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South China Sea: Emerging China-Taiwan Cooperation

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Proposals for cooperation between mainland China and Taiwan in the South China Sea have emerged. Beijing and Taipei could join hands to tackle non-traditional security challenges in the area. Such cooperation will have a significant impact on the South China Sea disputes.

IN THE PAST few months, there have been growing calls for cooperation between mainland China and Taiwan in the South China Sea. These proposals have come from not only the scholarly community but also the policy-making circles on both sides. How likely are these proposals to be adopted by either side? How could the two parties cooperate in the South China Sea? What impact could such cooperation have on the South China Sea disputes?

The proposals

For a long time, scholars in mainland China and Taiwan have had the view that the two sides could and should cooperate to protect their common interests in the South China Sea. But for obvious reasons, such an idea has rarely gained favour at the official level. The two sides, however, have been organising joint seminars on cooperation in marine scientific studies. So far, seven such seminars have been held.

As a reflection of, and perhaps encouraged by, the improved cross-strait relations, the seventh joint seminar was held in August 2008 where Chen Lianzeng, the deputy minister of the Chinese State Oceanic Administration attended. Chen called for concrete cooperation between mainland China and Taiwan to prevent and reduce maritime disasters and joint efforts to protect the common maritime interests of the two parties. Participants at the seminar further suggested that maritime cooperation be included in the talks between the mainland's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) and the Taiwan-based Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF).

The calls for cross-strait cooperation in the South China Sea intensified in recent months. In November 2009, at a nominally academic setting in Taipei, Lieutenant-General (retired) Li Jijun, former vice president of the Chinese Academy of Military Science and former director of the General

Office of China's Central Military Commission, suggested that Beijing and Taipei coordinate their defence activities in the South China Sea. During the Chinese parliamentary sessions in March 2010, Huang Jiayang, the political commissar of the PLA Navy Southern Fleet, unequivocally stated in an interview that the Chinese navy can cooperate with Taiwan's navy in the South China Sea. Major-General Luo Yuan of the Chinese Academy of Military Science also proposed during the same parliamentary sessions that Taiwan could probably allow Chinese naval vessels to have access to logistical support at the Itu Aba (Taiping) island, the largest island in the Spratlys currently under Taiwan's control, in the case of a crisis in the South China Sea.

At a cross-strait maritime forum held in Taiwan in late March, Chen Yue, a senior official with the Chinese State Oceanic Administration, noted that mainland China and Taiwan could also forge cooperation to safeguard the sovereignty and jurisdiction over the Diaoyu (Senkaku) island and the islands and islets in the South China Sea. Chiau Wen-Yan, deputy minister of the Environmental Protection Administration of Taiwan, proposed that mainland China and Taiwan could possibly work together to transform the Taiping island into an international peace park and to engage in archaeological activities in the South China Sea. Chen endorsed Chiau's proposals.

What cooperation could be possible?

The idea of mainland China-Taiwan cooperation in the South China Sea is not wishful thinking. The two sides have almost the same claims in the South China Sea. However, it may be premature to expect the realisation of the specific proposals outlined by both sides so far. It should instead be emphasised that any substantive cooperation involving the naval forces of both sides would not be feasible in the near future. Given the lack of military mutual trust between mainland China and Taiwan, it is difficult to imagine that the two sides could agree to substantive military cooperation in the South China Sea. Decision makers in Taiwan in particular are still far from prepared to engage with their mainland counterparts to forge security cooperation in the South China Sea, fearing that such moves could backfire in the local political atmosphere.

Nevertheless, the dramatic improvement in cross-strait relations in recent years has made it possible for the two parties to cooperate in certain functional areas, for instance, anti-piracy, anti-trafficking, anti-smuggling, search and rescue, environmental protection, and scientific studies in the South China Sea. Given the fact that both the mainland and Taiwan have expanded and intensified their maritime patrols in the South China Sea and more Taiwanese fishing businesses are moving southward in the area, Beijing and Taipei may find it useful to coordinate their fishing policies and join hands to protect their fishing communities.

In fact, bilateral cooperation on less sensitive maritime issues has emerged. In late 2009, mainland China and Taiwan signed an agreement to regulate the cooperation between their fishing sectors. Their cooperation in tackling various maritime challenges in the Taiwan Strait could be extended to the South China Sea area. Such incremental steps of cooperation could possibly lead to more substantive collaboration in the South China Sea in the non-traditional security areas. The prospect of such formal cooperation could be consolidated if the KMT wins the Taiwanese presidential election in two years and its mainland China policy does not fundamentally change.

Possible impact on the South China Sea disputes

Functional cooperation between mainland China and Taiwan would bring significant pressure on other claimant states in the South China Sea. For years, claimant states have been discussing possible cooperation in the South China Sea to deal with various non-traditional security challenges, which are outlined in the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. China has in recent years significantly improved its capability in dealing with these maritime challenges. Mainland China and Taiwan working together could play an active role in dealing with these challenges.

Regional states would soon realise that their interests could be at stake if they chose not to participate in these activities. Alternatively, they could opt to oppose and confront the joint activities of mainland China and Taiwan and, as a result, create crises in the South China Sea. Given the ongoing trends in the South China Sea disputes, other claimant states would most likely decide to join such cooperative measures, although one has to admit that there are many uncertainties. This scenario, if it eventuates, will significantly stabilise the South China Sea.

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