

Leasing Pratas Islands to the US

Written by Liu Shih-ming 劉世銘

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On Thursday last week, a military-chartered supply flight operated by Uni Air from Kaohsiung to the Pratas Islands (Dongsha Islands, 東沙群島) in the South China Sea was forced to turn back on its way to the disputed islands.

The incident has been interpreted as Hong Kong interrupting regular flight plans by not issuing a notice in accordance with international protocols.

In addition, as there were no military exercises in that airspace at the time, it has also been interpreted as a threat issued by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Based on the CCP issuing similar threats in a war of attrition against Taiwan, Taipei could consider handing the defense of the Pratas Islands to the US, under a management or leasing arrangement, while retaining non-military control, such as civil government and tourism management.

It is public knowledge that there would be no way to defend the isolated Pratas Islands and Itu Aba Island (Taiping Island, 太平島) if the CCP were to launch a military attack on Taiwan.

By simply surrounding the islands with armed private boats, they could sever supply lines, and without food supplies, the troops stationed on the islands would be forced to surrender.

The only reason that Taiwan can maintain communications with the islands is the freedom of navigation.

The line of communication between Taiwan proper and Itu Aba Island remains open because it does not pass through China's Flight Information Region, which includes Hong Kong.

However, the line of communication to the Pratas Islands is nearing crisis-levels following the

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blocking of the Uni Air flight.

If the same thing were to happen again, the government should consider asking the US if it would be willing to lease the island out of concern for air communications and the supply lines of the troops stationed there.

The US has no territorial ambitions, and it is opposed to Chinese expansionism, which is in contravention of international law.

Taiwan is concerned that China would place the Pratas Islands under a blockade and the US is determined to prevent China from occupying the islands.

Given these circumstances, if the ideological and systemic US-China confrontation continues, leasing the islands would allow the US to monitor the activities of Chinese nuclear submarines in the South China Sea.

This is a solution that the US and Taiwan should discuss.

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Translated by Perry Svensson

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