

## Taiwan's key role in the South China Sea

Written by Nat Bellocchi ☐☐☐

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During the past few weeks, China has significantly increased tension in East Asia by claiming “indisputable sovereignty” over the South China Sea. While claims and counterclaims by China and other nations in the region — in particular Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Taiwan — have existed for several decades, China's recent aggressiveness and belligerence have put other countries on edge.

The most significant pushback came during the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi from July 22 to July 24, when 11 Asian nations plus the US expressed concern about China's moves. In her statement, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton called freedom of navigation on the sea a US “national interest,” and urged “a collaborative diplomatic process” by all claimants to resolve “the various territorial disputes without coercion.”

The emphasis on a multilateral mechanism is essential here: In a multilateral forum, China faces a group of like-minded countries, while in bilateral negotiations, China can play off countries against each other.

This development has significant implications for Taiwan. During the past two years, the administration of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has followed a policy of accommodation toward China to reduce tension and — through signing the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) — enhance economic relations and broaden ties with East and Southeast Asian countries. China's belligerence on the South China Sea — as well as its refusal to rein in North Korea — raises doubts about its long-term intentions. Is it really for peace and stability in the region, or is it intent on domination? If it is the latter, what does that say about its intentions toward Taiwan?

As I have said earlier (“Taiwan needs to stand by its Allies,” Taipei Times, June 1, page 8), there are no indications that Beijing has changed its intentions in any fundamental way. Chinese rulers are still intent on absorbing Taiwan. Their tactics have only changed slightly — in addition to military threats and intimidation, they are now using economic means to entice Taiwan.

What would be the best approach from Taiwan's side? Is it going to follow the approach of accommodation, or does it clearly take the side of its democratic allies — the US, Japan and South Korea — and others in the region whose key interests are threatened by China's expansion.

Simply reiterating its claims to the Pratas (Tungsha) islets and Taiping Island in the Spratlys is not enough. Taiwan needs to take a more principled stance on freedom of navigation. The discussions at the ASEAN Regional Forum show that there is growing solidarity among the nations of East and Southeast Asia to counter Chinese moves.

Is Taiwan joining this newfound solidarity, or is it going to be the odd-man-out? For China,

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“recovering” Taiwan is not only a symbolic conclusion of the civil war between the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party of many decades ago, it is also perceived by the People’s Liberation Army as a strategic asset in dominating the East Asia region. Without control of Taiwan, it will be difficult for China to move toward a full-fledged “blue water” navy and exert its influence as a Pacific sea power.

Taiwan, on the other hand, can only maintain its freedom and democracy if it remains in the democratic camp and is able to build fair and equitable relations with other like-minded states. That would be the best long-term guarantee for peace and stability in the region.

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