

## Maritime council will sink with no powers

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Wednesday was June 8, the date designated by the UN as World Oceans Day. This year's theme is "Our oceans: Greening our future." On the day, a panel discussion was held at the UN headquarters in New York on the topics of "oceans and the environment," "oceans and the social impact" (especially on fish workers in the small-scale, artisanal sector), "economic aspects of the oceans" and "oceans and youth" (focusing on young people's understanding of sea conservation).

Just before World Oceans Day, the annual Asia Security Summit, also known as the Shangri-La Dialogue, was held in Singapore. A lot of attention was focused on the South China Sea situation. China's Chief of General Staff Chen Bingde (陳炳德) acknowledged for the first time that China is building an aircraft carrier for dealing with various maritime problems.

On the eve of World Oceans Day, Taiwan's Fishermen's Labor Rights Association (漁民勞動人權協會) gathered in front of the American Institute in Taiwan to protest about the death of Wu Lai-yu (吳來于), captain of a hijacked Taiwanese fishing boat, who was killed when the US Navy exchanged fire with Somali pirates aboard his vessel.

While seemingly unconnected, both events have a bearing on Taiwan's ocean policies, thinking and action. The government has some impressive things to say about its South China Sea policy, but it does nothing tangible. It is the same when it comes to fighting Somali pirates and protecting people's lives and property. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not lodged a solemn protest or demanded compensation from the US government for Wu's death, and the Fishery Administration (漁業署) has merely issued a press release advising fishermen not to operate in waters near Somalia and to be on the alert when fishing in the Indian Ocean. The press release advises captains and crew to try not to let unidentified boats approach them. How does such passivity fit in with President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) declared intention to "make a blue revolution and seek prosperity from the ocean"?

The most praiseworthy thing the government is doing with regard to the sea is setting up a Council of Ocean Affairs (海洋委員會) early next year. However, a closer look at the draft organic law for this department does not give rise to optimism about its ability to integrate and regulate national maritime policy.

Although the council is to be vested with the power of regulating, promoting and coordinating certain areas of policy related to the sea, the draft organic law does not give it the authority to enforce its decisions. Besides, in Taiwan's political culture, Cabinet-level departments called "councils" hold a lower status than those called "ministries." Other ministries have practical control over policies, laws, personnel and finance, so it is not clear what political tools the Council of Ocean Affairs will have at its disposal to regulate maritime policies involving other ministries. The council must be able to control certain ocean-related matters, such as protecting the marine environment and ecology, and the authority to call a halt to projects and activities. It should also spur the development of maritime industry and promote Taiwan's interests at sea. Unfortunately, the necessary legal provisions for these functions are nowhere to be found in the existing draft of the organic law.

While the UN and the international community are focusing on the marine environment, fish workers' rights, the marine economy and the next generation's knowledge and understanding of the ocean, Taiwan's prospects in relation to the sea remain far from clear.

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