

Lofty rhetoric leads to nowhere

Written by J. Michael Cole □□□

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The pages of this newspaper and other liberal publications are filled with beautiful slogans about the need to “protect” Taiwan based on lofty principles such as democracy, justice and human rights. Commendable as these prescriptions may be, in and of themselves they are impotent in the face of the present challenges confronting this nation.

Although the intentions of the opinion writers who propose such measures are undoubtedly honorable, their prose often lacks the rigorous intellectual inquisitiveness that would give them true meaning, leaving us with little more than a constellation of presumptuous abstracts. In fact, more often than not, the ideals they espouse are at best a means to contrast what the authors are trying to protect with the entity that poses the most formidable threat to it — China.

However, using words to describe what China is not is hardly the kind of call to action that will ward off the threat to Taiwan’s continued existence.

An understanding of the opponent makes this abundantly clear. Sloganeering doesn’t gain traction with the Chinese Communist Party and the politicians and business leaders in Taipei who seem inclined to be co-opted by the Chinese. It doesn’t move, sway or frighten them.

One should be careful, though, not to confuse slogans with “soft power,” the term that seeks to explain a state’s ability to bring about behavioral change in other states by virtue of the attractiveness of its social mores and cultural practices. Soft power, if applied wisely and with clear purpose, can effect change that is beneficial to the state exercising it.

The problem with ideals like justice and democracy is that they are merely formless concepts existing in nature; without direction and willful purpose, they are neither here nor there. Absent a stated objective, they cannot constitute “soft power” and will fail to achieve any effect whatsoever. Therefore, what is required is not so much a parroting of Western liberal ideals — which Beijing sheds like water off a duck’s back — but rather an action plan with clearly stated objectives that can translate into concrete acts — both pre-emptive and reactive — of “soft” and, in needed, “hard” power.

For obvious reasons, this prescription requires a lot more homework, since looking for solutions in the real world confronts us to all kinds of practicalities. However, if we are to achieve our objective of saving Taiwan from what is quickly shaping into an ominous fate, this is what is required of us. Anything short of this is intellectual sloth, a facile churning out of concepts that ultimately does nothing more than deresponsibilize the author while stating which side of the divide he or she sits on.

Ironically, the abundance of vague concepts that have been repeated ad nauseam in the past few years has also been self-defeating, as it has served to turn Taiwan into an abstract idea abroad, rather than an actual plot of land with 23 million people inhabiting it. In many ways, this is exactly what Beijing has sought, and the many academics who care and write about Taiwan should be horrified that their work is making this objective more achievable for the communists.

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Abstractions are easy to ignore, and if Taiwan's would-be defenders paint the issues as such to their audience, then it will be immensely difficult to convince the rest of the world to care about Taiwan's fate, let alone take action to ensure a positive outcome.

Nothing gets resolved in the ivory tower, especially in a situation like Taiwan's where the "other side" plays by different rules, rules that are solidly grounded in reality and which come in the form of investments, trade agreements, military deployments, backroom negotiations and so on. We can scream "human rights" and "democracy" all we want. We can even shake in anger when our constitutional "right" to hold a referendum on the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) is yet again denied by the authorities. However, without concrete acts, those phantoms will be as useful as brandishing a flower at the cold, crushing tracks of tanks storming the beaches.

After years of deceiving ourselves into thinking that China's opening to the rest of the world would liberalize and democratize it by dint of exposure to Western ideals, we should know better than to expect that the small army of academics who would defend Taiwan against the illiberal behemoth can be any more successful.

Writing in 1839, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's adage "the pen is mightier than the sword" may have rung nicely in his play, but in reality if no one's reading, the pen is nothing but a scribble seen by no one, wasting at the bottom of a dark well.

Let us descend to Earth from our towering ideals and meet the challenge that awaits us with our feet firmly planted on the ground, and our minds filled with action.

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