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Emerging Chinese “Commonwealth” Stands Opposed to U.S./Japanese Threat

Wayne MADSEN
11/9/2015



People’s Republic of China president Xi Jinping stunned the world, and especially the increasingly bellicose United States and Japan, by holding an unprecedented meeting with Ma Ying-jeou, the president of Taiwan, which continues to call itself the “Republic of China.” It was the first meeting between the presidents of the rival Chinese governments since mainland China fell to the Chinese Communist Party in 1949.

While a watershed event in terms of Chinese history and cross Taiwan Strait relations, the Xi-Ma meeting sent a stark message to the United States and Japan. Washington and Tokyo have been

busy building up their military forces in east Asia – the “Pivot to Asia” policy of the Obama administration and the offensive and neo-militarist U.S.-Japanese “blood alliance” promoted by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

To counter the U.S.-Japanese military threat and the recently-announced Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trading bloc of Pacific Rim nations, not including China or Taiwan, President Xi dusted off an old proposal for China to lead the way in creating a “commonwealth” of Chinese nations and regions in east Asia.

This economic-based Chinese "commonwealth" consists of the People’s Republic of China and overseas Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao. Currently, four different currencies - the PRC yuan, New Taiwan dollar, Hong Kong dollar, and Macao pataca - are used within a rather small geographic triangle composed of southern Chinese coastal provinces, Taiwan, Macao, and Hong Kong. Businessmen in the region would like to adopt something akin to the euro in order to facilitate greater commerce.

The Xi-Ma summit was held in Singapore, a majority ethnic Chinese city-state which is also seen as a potential member of a Chinese commonwealth in east Asia. Xi and Ma amicably discussed the desire for Taiwan to participate in international organizations. China agreed to consider greater Taiwanese participation in United Nations specialized agencies on a case-by-case basis. Also proposed at the summit was the establishment of a Beijing-Taipei hotline linking the governments of China and Taiwan, establishment of representative offices in Beijing and Taipei, and a lessening of military tensions in the Taiwan Strait.

Regardless of whether they are mainland, Taiwanese, Hong Kong, Macanese, or Singapore Chinese, the Chinese people have long memories of what the "white devils" wrought upon China in terms of subjugation and fomenting internal dissension through past western support for warlordism and opium addiction.

While it is a fact that China considers Taiwan to be a renegade province of China, Ma is recognized by China as the leader of the Kuomintang Party, the nationalist party defeated by the Chinese Communists in 1949. The Kuomintang Party, like the Communist Party, recognizes Taiwan as an inalienable part of China.

Taiwan businesses have invested billions of dollars in mainland China and PRC banks operate openly in Taiwan. Both sides were upset about not being included in the TPP, which is seen as a Western rival to Chinese economic influence in the Pacific region. The TPP’s major players, other than Japan, are the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, all members of the Western military and intelligence alliance.

In playing his own “China card,” Xi’s historic meeting with Ma of Taiwan has tossed a spanner into American plans to develop the TPP into an anti-Chinese bloc. Japan's increasing militarist policy and its plans to extend its military forces beyond the Japanese islands and surrounding waters has set off alarms in both China and Taiwan, thus drawing the two longtime rivals closer. China and Taiwan are united in the claims of "generic" China to the Diaoyu islands occupied by

Japan in the East China Sea.

China and Taiwan are also united on generic Chinese claims to the islands of the South China Sea. In fact, the People's Republic of China's claims to the South China Sea islands are based on those originally made by the Republic of China under Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek. The People's Republic of China is merely a "successor state" to the same maritime claims now disputed by the United States, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. Taiwan maintains one of the largest military garrisons in the disputed Spratly Islands, on the island of Taiping, and the PRC has very desire to see to it that Taiping remains in Chinese hands, even if that is the "Republic of China" on Taiwan.

As the U.S. Navy initiated provocative maneuvers around PRC-constructed artificial islands in the South China Sea, Taiwan thumbed its nose at Washington by reinforcing its own claims to the islands. A statement from the "Republic of China" Foreign Ministry in Taipei stated: "the Nansha (Spratly) Islands, Shisha (Parcel) Islands, Chungsha Islands (Macclesfield Bank), and Tungsha (Pratas) Islands (together known as the South China Sea Islands), as well as their surrounding waters, are an inherent part of ROC [Republic of China] territory and waters." Beijing was more than happy to see Taiwan reinforce historic Chinese claims to the same islands it also claims. Most of the world recognizes Taiwan as an integral part of China so the Taiwanese claims to the islands merely doubles down on what the PRC sees as Chinese sovereignty over the islands.

China may seek to extend full or associate membership in its emerging Chinese commonwealth to non-Chinese nations as a way to promote Chinese "soft power" in the region. There is no reason why China cannot, for example, welcome South Korea, which is similarly wary of Japanese military intentions, into its commonwealth. The British-led Commonwealth of Nations, which has historically been composed of English-speaking former British colonies, now includes as members French-speaking Rwanda and Portuguese-speaking Mozambique. Similarly, the Francophone International Organization, a commonwealth of primarily former French-speaking ex-colonies of France, includes Portuguese-speaking Guinea-Bissau and Spanish-speaking Equatorial Guinea.

The emerging Chinese commonwealth could also make inroads into the TPP. Although Malaysia is a member of the TPP, its two eastern states – Sarawak and Sabah – are restive in that they want more autonomy from the federal government of Malaysia. In September of this year, primarily indigenous peoples and ethnic Chinese in Sarawak called for, and received, greater autonomy from Malaysia. The people of Sarawak viewed with alarm the movement of Muslim school teachers into the state and attempts to spread Islam in the one part of Borneo having a majority non-Muslim population.

With strictly Muslim Brunei, also on the island of Borneo, joining Malaysia in the TPP, the majority Christian Iban and Melenau and primarily Buddhist Chinese of Sarawak became alarmed over the possibility that their religion and culture would be overwhelmed by the Muslim-led Malaysian federal government in Putrajaya and the Muslim sharia law monarchy in Brunei. The thirty percent Christian tribal peoples and Buddhist Chinese of the other Malaysian state on Borneo – Sabah – also feel threatened by the increasing influence of jihadist Muslim

teachers in the state. Sabah also received greater autonomy from Malaysia in September.

With the snap of a finger, China could up the ante against Malaysia over the South China Sea islands issue by backing the independence of Sarawak and Sabah and welcome their association with the Chinese commonwealth. Sabah could also lay claim to Malaysia's financial center on the island of Labuan in the South China Sea since the island, which has an influential Chinese minority population, was once part of British North Borneo, which is now Sabah. The half-island, half-mainland Malaysian state of Penang, with fifty percent of its population Chinese, is also a candidate for association in a greater Chinese commonwealth.

President Xi, like Russian President Vladimir Putin, has refined the art of advancing the interests of his nation on an international chessboard that America has sought to dominate. Just as with Putin's dispatching of military forces to Syria to fight Islamist jihadists, Xi's surprise meeting with Taiwan's president has let Washington know that America is no longer unilaterally calling the shots in international affairs.