Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

Pacific Island countries under pressure from China over Taiwan ties

China warned of “consequences” for Taiwan after officials from Beijing and Taipei attended a ceremonial event at a Pacific leaders summit, where major powers already had been urged to restrain from turning a meeting of mostly small island countries into a geopolitical sideshow.

The 18 member states and territories of the Pacific Islands Forum, which opened its annual summit in Palau's largest city Koror on Monday, do not include China, the United States or Taiwan.

However, battles for influence over the lucrative oceans and strategically important locations of the forum’s members this week threatened, as they have before, to overshadow its summit.

Some theater was expected at this year’s event because the host country, a western Pacific island nation next to the Philippines that has close ties to the U.S., is among the 11 countries and the Vatican that recognize Taiwan, which Beijing says is a part of China.

Several Pacific leaders didn’t attend this year’s event. While some absences were due to ill health or politics at home and signaled in advance, analysts speculated others might be missing due to pressure from Beijing.

Envoys from China and Taiwan trade barbs

Ahead of the summit, Palau President Surangel Whipps Jr. hosted joint events with Taiwan’s representative, Foreign Minister Lin Chia-lung, and at the opening ceremony placed the envoys from Beijing and Taipei in the same row, although they were in separate blocks of seats.

After the event, China's representative, Pacific Envoy Qian Bo, told reporters in Koror that the presence of Taiwanese officials was “very inappropriate.”

Asked if there would be consequences for Taiwan, Qian said there would “always be consequences.”

He denied the remarks were a threat and didn’t provide further details. Beijing has long sought Taipei’s exclusion from international summits through diplomatic pressure.

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Lin on Tuesday rejected the suggestion that his participation was illegitimate, accusing Beijing of dividing the region and “blaming the problems” on others.

“If we go to a party, we always follow the directions of the host,” Lin said in Koror. “However, whenever China goes to a party, it makes itself as if it's the host and China ruins the whole atmosphere of the party.”

Summit's host urged major powers not to interfere

China's criticism came at the end of an event where Palau's president urged the major powers present at the forum to leave the summit’s workings to member states.

“Our partners are welcome to sail with us but they do not choose our destination,” Whipps said in a speech. “The Pacific agenda must be driven by us and for us.”

Our partners are welcome to sail with us but they do not choose our destination - Surangel Whipps Jr.

Powerful nations interested in the Pacific have raced in recent years to shore up alliances among its leaders, intensifying a contest for influence between China and the U.S., Taiwan and forum members Australia and New Zealand.

That has led to an explosion in interest in the annual Pacific leaders meeting, which has grown from a casual affair to a summit with 2,000 attendees.

Non-member countries invited to attend are called partners, with China holding so-called dialogue partner status and Taiwan registered as a development partner.

Taiwan's attendance at summits has provoked China's ire before, with the issue resulting in partner countries being barred from attending last year's meeting in Solomon Islands.

Divisions are echoed among members

Ahead of each summit, Pacific leaders often try to focus attention on the matters they say are most pressing to them.

These include the effects of climate change on the region and the struggles related to he COVID-19 pandemic and the start of the Iran war that have befallen their national economies, with many of them reliant on foreign aid, tourism and increasingly expensive imported gasoline.

The leaders' ability to speak with one voice at the annual summit has come under pressure

However, as conflicting major powers over the past decade have escalated their efforts to secure access to Pacific waters and ports by inking security deals and offering funding, immigration access to their countries and other sweeteners, the leaders' ability to speak with one voice at the annual summit has come under pressure.

In a recent episode, the forum's foreign ministers failed to reach consensus on a statement criticizing Beijing's launch of a ballistic missile into the South Pacific Ocean in July.

While most member states strongly opposed China's actions, the refusal of two to endorse a proposed statement meant none was issued.

Some analysts say the absence of certain major politicians from the summit could be another example, although those present have downplayed suggestions that the representation of some states by senior officials instead of national leaders would undermine discussions.