

US' new fact sheet reflects 'warming' ties

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Old and new versions of the US Department of State's online fact sheet on Taiwan are pictured in a composite screen grab, with notable changes highlighted for emphasis.

Photo: Screen grab and graphic by the Taipei Times

Changes to the US Department of State's fact sheet on Taiwan indicate a significant warming in relations between the two nations, an academic said yesterday, as Beijing denounced them as "political manipulation."

The department's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs on Thursday updated its online fact sheet on Taiwan-US relations, removing statements saying that Washington acknowledged Beijing's "one China" position and did not support Taiwanese independence.

A previous version of the document opened with the statement: "The United States and Taiwan enjoy a robust unofficial relationship" and said the US acknowledged "the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China."

In the updated version, the statement mentioning Taiwan as a part of China has been removed, and the document now opens with the statement: "As a leading democracy and a technological powerhouse, Taiwan is a key US partner in the Indo-Pacific."

Yeh Yao-Yuan (葉耀元), chair of International Studies and Modern Languages at the University of St Thomas in Houston, Texas, wrote on Facebook that the changes signify a "striking warming of relations" between the US and Taiwan, mainly due to rising tensions between Washington and Beijing.

Even though the US still upholds its "one China" policy and strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan, Yeh said the US now sees Taiwan more as an important economic, security and democratic partner, and is more open to Taiwanese making their own decisions about their future.

The explanation for the US' "one China" policy has been completely removed, instead

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emphasizing the “six assurances,” Yeh said.

The narrative change places more emphasis on bilateral diplomatic interaction, which can be seen from the US dispatching high-level officials to visit Taiwan following the passage of the Taiwan Travel Act, he said.

Inclusion of the US-Taiwan Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue, and the Technology, Trade and Investment Collaboration also lays the foundation for a bilateral free-trade agreement, Yeh said, adding that mention of the US-Taiwan Education Initiative only further highlights Taiwan's rising status in Washington's diplomatic and strategic plans.

Washington's ties with Taipei have warmed, because the US' attitude toward China has changed from partner to competitor, Yeh said.

While it does not indicate that the US is renouncing its “one China” policy or its policy of strategic ambiguity, it is nonetheless a great step forward, Yeh said.

Meanwhile, American Institute in Taiwan spokesman Ed Dunn yesterday sidestepped questions about the change, only reiterating the US' stance that Washington's “one China” policy has been guided by the US' Taiwan Relations Act, the Three Joint Communiques and the “six assurances” for more than four decades.

“Our commitment to Taiwan is rock-solid and contributes to the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and within the region,” he said.

The US is committed to deepening unofficial relations with Taiwan — a leading democracy and a critical economic and security partner of the US, Dunn added.

Citing Dunn's remarks, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Joanne Ou (歐陽) said that Washington has said that its policy toward Taiwan has not changed.

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Taiwan would continue to deepen relations with the US, and enhance its self-defense capabilities, its freedom and democratic system to promote cross-strait peace and security, she said.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs slammed the change, calling it “a petty act of fictionalizing and hollowing out the ‘one China’ principle.”

“This kind of political manipulation on the Taiwan question is an attempt to change the ‘status quo’ in the Taiwan Strait, and will inevitably stir up a fire that only burns [the US],” ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian (趙立堅) told reporters in Beijing.

Additional reporting by Reuters

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