

A heated debate is going on in Taiwan over the cross-strait service trade agreement with China. Proponents, with President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) in the forefront, argue that the agreement is essential for the nation's competitiveness and its future as a trading nation.

In an international press conference on Sunday, Ma said that the pact is "crucial to Taiwan's future economic development," while Premier Jiang Yi-huah (江宜樺) pronounced a day earlier that the pact would "help Taiwan's liberalization and internationalization."

Opponents — including the students who have taken over the legislative chamber, the Democratic Progressive Party and the Taiwan Solidarity Union — maintain that the agreement is bad for the nation and will further undermine the already shaky and stagnant economy.

Who is right? To decide, consider a number of specific aspects of the agreement and also the way the government has attempted to advance it through the legislature.

First, is the agreement with the People's Republic of China a prerequisite for Taiwan to join other international trade blocs, such as the much-touted Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)?

The answer is a clear and straightforward "no."

On the contrary, the nation has a better chance of joining the TPP if it does not have a service trade agreement with Beijing. The reason is that if the agreement with China goes ahead, other countries will perceive Taiwan's economy as too closely tied to China, which will not help the nation's liberalization and internationalization.

Second, will the trade agreement improve the economy?

Again, the answer is "no," because a trade agreement with China is likely to hollow out the

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Written by Gerrit van der Wees
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economy instead of strengthening it. An overreliance on China will make Taiwan less prepared for intensive cooperation — and competition — with other economies in the region and around the world.

Third, is the trade agreement fair and balanced? Jiang and other officials love to point out that Beijing has agreed to open 80 categories of its service sector to Taipei, while Taiwan will open 64 to China. Such statements are highly deceptive, as each category has a different weight, size and impact on the economy.

In his press conference on Saturday, Jiang also said: “Every economic expert knows that this agreement will do more good for Taiwan.”

He forgot to mention that the chairwoman of the economics department at Taiwan National University, and many other economists, have criticized the report as bad for the nation.

However, all the “economics” arguments aside: This trade agreement has very little to do with free trade. Instead, it is a rather obvious attempt to push the nation into the economic orbit of undemocratic and repressive China, so that a few years down the road, Taiwan has no choice but to succumb to Beijing’s pressure to “unify.”

And by “unify,” it means something along the same lines as the way Hong Kong and Tibet have been incorporated by China.

Last but not least, Ma and his officials are trying to label the student protest as “illegal” and blame the students for “violence.”

These tactics by a Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government are reminiscent of the old days of the Martial Law era and the White Terror of 1947 to 1987.

They have no place in Taiwan’s new democracy and should be rejected out of hand.

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