

US backs expanded military exchanges, port calls

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The US House of Representatives on Friday passed the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018, which includes US backing for expanded military exchanges with Taiwan and amendments to US Navy port of call stops in Taiwan.

The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which serves as the foundation for commercial, cultural and other relations between Taiwan and the US, and the “six assurances” are included in the bill, which cleared with a 344 to 81 vote.

It is the “sense of [US] Congress” that, in accordance with the TRA, the US should make available and provide timely review of requests for defense articles and services that might be necessary for Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability, the bill said.

The US should seek opportunities for expanded training and exercises with Taiwan, and encourage Taiwan’s continued investment in asymmetric self-defense capabilities that are mobile and survivable against threatening forces, it added.

It was also the “sense of Congress” that “Taiwan should significantly increase its defense budget to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability.”

A “sense of Congress” is only a formal expression of opinion and is not legally binding.

Many amendments to the bill were also passed, including two on Taiwan.

One amendment requires the US secretary of defense to report to congressional committees by no later than Sept. 1 next year on “the feasibility and advisability” of the US Navy making port of call stops in Taiwan and of the Republic of China Navy making port of call stops in US territories.

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The other amendment pertains to normalizing the transfer of defense articles and defense services to Taiwan, again using a “sense of Congress” clause.

It stipulates that no later than 120 days after the US secretary of defense receives a letter of request from Taiwan with respect to the transfer of a defense article or service to Taiwan, the secretary, in consultation with the US secretary of state, should submit a congressional report on the issue.

Taiwan yesterday expressed its gratitude to the US Congress for its interest in Taiwan’s defense and the security ties between the two.

“We will continue to attach importance to investment in national defense and bolster our self-defense capabilities, and stay in close contact with friends in the US to ensure regional peace and stability,” Presidential Office spokesman Sidney Lin (林錫山) said.

The US Senate is also to vote on a draft National Defense Authorization Act, which was recently passed by the US Senate’s Armed Services Committee. If the version is different from that of the US House of Representatives, the two chambers are to negotiate a final version.

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