

ASIA

Taiwan Gets Boost from Sino-US Airline Fuss, Observers Say

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TAIPEI, TAIWAN — Taiwan has garnered an unexpected burst of sympathy overseas this week as China stirred anger with demands that international airlines avoid calling the island a country.

The White House protested against China's request that airlines of various nations avoid labeling Taiwan, Hong Kong or Macau in ways that imply they are separate from China. White House Press Secretary Sara Sanders, in a statement, called the request "Orwellian nonsense."

Beijing's targets included Australia's flagship carrier, Qantas, prompting a call from Australia's foreign minister for China to avoid making threats.

Taiwan has been self-ruled for nearly seven decades since the establishment of the communist People's Republic of China. Beijing considers the island a part of its territory and is pushing for eventual reunification. The Chinese government has historically and consistently pressed other nations and multinational companies to accept its view on Taiwan.

Taiwan's president rejects the idea of a single China, and surveys on the island show most people support local autonomy over unification.

The airline flap and plus international protests make China look "over-aggressive," said Denny Roy, senior fellow at the East-West Center, a research organization in Honolulu.

Bonnie Glaser, director of the China Power Project at the Center for International and Strategic Studies, a Washington think tank, said the spat also takes Taiwan out of diplomatic isolation.

"Pushback from the U.S. and other countries will help to alleviate Taiwan's concerns about growing isolation due to Chinese pressure," Glaser said.

Chinese pressure

The Civil Aviation Administration of China in April sent letters to 36 foreign airlines, including some in the United States, demanding that they remove any references on their websites or in other material that suggests Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau are independent of China.

Airlines often list Taiwan as a separate entity when asking customers where they plan to travel, where their passports are issued or where their credit cards are registered.

Rebutting the White House response this week, China denied threatening or coercing the airlines, but did not relent on its position. The state-run China Daily news website, said Chinese officials had “informed the carriers that they got it wrong when they refer to China’s regions as a country.”

The spat shows that foreign governments find China is going too far in pressuring nongovernmental companies, said Shane Lee, a political scientist at Chang Jung Christian University in Taiwan.

“These countries don’t think that their national companies can be bullied by China,” Lee said. “It’s private business. Secondly they think China is going too far to push Taiwan.”

Taipei’s measured response

Taiwan thanked the U.S. government Sunday for protesting China’s action but has otherwise said little about Beijing’s demands to the airlines.

Roy thinks that relatively low-key approach has helped Taiwan’s image.

“This might be an instance where Taiwan doesn’t need to say anything,” he said. “Taiwan speaking up would only attract the criticism that Taipei is trying to exploit the situation, and would put Beijing in reflexive defensive mode, when we should instead make it clear that this is about Beijing being over-aggressive.”

Will airlines abide?

Airlines that have been asked to change their references to Taiwan will probably do as they are told, analysts say. China’s requests now extend a spat that started in January,

when Beijing requested that U.S. hotel giant Marriott International, American-owned Delta Air Lines and the Spanish fashion brand Zara to change the way they referred to Taiwan. The companies complied. Delta and the Marriott chain, both of which do business in China, apologized.

Qantas had changed its references to Taiwan in January in line with Beijing's views, multiple media outlets reported.

Airlines risk a backlash from Chinese netizens if they don't change, which could hurt their reputation among Chinese travelers, said Jeffrey Lowe, managing director of aviation services firm Asian Sky Group in Hong Kong.

Corporate reputations matter in China as more than 700 million Chinese are online, and Chinese travelers took 130 million trips overseas last year, more than in 2016.

"I think China is serious about its request," Lowe said. "They have certainly demonstrated that. There seems to be for whatever reason a renewed initiative or push from the central government to ensure that the named countries are being referred to in the correct manner that the central government would like to see."

The name-change requests mark just one part of China's long-term effort to isolate Taiwan, said Liu Yih-jiun, public affairs professor at Fo Guang University in Taiwan. Officials in Taipei say China has persuaded three former diplomatic allies to switch sides since 2016 and blocked it twice from observing the World Health Organization's annual assembly.

"I would just take the kind of gesture to make major airlines all over the world try to do things — I think it's just kind of a very minor or localized episode, but under the table the situation is far worse than that," Liu said.