

Keeping fishing boats out of trouble

ON SEPT. 13, the *Formosa Chieftain No. 2*, a 99-tonne Taiwanese recreational fishing vessel, was apprehended by the Japanese Coast Guard near the disputed Diaoyutai islets (釣魚台), resulting in a minor clash with officers of Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration (CGA), who arrived on the scene later.

The fundamental question is whether the boat crossed into Japanese waters. From Japan's point of view, it did and the actions of its officers were therefore justified when they arrived on the scene to enforce the law by impounding the boat and detaining the people on board.

From the CGA's point of view, its officers were equally justified in enforcing the law within the temporary enforcement line marking the boundary of Taiwan's exclusive economic zone and carrying out their duty to protect fishermen and their boats.

From the fishermen's point of view, there should be nothing wrong with approaching a chain of islets that the government claims to be Taiwanese territory. Each party believes it did nothing wrong, but there is an obvious clash in perspectives.

A key problem is how to

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keep track of a fishing vessel's location. Several systems are in operation: the boat's automatic identification system, the long-range identification and tracking system, the fishing vessel monitoring system, the transport ministry's vessel traffic management system, the CGA's coastal radar system and the navy's radar system.

With all these systems operating in combination, it should not be difficult to determine a vessel's location. However, these systems can only be fully effective if the vessel is carrying equipment that can emit or respond to tracking signals. The problem is that at present, such equipment is only installed on commercial and passenger vessels of more than 300 gross tonnes, as well as some larger fishing vessels.

Smaller boats generally don't have this equipment, because there is a question of who would pay for it, as well as issues of privacy and freedom of navigation.

Of course the crew of a ship know where they are. In the case of the Diaoyutai, the Taiwanese

government says the islets and surrounding waters belong to Taiwan, so of course fishing boats should be able to go there to fish.

After all, many veteran Taiwanese fishermen have been fishing there since their youth, so how can Taiwanese fishing boats be said to be crossing into another country's territory when they fish there?

China also claims the islets, but how many Chinese fishermen dare play cat and mouse with the Japanese, as Taiwanese fishermen so often do?

Actually there are many such disputed waters and overlapping claims to exclusive economic zones. The Spratly Islands are another example. So is the Taiwan Strait.

In practice, the dividing lines in these waters have for a long time been a matter of unspoken agreements. Such tacit understandings are hard to maintain, however, when fishing boats go right up to the front line.

In the case of the Taiwan Strait, fishermen may ask: "Doesn't the government say China is ours, too?" This is a hard question to answer with many factors to consider.

Questions of sovereignty and maritime boundaries are the

most basic, but they are also the hardest to resolve. In the meantime, the government can only try harder to educate and train fishermen and keep them informed.

Hopefully Taiwanese fishermen can understand the reality of the status quo. At the same time, it is to be hoped that the Council of Agriculture, the CGA and other government agencies will work together to improve Taiwan's ship monitoring systems and speed up installation of automatic vessel identification and tracking systems on boats that often enter disputed waters.

This would allow the government to have a monitoring mechanism that would warn authorities of impending incidents before they occur.

It would also provide proof of a vessel's location when an incident does happen. Maybe then disputes like the one over the *Formosa Chieftain No. 2* can be avoided.

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