

Sovereignty in the South China Sea: Taiwan's domestic posturing

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Taiwan's President, Ma Ying-jeou landed on Taiping Island in the South China Sea on January 28 despite lack of support from the United States. President Ma's main purpose was to refute the Philippines' claim stating to the International Tribunal in Hague that Taiping Island is just a reef, rather than an actual island. Ma had lunch on the island with the soldiers and officers stationed there, and explained that their food and water came from the island itself, proving that Taiping Island is a place that can provide the basic necessities of human life. This is the definition of an island under The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

However, Ma's landing caused the United States' dissatisfaction. The spokesman of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) said Ma's behavior would not help solve the South China Sea dispute that many countries claim they have the sovereignty of the islands and reefs. At the same time, the U.S. State Department expressed its disappointment. According to some Taiwanese journalists stationed in the U.S., Taipei and Washington had already negotiated this issue for a long time, but Ma still decided to land.

Recently, China has actively built military installations and several airstrips in the South China Sea's islands and reefs. Several countries including China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Taiwan all claimed sovereignty over the Sea to a certain degree. The U.S. has been quite dissatisfied with China's massive construction projects in the area. The Western power is particularly worried that China would undermine freedom of navigation and escalate the territorial dispute over the area. In addition, China is undoubtedly the most significant rival of the U.S. in the twenty-first century. For the U.S., containing China's behavior, especially related to military expansion, is in line with its interests.

China's territory claims of the islands and reefs in the South China Sea are based on the Nationalist Government's (Republic of China, R.O.C.) position confirmed in 1946. The government is tenacious, substantially controlling Taiwan and other affiliated islands. Taiwan (R.O.C.) nevertheless has maintained its territorial claims of the islands and reefs. The U.S. was worried that Ma's landing would strengthen China's position, and that might narrow the political distance between Taiwan and China. The power balance between China, Taiwan, and the U.S. might be broken in the near future depending on the political contextual changes of the South China Sea.

In fact, as the predominant Western hegemon, it is reasonable that the U.S. would be worried about the situation in the South China Sea. However, U.S. decision makers must also understand that it holds no real claims in this region over ten thousand kilometers from the nearest American territory. Most Taiwanese found the U.S.' criticism of President Ma inappropriate. While there are real disputes in the area, Taiping Island has been totally under the Nationalist Government's control, never having faced challenges from other countries even though the Nationalist Government moved from Mainland China to Taiwan in 1949. For Taiwan, Taiping Island is absolutely a part of Republic of China. Ma observes his country's territory as unalterable. Moreover, President Ma's action was to arouse international attention that Taiping Island is an "island" not a "reef". Therefore, Taiwan can claim the 200 nautical mile economic zone based on it. Ma did not board a controversial Island to declare sovereignty – he simply entered Taiwanese territory to bring attention to the fact that the area is habitable. One might liken Ma's action to a host of a house entering a dining room from the living room.

Taiwan's main opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), won the presidential and parliamentary elections in mid-January. Its position on Cross-Strait and foreign affairs is unconditional in its opposition to mainland China's government. It also assumes the support of Japan and the U.S. in all things. Some of the DPP's new congressmen criticized that Ma's behavior disrupted the international order. One of

them even said that Taiping Island is too far to defend, and he did not know why Ma had to go there, mirroring the American position.

Unfortunately, these DPP congressmen highlighted their adherence to American policy, while the U.S. has been reluctant to be openly involved in the internal politics of Taiwan. The DPP's congressmen have drawn on American support directly through aligning their policy with American foreign policy itself. Therefore, the U.S. later issued a statement to praise President Ma's "South China Sea Peace Development Route" and clearly stated that Taiwan is also a country able to claim sovereignty in the South China Sea.

This event has shown that the U.S. is willing to ignore the complexity of Cross-Strait relations and Taiwan's domestic politics on this issue. The U.S. only tried to avoid Taipei and Beijing on the same side, but it did not notice that the DPP is particularly proficient at manipulating U.S-China relations so as to confront China. Despite the U.S.'s time and resources spent developing policy in relation to China, it is surprising that the whole State Department failed to predict the possible reaction of DPP. As the most essential defender of the current international order, the U.S. should be more cautious in its willingness to interfere in other countries' internal politics when countering China. Otherwise, meddling will lead to more unnecessary distress to the U.S. and the world, and will not be helpful in resolving the dispute in the South China Sea.