

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) devoted a considerable portion of her Double Ten National Day address on Tuesday last week to Taiwan's military. She gave her comments pride of place in the section of the address on "Safeguarding Taiwan's Democracy and Freedom."

In doing so, she seemed to be defining the goal of Taiwan's defense policy as defending democracy. She praised "our brothers and sisters" in the armed forces saying: "All of you are staunch defenders of Taiwan's democracy, freedom and way of life."

Such language might seem conventional and almost so obvious as not to need saying, but the idea that defending Taiwan's democratic way of life is the goal of defense policy has not been expressed so clearly or authoritatively before.

The Tsai administration's Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) in March said that the military's goals are safeguarding the nation, building a professional military, increasing defense self-reliance, protecting the people's welfare and contributing to regional stability.

In the 2009 QDR, former president Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration said that the military's goals were war prevention, homeland defense, contingency response, conflict avoidance and regional stability.

The ROC Constitution states that national defense objectives are to safeguard national security and preserve world peace.

Nowhere in these statements is there any mention of democracy or freedom. In Taiwan's authoritarian period, the defense goal was to recover the mainland. Tsai's explicit linkage of defense to democracy is thus noteworthy.

The linkage does have a background. Democracy has been a goal of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) since its founding.

The party's first defense blue paper in 2013, "The DPP's National Defense Agenda," said: "The existence of a sovereign state, a free society and pursuit of happiness are Taiwan's core national interests that our national defense must reflect and protect."

Since her inauguration, Tsai has visited military bases two or three times a month, attending ceremonies, announcing promotions and handing out awards.

In praising the military, promoting military reform, advocating for military equipment and benefits, linking the military's role to democracy and calling them brothers and sisters, Tsai is clearly trying to boost military morale and help earn public respect for the armed forces.

Doing these things will in turn help address the practical problems that the Ministry of National Defense has had in recruiting volunteers for the armed forces, filling places in officer training programs and encouraging participation in the reserves.

However, the president's efforts might have greater importance.

In recent years, a broad consensus has formed in Taiwan that the nation's democratic values and way of life define Taiwan. This consensus has grown along with the stronger sense of a separate Taiwanese identity.

This consensus has also become stronger as the gulf between Chinese Communist Party authoritarianism on the mainland and Taiwan's democracy has grown ever wider.

At the same time, the military capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have increased dramatically, posing a growing threat to Taiwan. During the past year, the PLA has begun conducting exercises east of Taiwan and sending ships and aircraft to circumnavigate the island. These exercises will likely become more frequent and more coercive.

Despite considerable media coverage of this growing threat, there has been little change in the public's general lack of interest in defense issues.

This lack of interest has been a matter of concern to many in the US.

It might reflect a feeling of resignation that, given the PLA's capabilities, there is little Taiwan can do but to rely on the US. It might reflect a lack of awareness that there is much the military, the government or Taiwanese could do within existing resources that would strengthen the nation's deterrence.

Tsai has now articulated a link between democracy and defense, in effect providing a more compelling rationale for national defense. The idea that the goal of national defense policy is to safeguard Taiwan's democratic way of life can convey a powerful message.

Will this idea be embraced by Taiwanese? It would seem to have particular appeal to the younger generation.

If the linkage is understood and then accepted and translated into action by political leaders and Taiwanese, that could dramatically change attitudes toward defense.

Were that to happen, it would have positive effects on relations with the US, by demonstrating a broad commitment to defending Taiwan. That would help consolidate US support for Taiwan's defense.

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