a sense of “strong dissatisfaction and anger” about the move, but

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reaffirmed that Taipei would not engage in a contest of “checkbook diplomacy” with Beijing.

Taiwan also “strongly protests and condemns Beijing for luring Panama to switch diplomatic ties, squeezing Taiwan’s space in the international community and hurting Taiwanese feelings,” he said.

Taiwan’s response came after Varela announced that Panama was establishing diplomatic ties with China, saying in a televised address that it represents the “correct path for our country.”

At the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing yesterday, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi (王毅) and Panamanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Isabel de Saint Malo signed a joint communique establishing diplomatic relations, followed by a champagne toast.

Wang said he was sure relations between the two countries would have a “bright future.”

De Saint Malo said she hoped the new relationship would lead to trade, investment and tourism opportunities, in particular “exporting more goods from Panama to China.”

In the joint communique, Panama said it would not maintain any official ties with Taiwan and also agreed to recognize that there is only “one China” and that Taiwan is part of it.

Panama’s decision leaves Taiwan with 20 diplomatic allies, 11 of which are in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The decision is widely seen as a result of China’s mounting efforts to apply pressure on Taiwan since President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) took office on May 20 last year.

Lee criticized Panama for keeping Taiwan in the dark about the move, but said there had been

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signs of Panama's intentions and Taiwan used every means at its disposal to keep the Central American nation from moving in that direction, without going into specific details.

One of the signs was that Panama did not announce a successor after then-Panamanian ambassador to Taiwan Alfredo Martiz Fuentes on April 30 left his post to take over as Panama's social security chief, even though Martiz told Tsai on April 20 that bilateral relations were solid.

In addition, Ambassador to Panama Miguel Tsao (譚世明) has not been able to present his credentials since arriving in the country in the middle of last month.

The diplomatic rift came nearly one year after Tsai visited Panama in June last year on her first state visit.

Tsai attended the inaugural ceremony of the expanded Panama Canal and witnessed Taiwan's donation of 3,000 boxes of flu medicine to help combat an epidemic of the H1N1 flu virus.

The Republic of China and Panama established diplomatic ties on Jan. 16, 1910.

Panama is the second diplomatic ally to cut ties since Tsai took office, the first being Sao Tome and Principe, which recognized Beijing in December last year.

In March last year, China re-established official ties with the Gambia, more than two years after the small African nation cut off relations with Taiwan.

Panama has actively sought to set up ties with China in the past.

According to a US Department of State diplomatic message released by WikiLeaks, Panama

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tried to establish relations with Beijing in 2009 without success.

Additional reporting by AP

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