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China enacts law authorizing force against Taiwan

BEIJING—China enacted a law on March 14 authorizing the use of force against Taiwan if it moves toward formal independence, codifying its long-standing threat to attack the island.

The move could provoke a popular backlash in Taiwan and quickly unravel recent progress in cross-strait relations.

The National People's Congress, the ruling Communist Party's rubber-stamp parliament, approved the anti-secession law by a vote of 2,896 to 0, with two abstentions, on the last day of its annual session. The action defied U.S. appeals for restraint and strong protests by Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian as well as some of his political rivals.

Chen has vowed a tough response, and mainland analysts have expressed concern that Taiwan's pro-independence camp will use the law to rally public sentiment against Beijing and push for measures that could escalate tensions.

The vote came a day after President Hu Jintao was named chairman of the state military commission, replacing Jiang Zemin, the former president. Hu's appointment relieved Jiang of his final post and appeared intended to highlight the new leader's control of Taiwan policy and his resolve on the issue.

"We shall step up preparations for possible military struggle and enhance our capabilities to cope with crises, safeguard peace, prevent

wars and win the wars, if any," Hu said at a meeting of the Chinese military's delegation at the parliament. He also said the army should "always place the task of defending national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity . . . above anything else."

The legislation, as circulated in draft form last week, says the government "shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity" but is not specific about what would trigger such action against Taiwan.

Instead, it uses language that leaves the Chinese leadership with the flexibility to judge when an attack would be necessary, slightly altering the wording used by the gov-



A CHINESE ethnic minority delegate adjusts her headgear after the opening session of the National People's Congress in Beijing. China's parliament enacted a law on March 14 authorizing the use of force against Taiwan if it moves toward formal independence. —Reuters photo

ernment in previous statements of its Taiwan policy. The law says China should use force if Taiwan secedes, if "major events" move the island toward secession or if "possibilities for peaceful reunification are completely exhausted."

Premier Wen Jiabao was scheduled to speak at a nationally televised news conference March 14 immediately after the vote and the close of a ceremonial legislative session in which the party also pledged new measures to address rural poverty and rising social unrest.

Taiwan's government has repeatedly condemned the anti-secession law as a "blank check" to invade and suggested it might retaliate by pursuing sensitive revisions to

the island's constitution — a move China has warned could prompt a military response. In a speech Saturday, Chen said the law risked triggering a "full-phase backtracking of relations" and pledged to mobilize 1 million people for a protest against the Chinese decision.

"The Taiwanese people will not remain silent and will stand up," he said, adding that "the proposed anti-secession law will backfire, and end up only driving both sides of the strait further apart."

The Chinese government asserts that Taiwan is part of its territory and has as many as 700 missiles aimed at the island, which is about

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Vo calls for ban on food, medicine sales taxes

AUSTIN—With state lawmakers scrambling to find the money to fund a variety of new and existing programs, State Rep. Hubert Vo has proposed an amendment to the Texas Constitution that would put one potential revenue source off limits forever: a state sales tax on basic food and medicines.

"Putting food on the family table is tough enough for many working Texans," Vo said. "The least we can do is take the notion of taxing that food off the table."

Vo said legislative proposals as recently as 1997 have attempted to expand the state sales tax, including one that year by his predecessor to tax basic food and over-the-counter medicines.

Lawmakers in Austin are again considering a vast expansion of the sales tax that would make Texas' sales tax rate the highest in the nation by far. The latest proposal includes expanding the sales tax to soft drinks and other so-called "snack foods."

Vo's proposal would amend Article VIII of the Texas Constitution to prohibit the taxation of any food, drink, or medicine not already taxed under Chapter 151 of the state tax code.

Vo said his proposed amendment would guard against any temptation by the current or future legislatures to tax basic foodstuffs, broaden the definition of "snack foods," or draw distinctions between over-the-counter and prescription medicines.

