

Taiwan question puts S. Korea to test over US-China row

2020-05-15 : 17:05



Taiwan Health Minister Chen Shih-chung holds a news conference on Taiwan's efforts to join the World Health Organization (WHO) in Taipei, Taiwan, Friday. / Reuters-Yonhap

By Yi Whan-woo

A group of senior U.S. Congress members has asked Korea, among 55 countries, to support Taiwan joining the World Health Organization (WHO) despite China's opposition.

Analysts said Friday this may test Korea again in its attempts to strike a balance between the U.S. and China, following the heightened Washington-Beijing standoff over the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a letter released May 8, Chairman Eliot Engel and ranking member Michael McCaul of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Chairman James Risch and ranking member Robert Menendez of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations argued that "diseases know no borders."

The 55 countries include Australia, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Sweden and Vietnam.

The lawmakers argued Taiwan's long record as a reliable partner on global health and its significant resources and expertise were "assets from which the world could and must more fully benefit."

The four Congress members also argued that Taipei was regularly invited to annual World Health Assembly (WHA) meetings from 2009 to 2016, until Beijing pressed the WHO and other international organizations not to allow it to attend their meetings in accordance with its "One China" policy.

"Such blatant prioritization of Beijing's political interests over the health and safety of Taiwan and the rest of the world has grave consequences," the lawmakers said.

They called for Taipei to be allowed to attend the 2020 WHA, slated for May 18 and 19, and urged "like-minded" countries to "reject Beijing's political pressure campaign aimed at excluding Taiwan."

Park Won-gon, an international relations professor at Handong Global University, said the Taiwan question can be said to be the Achilles heel of China and that siding with the U.S. "may lead to another THAAD retaliation."

Park was referred to China's retaliatory action against Korean businesses after the U.S. deployed a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery here. Beijing suspected THAAD's radar would be used to spy on its military activities.

Shin Yul, a political science professor at Myongji University, speculated Taiwan's WHO bid is part of a U.S. long-term plan to recognize Taiwan as an independent state, and thereby better hold China in check.

"It is therefore important for Korea to decide with which of the two world powers it would side with," Shin said.

Park and Shin reckoned Chinese President Xi Jinping, despite the Korean government's years-long wish, may not visit Korea, if Seoul joins with Washington over the Taiwan matter.

Likewise, the U.S. Congress could turn its back on Korea if it sides with China, leading the Seoul-Washington alliance to become more complicated under the Donald Trump administration.

"The alliance matters include the defense cost-sharing talks, and even Congress members appear to find Trump's demand too burdensome for Korea on this issue," Park said.

The analysts suggested the Moon Jae-in administration wait for decisions made by the some of the 55 countries and then take measures accordingly.

Meanwhile, a foreign ministry official declined to comment on whether the government had received the letter, citing diplomatic protocol that deters such revelations without both parties' consent.

The official said Taiwan's participation in WHO related meetings depends on decisions made by its chairperson.

