

Section VII

Cross-Regional Civil Society Dialogue and Environmental Confidence Building

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Despite growing economic and cultural linkages, relations in the Taiwan Straits continue to be colored by tension and mutual mistrust. The ongoing dispute over Taiwan's status and threats from Beijing feed the perception that the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan are on a path to inevitable confrontation and even military hostilities. The potential for such confrontation highlights the need to open more doors for dialogue and cooperation between the PRC and Taiwan. The challenge remains to find policy areas that can become catalysts for communication and confidence building across the Taiwan Straits.

For the past twenty years, there has been increasing economic interdependence between Taiwan and Mainland China, which is widely believed to promote mutual prosperity and encourage more peaceful relations. A similar logic supports the idea that enhancing the awareness of common environmental challenges and *ecological* interdependence across the Taiwan Straits also could create opportunities for mutual gain and peaceful interaction.

A major focus of the Environmental Change and Security Project's (ECSP) meetings and publications in Washington, DC has been to critique and explore the policy relevance of the growing body of research that posits environmental degradation can be a catalyst for various forms of conflict between nations, regions, and peoples.² In addition to this environmental-security agenda, since 1997, ECSP also has been running the Working Group on Environment in U.S.-China Relations, which has aimed to foster dialogue among policymakers, NGOs, and academics in the United States and China on environmental and energy cooperation. The *Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum* in Hong Kong was a new China Working Group initiative, which aimed to give environmental NGO activists and journalists in Greater China a chance to exchange information on their environmental education, lobbying, and government watchdog work. The goals of the *Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum* were modest and did not directly address the

topic of cross-straits environmental cooperation. However, the enthusiastic exchange of ideas among environmentalists from both sides of the Taiwan Straits did lead us to reflect on the prospect for environmental peacemaking in this and other regions of conflict.

The Concept of Environmental Peacemaking

While there is a large body of scholarly research on the linkages between environmental degradation and conflict, there is almost no systematic research on an important corollary; namely that environmental cooperation may be a catalyst for broader processes of regional peacemaking. It merits investigation whether environmental cooperation can move beyond simply avoiding ecologically induced conflict and actually create more extensive opportunities for building peace.³

In their exploration of this question of promoting peace, Conca and Dabelko posit that environmental peacemaking can develop both through state-to-state relations and trans-societal linkages.⁴ At both levels environmental cooperation can transform the bargaining environment between countries, regions, or peoples and help to build trust and interdependence into the relationships. For example, environmental problems often develop gradually and demand a long time to solve. Thus, cooperation on environmental issues could lengthen the time horizons of political decision-makers. If countries or regions develop effective long-term cooperative strategies for environmental problems they could simultaneously instill a habit of more diffuse reciprocity in their relationship, as well as reduce the uncertainty in their interactions. Environmental cooperation at the nongovernmental level could serve to strengthen trans-societal linkages and build common norms and identity around mutual ecological concerns.

Environmental Peacemaking in the Context of Cross-Straits Relations

In light of decades of growing economic integration colored with fluctuating political tensions, it is not surprising that security and economic issues domi-

nate cross-strait dialogues and interaction. Aside from some nascent regional forums on environmental protection in Northeast Asia,⁵ at the governmental level Mainland China and Taiwan rarely cooperate on environmental issues. While there are some potential long-term environmental problems that will impact both (e.g., global climate change, fishery collapse, Mainland's acid rain problems impacting Taiwan), Taiwan and Mainland China are not facing any immediate pollution or natural resource conflict that could force them to negotiate an environmental agreement or undertake joint action. In short, there is not a strong catalyst for high-level cooperation on environmental issues in the Taiwan Straits.⁶

While there are no explosive ecological battles looming in the cross-strait region, the people in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong do face common environmental problems that stem from the rapid economic development in the region. Public opinion polls in each of the three areas cite environmental degradation, particularly air pollution, as one of the major threats to health and quality of life. Urban sprawl, groundwater pollution, and unsustainable use of surface and groundwater resources are the other problems putting pressure on the natural environment and endangering human health in each of these areas. On both sides of the Straits, the paucity of hazardous waste disposal facilities combined with the lack of community-right-to-know protections, are allowing uncontrolled contamination of soil and water. While the governments in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong all have promulgated a wide range of environmental protection laws to address these issues, each faces difficulties in monitoring and implementation. The growth in environmental NGOs and news reporting could potentially help fill the gap in monitoring environmental policies and problems. But as these proceedings highlight, green civil society organizations face numerous political, institutional, and financial challenges in Greater China. Strengthening the capacity of these groups could improve their effectiveness as environmental watchdogs and educators.

Potential of Trans-Societal Environmental Cooperation

Presentations and talks at the two-day forum revealed the dynamism and growing potential of the non-governmental sector in environmental politics in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Green NGOs are actively engaging in policymaking, problem solving, and awareness building and environmental jour-

nalists are also quite active in reporting and investigating environmental degradation and environmental activism. Promoting information sharing on common environmental problems and facilitating environmental collaboration among NGOs, academics, and news organizations within Greater China could highlight the extent of their *ecological* ties and common environmental challenges. Over time building informal “green” networks could pave the way for more formal cooperative environmental efforts to solve problems each area faces. Cooperation on common environmental challenges could build confidence in the Taiwan Straits region for the PRC and Taiwan to work together on other issues.

