

Kinmen County began importing water from China's Fujian Province on Sunday in a bid to stabilize the islands' fragile water supply. The controversial project represents a microcosm of Beijing's wider "united front" strategy. Kinmen's deal with Fujian Water Supply Co is at best unwise and at worst exceedingly reckless.

Under the agreement, inked on July 20, 2015, during former president Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) second term, the county is to import an average of 34,000 tonnes of water a day through a 16.7km undersea pipe, which could increase to 55,000 tonnes per day during the dry season.

The water link has inspired Kinmen County Commissioner Chen Fu-hai (陳福海) to talk of a wider "three new links" policy to incorporate an electricity link and a bridge to China.

This is worrying on three fronts.

First, the policy would further exacerbate Kinmen's already high economic reliance on China.

Take tourism as an example. National Immigration Agency statistics show that Chinese tourists accounted for 40.17 percent of travelers to Kinmen last year. However, restrictions on Chinese visitors to the county were relaxed on Jan. 1, following Chen's lobbying, and in the first five months of the year, Chinese tourism to Kinmen increased 9.18 percent from the same period last year to make up about half of the county's tourism.

Second, the policy poses a significant security threat. Once the water, electricity and bridge links are established, if relations between Taipei and Beijing sour, what is to prevent Beijing from threatening to pull the plug?

There is of course a precedent for this: Russian President Vladimir Putin has shown Beijing how cutting the gas supply can be used as an effective tool to bully recalcitrant neighboring states.

Kinmen's risky water business

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Even worse, in the event of an outbreak of hostilities, what would prevent the Chinese People's Liberation Army from rolling tanks into Kinmen, courtesy of Chen's shiny new "peace bridge?"

Third and most important, Kinmen has become a focus of Beijing's "united front" strategy to sow division and discord in Taiwan.

In the run-up to Sunday's twin opening ceremonies for the water link in Kinmen and Fujian, the Mainland Affairs Council clashed with Chen, calling on him to postpone them in light of "Chinese suppression" — a reference to Beijing last month pressuring the East Asian Olympic Committee into revoking Taichung's right to host the East Asian Youth Games next year. Chen rebuffed the council's request.

Even as it bashes President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) government, Beijing is proffering a juicy carrot to Kinmen in a bid to set Taiwanese against Taiwanese and local governments against the central government.

Kinmen's only Democratic Progressive Party county councilor was refused entry to the Kinmen ceremony and no central government officials were in attendance. Across the Taiwan Strait in Jinjiang City, China's Taiwan Affairs Office Minister Liu Jieyi (刘结一) milked the propaganda opportunity for all it was worth.

"Only if cross-strait relations are good will Taiwanese be better off," Liu said, denouncing Taiwanese who opposed the link out of "malicious political purposes," saying that they would "meet their doom."

Given that Chen is a member of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), which advocates unification with China, it would not be unreasonable to wonder if his "three new links" idea has the nation's best interests at heart.

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