

Tsai controls the defense narrative

Written by David Brown

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President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) has been developing a narrative that the goal of Taiwan's defense is to protect the republic's democracy.

There are many ways to advocate the role of national defense. It could be expressed as defending Taiwan's sovereignty, territory and dignity, as deterring aggression, as preserving the Constitution, as protecting the economy and people's security, or, as it is more frequently touted, as defending Taiwan's freedom and democracy.

Tsai plays a prominent role in defining that purpose. In September, she described the goal of her defense policy as protecting Taiwan's "sovereignty, democracy, freedoms and dignity."

"The Battle of Gunningtou reminds us that freedom is not earned by making concessions, nor by bending the knee, but rather through a mighty defense capability and cohesive will," Tsai said during a ceremony last month commemorating the 1949 battle on Kinmen.

A Ministry of Defense report this year states that the mission of the armed forces is to "become the perpetual protectors of [Taiwan's] freedom and democracy."

When two Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) fighters crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait in March, Tsai coined a 16-character statement: "On territory and sovereignty, do not give up an inch; in firmly upholding democracy and freedom, do not retreat."

She has repeated this slogan subsequently. Tsai has also described the issues at stake in the coming election as a "choice of values" and as preserving Taiwan's democratic way of life in the face of pressure from Beijing.

Last month, in her Double Ten National Day address, Tsai said: "When freedom and democracy are challenged ... we must stand up and defend ourselves."

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In her Double Ten National Day address last year, Tsai said that she had consistently insisted on protecting the free and democratic way of life of the nation's 23 million people. In her 2017 address, Tsai praised "our brothers and sisters" in the armed forces, saying: "All of you are the staunch defenders of Taiwan's democracy, freedom and way of life."

Tsai seems to have been searching for a way to state the mission of the armed forces that would mobilize public support for national defense. That mission is multifaceted, but is it more effective to emphasize deterring PLA aggression, protecting national sovereignty or protecting Taiwan's democratic way of life?

All are important. While different aspects are more appropriate in specific circumstances, Tsai is increasingly emphasizing the protection of Taiwan's democracy.

Public opinion polls shed some light on which is more appealing. For many years, Duke University has published the Taiwan National Security Survey, which is designed to assess attitudes about security.

After a series of questions on the PLA threat and the possibility of war, the survey asks respondents an open-ended question on what they would do if war breaks out. Respondents are not given multiple choice answer. Instead, they must write in their response, which are then grouped into categories.

In surveys from 2012 to 2019, the consistently high-ranked categories, together making up 60 to 70 percent of responses, were "adjust to the circumstances," "don't know" and "flee abroad."

Far down the list in these same years were "support the government," "join the army" and "resist," representing 15-20 percent of the responses. Skeptics who doubt that Taiwanese have the will to fight often cite these statistics.

However, last year, the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy designed a poll to gauge attitudes toward democracy and defense. The poll started with questions on democracy, with 76 percent of respondents agreeing that despite its flaws, democracy was the best political system. The

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poll then asked respondents whether they would “fight to protect Taiwan” if a declaration of independence led China to use force against Taiwan — 55 percent of the respondents said yes. The willingness to fight increased to 68 percent if Beijing initiated the use of force to compel unification.

This year, the foundation conducted a similar survey that found slightly higher percentages of respondents willing to fight in both circumstances. Furthermore, those respondents who expressed stronger support for democratic values were more likely to support fighting to defend Taiwan.

It is well known that polls give different results based on the context and the way questions are posed. It is not clear which of these polls is more accurate in assessing Taiwanese’s willingness to fight.

The poll conducted in the context of Taiwan’s democratic values reported much higher support for defending Taiwan. This would seem to indicate that Tsai is onto something important in encouraging the public to think about the mission of national defense as protecting Taiwan’s democratic way of life.

It is not clear how many people hear, read or otherwise actually absorb statements by national leaders. Nevertheless, Tsai is again demonstrating leadership in building public support for a greater commitment to defense. In the short term, greater public awareness that the goal is to defend democracy should aid in military recruitment and retention, along with taking reserve obligations seriously and supporting increased defense spending.

Further research is needed to confirm these suppositions. Several years ahead, Beijing could be using much more threatening military actions to buttress its political and psychological campaign for unification.

In the face of such threats, protecting Taiwan’s democratic way of life might be the only rallying cry that could bring millions of Taiwanese into the streets in peaceful public demonstrations of resistance.

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