While environmental activism is growing within Greater China, one of our main observations from the forum and research is that communication and cooperation among these green groups and environmental journalists remain at a low level.⁷ Perhaps this lack of “green” networks is simply an outgrowth of the political complexity across the Taiwan Straits. Given the history and political obstacles in the region, as well as institutional weaknesses of the NGOs, the limited contact and exchange among grassroots environmental NGOs in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Mainland is understandable. Nevertheless, the puzzling question is whether the enhancement in such civic exchanges and dialogues will have healthy and long-term effects on mutual confidence building among the people and governments within Greater China.⁸ A single conference cannot provide the answer to this question. However, our observations at the Hong Kong forum and reflection on the subsequent collaborative initiatives among the participants leads us to speculate on how trans-societal environmental networks could build confidence (a precursor of peace) among regions and peoples, as well as improve environmental protection initiatives. We posit that the impact of trans-societal environmental networks in the cross-strait regions could:

1. *Strengthen the effectiveness of environmental NGOs and journalism in the region.* By exchanging information with counterparts in other areas, environmental NGO activists can learn from each other and improve the capacity of their organizations. Providing environmental journalists with an opportunity to exchange stories and listen to lectures on new reporting themes helps them craft more relevant and compelling stories. Stronger and more sustainable NGOs could enhance the growth of a “green” civil society within Greater China. From their Hong Kong and Taiwan colleagues,

Mainland Chinese environmentalists can learn about networking, partnering with the private sector, and fund raising techniques. Conversely, Mainland environmental NGOs can offer their growing expertise of the advantages and pitfalls of cooperating with international NGOs and foundations.

2. *Spread new thinking on solving environmental problems beyond NGOs and journalists.* Some environmental NGOs and journalists play a crucial role in shaping ecological awareness in their communities while others influence government policymaking. Participating in dialogues with counterparts from other areas enables environmental activists and journalists to carry home new knowledge and opinions. The dissemination of new information and ideas could contribute to building common norms and understanding of the importance of environmental protection and the necessity for action.

3. *Generate more substantial domestic pressures for regional environmental cooperation.* By promoting greater understanding of environmental problems, trans-societal environmental networks could encourage or raise the interest of the respective governments to come together to address common environmental concerns.

4. *Encourage local governments and the private sector to cooperate with environmental NGOs.* While high-level environmental cooperation and dialogues are not taking place among the Mainland, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong governments, environmental NGO networks could open up opportunities for local governments, the private sector, and research institutes to cooperate on environmental issues. As the examples below illustrate, trans-societal environmental networking has produced some diverse and productive NGO and governmental partnerships that are addressing environmental problems in Mainland China:⁹

(a) *The South-North Institute for Sustainable Development* (A Beijing-based NGO) is working with the *Natural Resources Defense Council* and the *Taiwan Institute for Economic Research*, *Shanghai Municipal Economic Commission*, *Shanghai Tongji University*, and the *Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology* on a project to support the development and commercialization of fuel cell vehicles in the PRC (fuel cell vehicles are a key research and development objective of PRC's Tenth Five-Year Plan).

(b) *The Friends of the Earth Guizhou* (which was

founded with guidance from the *Conservancy Association* in Hong Kong) is working now with the Guizhou Provincial government and local businesses to create sustainable management programs in the Cao Hai Ecological Education Center.

(c) *The Nature Conservancy* is working with the Yunnan Provincial government and over forty university and environmental grassroots organizations in the province to implement a master plan to promote conservation and sustainable development projects within Yunnan's great river basins.

(d) *WWF-Hong Kong* periodically runs training courses in the Maipo Wetland Reserve for PRC environmental government agencies and schools.

(e) *The World Resources Institute* is partnering with the *Hong Kong Polytechnic University* and several Mainland universities to help integrate environment and sustainable development issues into Mainland Chinese business school curricula.

(f) In its Asian Elephant Habitat Conservation and Community Development Project the U.S.-based *International Fund for Animal Welfare* has brought together the *Wildlife Division of Simao Prefecture Forestry Bureau*, the *Forestry Department of Yunnan Province*, the *Institute of Ecology at Beijing Normal University*, and the *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service* to develop community economic programs in order to ease the pressure on farmers caused by elephant activities in Simao Prefecture.

5. *Enhance environmental NGO cooperation among Mainland Chinese NGOs.* Unlike the NGO sector in Taiwan and Hong Kong, a number of the Mainland NGOs are not aware of the existence of other environmentalists within their country! As discussed earlier in these proceedings, Taiwanese environmental NGO activists offer models for effective NGO partnering and networking. NGO gatherings, even with outside groups, has the added benefit of promoting more networking among Mainland's environmental NGO activists who could in turn build stronger information exchanges between provinces and regions within Mainland China on environmental issues. Interprovincial and intraprovincial environmental and natural resource conflicts are growing in Mainland China, so enhancing NGO networks within the country could enable Mainland environmentalists to facilitate cross-provincial cooperation.

