

As next year's presidential election looms, the issue of cross-strait relations is once again being discussed and debated. Putting to one side the conduct of the election, cross-strait relations is an issue of vital concern for the future of Taiwan's 23 million residents and will have implications for the development of the Chinese-speaking world. The issue demands serious attention.

With the thawing of once-frosty relations between Taipei and Beijing, there has been frequent contact across the Taiwan Strait, as well as political and social changes in both countries. Cross-strait relations must be examined and adjusted accordingly.

There are essentially two directions from which people approach the issue: "unification" on one hand and independence on the other.

The former has to do with nationalism, the latter with freedom.

From a nationalist perspective, cross-strait relations derive from tensions between Taiwanese nationalism and Chinese nationalism, from how they feed off each other and clash.

The former is based upon expansionism, the second upon self-determination. These aspirations significantly inform cross-strait relations to this day. That said, compared with tensions born of nationalism in other places around the world, which mainly derive from ethnic, religious or linguistic differences, the fundamental differences between Taiwan and China are certainly not of this nature.

The most important difference between the two sides is not related to ethnic, religious, linguistic or cultural factors; it stems from desires for freedom, democracy and human rights.

The picture of cross-strait relations changes when seen from the perspective of freedom: The conflict then pits freedom and democracy against autocratic dictatorship.

Taiwan wants to protect its democratic society and the values of freedom and human rights. Behind this is the idea that the tension between the two sides is a localized example of a wider conflict pitting freedom and democracy against autocratic dictatorship that is being played out worldwide.

As a democracy, Taiwan — with its defense of freedom — is in a position to secure the understanding and approval of the international community, which is both beneficial to securing international support and in avoiding internal ethnic conflicts. The nation's democracy could galvanize people with a shared commitment to protecting freedom and could gain the support of the Chinese-speaking world.

Within the conceptual framework of freedom and democracy versus an autocratic dictatorship, the balance of power is likely to shift slightly in Taiwan's favor.

This is because freedom, democracy and human rights are universal values that are the shared tongue of the civilized world, which — despite a rather difficult geographic location — have helped create the only free, democratic system in the Chinese-speaking world.

This is the nation's strength, and a new narrative of cross-strait relations should be founded upon it.

The move from nationalism to democracy is to be the paradigm shift in the narrative informing cross-strait relations. It was German philosopher Immanuel Kant who said, on discoursing about the possibility of perpetual peace between societies, that it could exist only between free, democratic countries.

Post-democratization, Taiwan expects China to choose the same path, so that both sides can pursue perpetual peace and development.

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Democracy, freedom can help nation lead region

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