

From various perspectives, the Sunflower movement led by Taiwanese students has created a monument in the nation's democratic history. In response to the unprecedented rally, which involved hundreds of thousands of people peacefully gathering on Sunday last week to protest against the cross-strait service trade agreement, President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration reluctantly consented to some of the students' appeals and released an oversight bill to monitor future agreements with China.

Nevertheless, an incompatible divergence between the students and the government has not been defused, since this oversight draft will not apply to the service trade pact, which is the focus of discord between the protesters and the government.

The Sunflower movement not only symbolizes a brand new page of civil participation in Taiwan's history, but also has some exhilarating implications.

First, a new generation of Taiwanese students has shown a strong attachment to the nation's future. Their claims are also broadly echoed by the majority of the public, which culminated in a mass demonstration, unparalleled in recent years.

Second, the most significant and exciting factor springing from the movement is that the spirit of democracy has become an inalienable part and a deep-rooted belief of most Taiwanese, which constitutes an invincible shield to defend the nation from foreign aggression.

Unfortunately, this movement has also exposed some worrying and disappointing drawbacks for constitutional practice. First, the movement signalled a catastrophic failure and dysfunction of the representative system. Lawmakers not only failed to perform their jobs in terms of overseeing the executive branch, but also fell short of fulfilling public expectation, causing the protesters to take the radical step of occupying the legislative chamber to draw the public's attention to how the controversial pact was recklessly handled in the legislature.

Second, after a series of constitutional reforms in past decades, power has been disproportionately concentrated with the president and the Executive Yuan. The weakened Legislative Yuan has lost its grip on the executive branch. Given the fact that Chinese

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Nationalist Party (KMT) lawmakers are strictly controlled and disciplined by their party and its chairman, who happens to also be the president, and that these officials comprise the majority of the legislature, the branch has become a rubber stamp for the Executive Yuan and has lost its original function — placing checks and balances on the executive branch.

The combination of a dysfunctional legislature and irresponsible lawmakers on the issue of the service trade pact triggered the students' outrage and the public's discontent.

Nevertheless, an indisputable reality is that the core of this widespread anxiety over the pact largely stems from people's growing apprehension of the creeping economic influence of China. Proponents of cross-strait economic integration say that the Sunflower movement is a symptom of an irrational "China-phobia," which is not only unwise, but also self-defeating. They claim Taiwan could not revitalize its economy if it refused to increase economic engagements with China the world's second-largest economy and potentially its No. 1 economy.

However, the student protesters and other opponents of the pact say that they are not rejecting economic engagement with China, but are asking for a more thorough and transparent review, prudent and verifiable impact assessments and institutional channels of civil participation regarding the signing of treaties with Beijing, since the repercussions of these agreements are likely to bear consequences for the survival of Taiwan.

Advocates of the trade pact argue against these claims by saying that Taiwan has recently signed free-trade agreements (FTAs) with Singapore and New Zealand, which brought no substantial negative effect to the nation and required none of the cumbersome procedures and deliberation being demanded for the China accord, and so ask why the service trade pact should be any different.

However, the pact's opponents contend that New Zealand, Singapore and other countries have no ambition to annex Taiwan and deepening economic engagements with those countries does not undermine the nation's sovereignty. As for China, it is the only country claiming that Taiwan is its renegade province and an inseparable part of its territory, as well as the only country that has more than 1,000 missiles pointed at the nation, threatening the use of force to conquer Taiwan if necessary.

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Furthermore, Beijing is also the fundamental source of Taipei's diplomatic predicament and the major obstruction to Taiwan's FTA outreach. Opponents ask how the nation can afford not to be cautious and take prudent steps when undertaking negotiations with this daunting and gigantic neighbor.

The underlying rationale of the debate centers on an intriguing politico-economic question: Can the economy be completely separated from politics? Pact advocates argue that the service trade agreement is not merely innocuous, but also economically beneficial and should not be tainted with excessive political conjecture. That is probably why the agreement's official assessment report — issued by the Ministry of Economic Affairs — focused on economic impact assessments, but totally ignored the socio-political consequences of the treaty.

Pact opponents are concerned that the effects of the agreement will go beyond economics and may result in undesirable immigration, regression of freedom of speech and an undermining of the nation's resistance to China and its de facto independence.

Despite the conflicting perspectives, political literature on the economy suggests that economic engagement can be utilized by an aggressor to mobilize interest groups sympathetic to its cause within a target country. As Albert Hirschman, a German-American academic, pointed out in his research of Nazi Germany's economic strategy toward the Balkan states, "vested interests" in the targeted state can become an influential commercial coalition and undermine its security policy.

Although it remains debatable whether a pro-China commercial coalition has emerged in Taiwan, one long-existing and irrefutable fact is that Beijing has been arduously and skillfully exercising its economic tactics to influence local politics. That may be the fundamental reason China is willing to grant more economic favors in the service trade pact. For China, economic interests have always been regarded as strategic instruments to serve political ends.

As the government fervently praises the benefits of the service trade pact, conscious and sagacious people should question the government's inattention to China's political ambitions. They should also wonder what lies beneath the sugar-coated pact and whether it is possible that Beijing would grant economic benefits without asking for any political compensations in return.

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For a small, open and vulnerable economy, the concerns of national security should always prevail over short-term economic interests. It is doubtful whether the government has seriously made a thorough political and security assessments regarding the possible repercussions of the trade pact. The dysfunctional legislature has fallen short of its responsibility in terms of undertaking a critical analysis of it, which is why the abhorrent 30-second review of the pact stirred up widespread public outcry.

Given that people are divided about what relationship should be developed with China, any important agreement should be subject to broader public deliberation in a transparent democratic process in order to obtain a consensus.

Compared with the legislature's failure to meet the electorate's expectations on safeguarding national security, the US Congress is more willing to exert its authority and oversight to rigorously monitor and scrutinize trade policies and agreements undertaken by the executive branch. Particularly, in recent years, the US Congress has been increasing its emphasis on the importance of national security with regard to trade pacts and foreign entities' investment in the US.

If a superpower like the US takes national security into account when formulating foreign economic policies and strives to strike a balance between economic interests and security, how can a small and vulnerable nation afford to deliberately overlook such issues?

Furthermore, some misleading concepts should be clarified regarding the debate on economic liberalization versus national security. First, no one rejects that further steps should be made toward trade liberalization. It seems to be a malign accusation to label people who support a more prudent supervision of trade with Beijing as "protectionists." If China were not a major threat to national security, it would be terribly stupid not to befriend such a gigantic and newly rich neighbor.

Second, it is imperative to construct a long-term global trade strategy, in which the scope of trade initiative should go beyond the Chinese market.

Third, the nation's prudence with regard to China issues, which many advanced countries also practice, should not be denigrated as trade discrimination or protectionism. As long as

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regulations agree with international standards, prudence toward China should not hinder Taipei's participation in other economic integrations.

Fourth, the government should put down its elitist arrogance and strive to communicate with dissenting opinions. A patriarch preaching: "I am doing this in your best interest" does not work in a modern democracy. In a democracy, people do not expect or need an omnipotent saint to rule or tell them what to do. Likewise, the opinions of self-interested Chief Executives from big corporations should not become more correct or valuable than the views of small business owners, street vendors and students, since everyone is equal and has one vote.

In a democracy, people believe that the sum total of each individual's rational thinking and self-awareness can lead to the best decision through public discourse and debate. In a democracy, people do not need a saint, but a down-to-earth leader who is able to listen, to lead by following the will of the people and to never forget that his mandate and power are derived from public consent.

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