

Ex-generals seek PRC tie-up on islands

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Retired senior military officers from both sides of the Taiwan Strait are pressuring President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) to allow greater cooperation with China, telling a forum earlier this week that the Diaoyutai Islands (釣魚台) controversy provides the perfect context in which to do so.

The comments, which called for the creation of a cross-strait military cooperation mechanism, were made on the sidelines of a workshop organized by the Chinese Century Communicating Association (中華世紀交流協會) in Hong Kong on Tuesday.

Saying that military exchanges between retired Taiwanese and Chinese generals in recent years were “single-faceted” and “meaningless friendship-building activities,” admiral Fei Hung-po (費鴻波), a former deputy chief of general staff, added that current regulations prevented more constructive dialogue between the two sides from taking place.

According to the South China Morning Post, Fei said he had told Ma that his administration should push for military exchanges involving higher-level retired officers and use the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF)-Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) platform, or Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT)-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) meetings, to facilitate exchanges.

Fei said Ma should appoint retired generals to attend the next KMT-CCP talks.

Another former deputy chief of general staff, admiral Wang Li-shen (王立升), and former Mainland Affairs Council deputy minister Chao Chien-min (趙建民) were also present at the forum.

Alarm over the growing pace of exchanges between retired Taiwanese generals and their Chinese counterparts has grown in recent years, with fears that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has sought to formalize such exchanges to increase its leverage and to collect intelligence using informal links between retired Taiwanese officers and active-duty soldiers.

Defense analysts said those efforts may be focusing on a key faction within the KMT that

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represents veterans and their families.

Those exchanges have come in the form of visits by retired Taiwanese generals to ancestral homes, golf tournaments and academic conferences.

Since late last year, China has increased pressure on the Ma administration to sign a peace accord and launch a military confidence-building mechanism.

Turning to sovereignty disputes, Fei said that Taipei and Beijing had yet to issue a joint declaration on the Diaoyutais — which are also claimed by Japan, which refers to them as the Senkakus — adding that this could be addressed once a cross-strait military working team is authorized by the SEF and ARATS.

Tensions over the dispute increased last year after Tokyo's announcement in September that it had purchased three of the islets comprising the Diaoyutais from a private citizen, sparking huge and at times violent protests across China. In September and earlier this month, Taiwanese coast guard vessels engaged in water-cannon exchanges with Japanese coast guard ships while accompanying Taiwanese fishing boats seeking to enter waters surrounding the islets.

Although Beijing has often called for cross-strait cooperation in dealing with the dispute, Taipei has denied any intention to do so, and maintains that the islands are part of the Republic of China's inherent territory. China claims both the islets and Taiwan as part of the People's Republic of China.

Speaking on the sidelines of the forum, retired PLA major general Xu Guangyu (徐广宇), now a researcher at the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association, said the tensions over the Diaoyutais provided “a good opportunity to start cross-strait military talks and to seek consensus on how to jointly address disputes in the East and South China seas.

“Cross-strait military talks could be started ahead of other political issues,” Xu said. “For example, we can declare a ceasefire in disputed waters in the East and South China seas, and

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announce a joint cross-strait stance on our goal to defend our sovereignty in those areas to the world.”

Former minister of national defense Wu Shih-wen (吳石文), who also attended the event, said that Taiwan had always upheld its territorial claims in the East and South China seas. However, he said that the current political climate meant it was not the right time for Taipei and Beijing to cooperate on those issues, views that were echoed by Chao.

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