



Interview with Richard Hu:

Transitioning Taiwan's Armed Forces in the South China Sea

By Jonathan Spangler and Richard Hu / *Perspectives*, 4 / 2015

The South China Sea Think Tank interviews Maj. Gen. Richard Hu about the possibility of transitioning the ROC forces stationed on Taiping Island from Coast Guard to military.

Richard Hu is a retired Major General of the ROC Army, Deputy Executive Director of the Taiwan Center for Security Studies, Assistant Professor at National Chengchi University's Department of Diplomacy, and Professor at National Defense University in Taiwan.

South China Sea Think Tank: Could you give us a brief background about the rumored transitioning of ROC armed forces stationed on Taiping Island?

Richard Hu: Sure. There have been reports and discussions over the years suggesting that Taiwan is considering transitioning



the forces stationed on Taiping Island from the Coast Guard there currently to the military. We have Coast Guard forces there today because, over ten years ago, the Coast Guard replaced the Marines [that were previously] protecting Taiping Island. However, the ROC government on Taiwan in May 2015 decided to maintain the status quo and let Coast Guard forces remain there safeguarding Taiping [Itu Aba] Island. The decision, I believe, was mainly based on a specious rational—China would be reluctant to invade Taiping Island [because it would] damage cross-strait relations, and other claimants would avoid taking Taiping Island because of the risk that China would launch potential invasions of islands “occupied” by those claimants. The ROC government’s strategic defense planning concerning Taiping Island looks very much like it is based on luck. To safeguard Taiping Island, we need something much more concrete, something beyond luck, gambling, and immature cause-and-effect calculations.

SCSTT: Why would you suggest there be that 70:30 ratio of standing forces?

RH: Both homeland defense and homeland security are of vital importance to a country. Safeguarding our own territory and sovereignty is a serious matter. The tensions and involvement



of other countries in the South China Sea today suggest that it is becoming less of a homeland security issue and tending more towards an issue of homeland defense. If we strengthen our military presence on Taiping Island, perhaps it will be a kind of deterrent [and help to] ensure that we are prepared for the unthinkable if it were to happen sometime, somewhere. A relatively stronger military posture could dissuade other claimants' temptations to invade Taiping Island by surprise. Since we have mixed missions involving both homeland defense and homeland security on that remote island, a roughly 70:30 ratio of standing forces deployed would be more practical.

[My suggestion] that Taiwan should take enhanced measures to safeguard Taiping Island is also based on lessons learned from the Falklands/Malvinas War in 1982. The British spent an average of \$318 million annually to defend the Falkland Islands after the war, not to mention the huge losses [incurred] during the war against Argentina. The rationale for the 70:30 ratio of deployment derives from what some call “preventive defense.”

SCSTT: How does this compare to the forces that other claimants have stationed in the South China Sea?



RH: I believe that, currently, most of the claimants have their military on those individual islands. China is sending patrol boats from its Coast Guard, but most of the standing forces on those islands are from their military. I believe that Vietnam and Malaysia and also the Philippines, all of them, have their militaries on the occupied islands.

SCSTT: If Taiwan were to transition its forces from the Coast Guard to the Marines or Navy, what do you think the international reaction would be?

Countries wouldn't be happy about it. They would be against the idea, and it would, of course, be viewed as a kind of provocative action, especially because of the ongoing disputes. But I think that some military actions can be done overnight. Since there's no obligation to notify everybody about these kinds of changes, the transition could perhaps just be accomplished overnight.

SCSTT: In the Taiwanese political system, who would be the one to make this decision?

Well, the Coast Guard replaced the military on Taiping Island in 2000, so I think the decision would perhaps eventually have



to go to the President of the Republic of China—he would have to make the decision. Domestic bureaucratic politics would be an obstacle for bringing the policy recommendation to the president’s attention. The ROC National Security Council is currently run by—at least some of its key members are preoccupied by the “luck and gambling” mentality, particularly regarding safety and security issues on Taiping Island.

SCSTT: Do you think there are any differences between the policies of the the KMT and the DPP? Or are they kind of similar regarding this issue?

It has been a debate over the years, so each party has their own concerns, and as far as I know, they haven’t reached a conclusion concerning this policy of whether they are going to replace the Coast Guard by using the Marines or Army forces. However, legislators of both parties look like they have somewhat common perceptions about what is necessary there—the ROC on Taiwan should take measures to strengthen its forces in order to safeguard Taiping Island.



SCSTT: If, hypothetically, the current Coast Guard forces were to be replaced by a 70:30 Navy-to-Coast Guard split, what would be the optimal timeline or way to go about this?

If there is a transition, the government should avoid carrying it out when tensions are high and diplomatic storms are brewing, as is currently the case with the US-China row over freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. As I have said previously, on the basis of preventive defense thinking, it should be done as early as possible while the timing and situation are relatively suitable from both strategic and operational perspectives.



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