

INSIGHT BRIEF: Increased confrontation around the Kinmen Islands, Taiwan Strait

29/02/2024

Incident

On the 14th of February, a Chinese fishing vessel was approached by a Taiwan Coast Guard Administration (CGA) patrol boat after it encroached into Taiwanese territorial waters, approximately 1M off Great Kinmen Island, which is administered by Taiwan. The CGA hailed the fishing vessel and informed them they would conduct an inspection as they had trespassed into prohibited waters. The fishing vessel then attempted to flee by conducting evasive manoeuvres. The CGA patrol vessel gave chase, during which the fishing vessel capsized, and two of the four fishermen were killed during the accident. China's Taiwan Affairs Office described this as a "vicious incident".

Five days later, a China Coast Guard (CCG) vessel ordered a Taiwan-flagged tourist passenger vessel, which was conducting a tour of the Kinmen Islands, to stop and subsequently boarded the vessel to conduct an inspection. Passengers were alarmed at the incident as this sort of action by the CCG in the waters around the Kinmen Islands was highly unusual.

Between the 20th-25th of February, the CCG increased its presence and activity around the islands. On the 20th of February, a CCG vessel came within 1.5M of Kinmen Island and was then ordered by CGA vessels to leave. On the 25th of February, five CCG vessels were observed conducting patrols around Great Kinmen Island, and two CGA vessels were dispatched to prevent further incursions.

Context

In 1949 Chinese nationalist forces fled the mainland for Taiwan following defeats to Communist forces. The PRC considers Taiwanese territories to be a province of the PRC and most UN Member States do not officially recognise Taiwan as an independent state. Since 1954 there have been three Taiwan Strait Crises, where the Taipei-based administration and the PRC have engaged in armed conflict and confrontation. Following the last Crisis, in 1995-1996, the PRC expanded its naval and amphibious capabilities and demonstrated its resolve.

The Kinmen Islands are Taiwanese territories located less than 4M from the Chinese mainland, they are therefore the closest Taiwanese-administered territory to mainland China, separated from the Taiwan mainland by the Taiwan Strait. China claims that the Kinmen Islands are part of Fujian province. As of early February 2024, the US stated they have permanently deployed Army Green Berets of the 1st Special Forces Group to the Kinmen Islands, attached to the Taiwanese 101st Amphibious Reconnaissance Battalion.

Analysis

China is likely attempting to put pressure on Taiwan over the issue of sovereignty of the Kinmen Islands. Given that the Islands are the closest to the Chinese mainland. This action is also likely linked to the incoming newly elected President of Taiwan, Lai Ching-te, who is due to have his inauguration on the 20th of May 2024. China has typically increased military and provocative actions during key political events in Taiwan. Lai Ching-te is also the chairman of the Democratic Progressive Party which is staunchly pro-Taiwan independence.

Implications

Ambrey assessed that there will likely continue to be flashpoint events localised to the waters around the Kinmen Islands, the Chinese government stated that the actions of the CCG around the Kinmen Islands were "beyond reproach". Ambrey are closely monitoring the situation, but for the time being, this is assessed to not meet the threshold to trigger a cross-strait conflict.