

Hong Kong to return Singapore troop carriers

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SINGAPORE - Hong Kong said on Tuesday it would release the nine Singaporean armoured vehicles it seized in November on their way home from military exercises in Taiwan, easing tensions between China and Singapore.

After the troop carriers had been seized, Beijing, which regained sovereignty over the former British colony of Hong Kong in 1997, warned countries against maintaining military ties with Taiwan, which it views as a wayward province.

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong wrote to Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying requesting the return of the carriers, and Hong Kong said it would handle the matter in accordance with its laws.

The seizure came amid signs of tension between China and Singapore, which has deepened its security relationship with the United States over the last year and remains concerned over China's assertive territorial stance in the South China Sea.

Since then, Beijing has been unsettled by U.S. President Donald Trump's statement, made in December before his inauguration, that the United States did not necessarily have to stick to its long-standing position that Taiwan is part of "one China".

Singapore's foreign affairs ministry said Hong Kong authorities would release the Singapore Armed Forces' (SAF) troop carriers and other equipment to the Singapore government, but it did not give details such as a time frame.

"This is a positive outcome," it said, adding that Lee had thanked Leung for Hong Kong's cooperation.

'State of Flux'

Analysts said the impounding of the troop carriers and China's subsequent comments on Taiwan showed Singapore had to adjust to the region's changing geopolitical climate.

"This whole incident is a reminder that things are in a state of flux," said Gillian Koh, deputy director for research at the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore.

"We didn't know that we would be influenced or infected by this state of flux, but this is now brought home very acutely and explicitly."

Singapore has a long-established, if low-key, military relationship with self-ruled Taiwan, using the proudly democratic mountainous island for infantry training.

Beijing has grudgingly tolerated this agreement since re-establishing diplomatic ties in the 1990s with Singapore, which recognises Beijing's "one China" policy that says Taiwan is part of its territory.

But China has repeatedly warned Singapore to stay out of the South China Sea dispute, where China's claims overlap with those of Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam.

Singapore has no claims in the South China Sea, but the open economy of Southeast Asia's biggest port depends on free navigation in the area.

In a post on his Facebook page, Singapore Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said: "SAF Terrexes are coming home to Singapore. Looking forward to this happy reunion with all Singaporeans in the Year of the Rooster."

Hong Kong's commissioner of Customs and Excise, Roy Tang, said in a statement the vehicles were seized because of "a suspected breach of the Hong Kong law.

"Hong Kong Customs has completed its investigation of the suspected breach. The investigation might lead to criminal prosecution," Tang was quoted as saying.

"The military vehicles and the associated equipment will be returned to Singapore through the carrier."

Singapore has said the vehicles were being shipped commercially as with previous exercises.