

Taiwan protests China's unilateral launch of new flight routes



Taipei, Jan. 4 (CNA) Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) protested strongly on Thursday against China's unilateral announcement of new flight routes close to the median line of the Taiwan Strait.

At a press conference, MAC Minister Chang Hsiao-yueh (蔣曉秋) said the decision was unacceptable, particularly if China intended to exert political pressure on Taiwan and impose a military threat under the guise of initiating new flight routes.

She called on China to immediately stop all flight operations on the routes and to initiate communication between the aviation authorities on both sides of the strait.

Such a move should have been discussed through cross-strait consultations, Chang said in response to an announcement by the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) earlier in the day that China was opening the M503 and other connecting routes to northbound commercial flights.

The CAAC said the move will help ease air traffic congestion

along China's southeast coast, meet the increasing demand for air travel west of the Taiwan Strait, and improve aviation safety.

The M503, which was opened in 2015 to China's southbound commercial traffic, was designed to avoid the routes used for domestic flights between Taiwan proper and its outlying Kinmen and Matsu islands and thus ensure aviation safety over the Taiwan Strait, the CAAC said, adding that it will maintain communication with its Taiwanese counterpart on the issue.

Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND), however, said it was strongly opposed to China's latest decision, which was taken without any consultation with Taiwan.

If Chinese airplanes intrude into the air space east of the median line in the Taiwan Strait and pose any threat to Taiwan's aviation safety, Taiwan's military will take action to intercept, warn and repel the intruding aircraft, the MND said.

Meanwhile, the Presidential Office said the Taiwan government was fully aware of the situation and will ensure the country's aviation safety and national security.

China's decision on Thursday followed a similar pattern as when it first decided to open the M503 route for commercial flights. At that time, China started with an announcement on Jan. 12, 2015 that it planned to launch four new flight routes over the Taiwan Strait, including a north-south M503 route.

The announcement drew strong opposition from Taiwan, which expressed fears that the plan would compromise aviation safety in the region and infringe on Taiwan's sovereignty.

Beijing eventually agreed to move the M503 six nautical miles to the west of the median line in the Taiwan Strait and use it only for southbound flights. China also canceled its plans for the other routes.

The M503 flight path, therefore, fell 10.2 nautical miles west of the median line and was officially opened on March 29, 2015 for commercial flights, following consultations with Taiwan.

(By Miao Zong-han, Lin Ke-lun and Evelyn Kao)

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