

The Pratas Islands situation looks bad

Written by Chang Feng-lin 張豐麟

Wednesday, 09 December 2020 05:46

According to a Nov. 30 report in the Liberty Times (sister paper of the Taipei Times), aircraft from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) last month set a new record for incursions into Taiwan's air defense identification zone.

Incursions occurred on 25 separate days in October, but last month, the PLA set a new record, entering the area on 26 days, with Taiwan's air force issuing more than 55 radio warnings for PLA aircraft to leave.

Due to the PLA's intensification of sea and air drills in the southwestern corner of Taiwan's air defense identification zone, the Pratas Islands (Dongsha Islands, 東沙) are under severe threat from China's military.

The Ministry of National Defense has responded by garrisoning the Marine Corps on the Pratas Islands, ostensibly to conduct off-shore training, but in reality to bolster its defenses.

Additionally, the ministry has this year invested NT\$125.7 million (US\$4.41 million) in the Dongsha Barracks New Construction Project.

Tender documentation for the project shows that construction is to comprise the installation or upgrades of water and electricity services, and the installation of electromechanical equipment.

The entire project was originally due for completion by Sept. 30 next year, but on Nov. 11 the Chinese-language United Daily News reported that work on the Pratas airport had been temporarily suspended.

This is very unfortunate.

The government intends to station an air force squadron at the Pratas Islands defensive

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garrison, in addition to a meteorological station, an outpost of the Marine National Park Headquarters, a Coast Guard Administration defense command post and a coast guard detachment.

The project is sponsored by the Air Force Headquarters and is likely the precursor to a follow-on project to install a radar station and mobile air-defense missiles.

The Pratas Islands are only about 400km from Kaohsiung. If a conflict breaks out, it would affect shipping routes that run through the Taiwan Strait and the Bashi Channel.

Freight and merchant shipping primarily enter the South China Sea from the Indian Ocean through the Strait of Malacca, so if there were a conflict, they would need to divert through the Java, Sulu or the Celebes seas en route to international shipping lanes in the western Pacific Ocean.

Any conflict regarding the Pratas would also be a huge blow to Japan and South Korea, whose export-led economies are heavily reliant on global trade.

Freedom of navigation by the navies of the US and European nations would also be muzzled, as the waters around the Pratas Islands form a key choke point.

If the PLA were to seize control of the islands, it would affect the ability and inclination of foreign warships to patrol the South China Sea.

In light of the tense and unpredictable situation in the South China Sea, prior to stepping down from office in 2016, then-Philippine president Benigno Aquino III invested US\$1.3 billion into government programs to improve the Philippines' ability to control the marine environment of the South China Sea and surrounding waters.

Aquino's successor, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, has continued to support and fund

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those projects and has made protecting the country's maritime economy his highest priority.

Whether from the perspective of defense, diplomacy or territorial sovereignty, the Pratas Islands are vital to Taiwan.

The military's announcement last month that work has been suspended on construction work there might lead nations in the region to believe that Taipei has neither the will nor the resolve to protect the islands, which would not bode well for Taiwan.

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Translated by Edward Jones

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2020/12/09](#)