HOUSTON RODEO DRAWING LARGE CROWDS



THOUSANDS of enthusiasts flock to the Reliant complex every day not only to watch rodeo competition, like the saddle bronc riding above, as well as the performances of the country's top entertainers but also to enjoy the outdoor activities that include a carnival. The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo ends on Sunday, March 20. The finals in the rodeo competition will be on Saturday, March 19, capped the performances of Clay Walker and Clint Black. The organizers say tickets are still available for the remaining days of the show. For ticket information, please go www.hlsr.com/ticket. —Houston Star photo by Arthur Bunda

House votes to change tax system

LEGISLATION CUTS SCHOOL PROPERTY TAXES, EXPANDS SALES TAX COVERAGE

AUSTIN—The Texas House on March 14 voted to approve a \$5.4-billion-a-year shift in state taxes by agreeing to cut school property taxes by a third while boosting and expanding the state sales tax and modifying business taxes.

The House approved the bill with a 78-70 vote, largely along party lines. Final passage in the House will send the juggernaut that is school finance reform to the Senate, where lawmakers will provide their own ideas about how to change the state's school and tax systems.

Before the March 14 final vote, the House approved a change to a business tax proposal that leaders had crafted over several days. The proposal had reached the floor late last week, but debate was put off because House leaders said they wanted to give lawmakers more time to di-

gest it. Under the plan, companies will have the option of paying a payroll tax or the state franchise tax, in which a company pays a tax on its capital or its net income. Most companies in Texas have legally avoided paying the franchise tax in recent years, but the House bill would force entities such as general partnerships to pay the franchise or payroll levy.

Rep. Mike Villarreal, D-San Antonio, said about 150,000 businesses in Texas now pay the franchise tax. He said about 475,000 businesses will pay the franchise or payroll tax under the House plan.

"If you do business in this state, you're going to have to pay your fair share," said Rep. Jim Pitts, R-Waxahachie.

Many Democrats have spoken against the bill because,

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Bill caps all state universities' tuition

AUSTIN—The Senate Finance Committee on March 9 slapped the University of Texas with a tuition cap that would effectively prevent officials from raising rates above the current level of \$94 per credit hour.

The vote came a day before the UT System Board of Regents meets to vote on a proposal that would, in fact, raise tuition 4.75 percent. The increase was not considered particularly controversial before the Finance Committee meeting, which drew attention to the escalation of tuition costs since the Legislature allowed campuses to set their own rates two years ago.

If schools opted to exceed the tuition cap, they would lose some state funding, depending on how much the tuition was increased.

The tuition cap must still be approved by the full Sen-



SEN. TOMMY WILLIAMS: Tuition deregulation "has exceeded my worst nightmares."

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FEATURE

Houston oi! Oh, it's South Vietnam!

THE aroma of *pho ga*, the murmuring of a pop song from Viet Nam, the comings and goings of Vietnamese families in and out of stores and restaurants chattering in Vietnamese. A sultry, shifty, humid sky, rice fields and oceans not an hour away...No, my friend, you're not in Sai Gon. You're in Houston, Texas! Make yourself at home with the thousands of

Vietnamese Houstonians!

And what a home: the oil and gas capital of the U.S., the largest medical center in the world, the NASA Space Center, a thriving arts culture, and the second largest population of Vietnamese people in America outside of Los Angeles. The unofficial count is now over 100,000 in a metropolitan area of five million, the population of Sai Gon.

It has three Vietnamese

radio stations and one cable TV station, several bookstores, uncountable restaurants, and two major international airports from which you can hop back to Viet Nam on almost any day of the year. Many here do.

And most recently, plans are brewing for an official designation of part of Midtown as "Little Saigon." Yes, the Vietnamese have indeed arrived.

Just how did this come to be?

The cradle of midtown "I'm a born-again Texan," says Nicole Cao, a banking officer who arrived here in 1976 with bittersweet memories of her homeland.

"I did not just lose a country and scores of rela-

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