Conclusion

The Hong Kong forum offered the participants an

opportunity to examine how environmental NGOs and news reporting have emerged, operated, and mobilized in each society, what type of difficulties they are facing, and what kinds of advantages they each enjoy. Mutual understanding of their counterparts across the Straits lays a good foundation for future dialogues among these civil society organizations. While only a short amount of time has elapsed since the forum, the *Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum* already has sparked some collaborative initiatives:

(1) *The Wild Bird Federation, Taiwan* began planning to help supply the *Black-necked Crane Association* at Zhaotong with telescopes to help with education activities among local farmers;

(2) The *Greenpeace-Hong Kong* office hosted a roundtable with the Taiwanese activists after the forum and explained the specifics on how to organize an on-line campaign against genetically modified (GM) food;

(3) The founder of the Taiwanese group *Society of Wilderness*, Hsu Jen-Shiu joined together with *GreenRiver*, a Sichuan-based NGO, to photograph the Jin Sha River in the summer of 2001. Those pictures will be published soon as the first and most comprehensive study of the ecological status of the river. The two groups are discussing future potential cooperation.

(4) Journalists at the forum interviewed the NGO participants (and each other!) and have used the material to create radio shows and to write newspaper and magazine articles.

(5) Hong Kong environmental NGOs commented that the forum helped them to identify more partners for future joint projects in Mainland China.

While the forum has sparked some small collaborative initiatives, we must reiterate that the objective of the forum was modest. We hope that this forum and these proceedings can promote some dialogue and further investigations into the potential of environmental cooperation to improve the effectiveness of green civil society organizations and to enhance peaceful relations among peoples and regions around the world.

Endnotes

¹ We would like to express our gratitude to our Wilson Center colleagues Geoffrey D. Dabelko, Sun Liang, and Gang Lin who provided us with valuable feedback on this final commentary.

² See the ECSP Web site for publications highlighting the environmental-security debates and literature (<http://ecsp.si.edu> or request copies at ecspwwic@wwic.si.edu). To request copies of the *China Environment Series* email chinaenv@erols.com or call 202-691-4233.

³ On theorizing environmental confidence-building, see Ken Conca, "Environmental Cooperation and International Peace" in *Environmental Conflict* (P. Diehl et al. 2001. Westview Press).

⁴ In the forthcoming book *Environmental Peacemaking* (Johns Hopkins University Press and Woodrow Wilson Center Press), editors Ken Conca and Geoffrey D. Dabelko present a collection of case studies that compare the progress, prospects, and problems related to environmental peacemaking initiatives in six regions: the Caspian, the Baltic, Southern Africa, South Asia, Central Asia, and along the U.S.-Mexican border. See also Stacy D. VanDeveer and Geoffrey D. Dabelko (Eds). 1999. *Protecting Regional Seas: Developing Capacity and Fostering Environmental Cooperation in Europe*. Washington, DC: Environmental Change and Security Project, Woodrow Wilson Center (for a copy email ecspwwic@wwic.si.edu).

⁵ There are some environmental and energy working groups within Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), which may be providing Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese representatives opportunities to meet and discuss regional environmental issues.

⁶ Notably, Hong Kong and Mainland China are facing some environmental problems that could raise tensions. For example, depending on which way the wind is blowing, Hong Kong and Guangdong Province send polluted air to each other. Hong Kong and Guangdong Province also share a common river basins. The Pearl River Basin, which is threatened by industrial, agricultural, and domestic wastes.

⁷ While the *Friends of Earth-Hong Kong* and the *Conservancy Association* in Hong Kong have been making efforts to start long-term and institutionalized cooperation with Mainland partners, a majority of the participants at the conference had never met their counterparts. In fact many of the Taiwanese groups were unaware that any truly nongovernmental green work was possible in Mainland China.

⁸ While the growth of cross-strait environmental networks could someday become a reality, it is a valid question whether the state institutions in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong would react negatively to the emergence of something akin to a regional green civil society. We do not believe environmental networks would be viewed as politically sensitive by the governments, for over the past decade numerous environmental scientists and researchers on both sides of the Taiwan Straits also have been meeting regularly. Over the same time period humanitarian and cultural organizations in Taiwan and Hong Kong have significantly increased their activities in Mainland China. Even government-organized NGOs in Taiwan and Mainland China, which aim to promote reunification, have worked together without causing political tidal waves. See Wang Xinxin Ken. (2000). "Taiwanese NGOs and the Prospect of National Reunification in the Taiwan Strait." *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. (Volume 54, Issue 1):111-115.

⁹ For more information on U.S. and Chinese NGO activities in China see the yearly inventory in the Wilson Center's *China Environment Series* <http://ecsp.si.edu>.

Green NGO and Journalist Forum Collage

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