

Democracy and freedom set Taiwan, China apart

Written by Peng Ming-min 彭明敏

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Former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) has described the relationship between Taiwan and China as a “special international relationship” and former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) has said that Taiwan and China are two separate nations — one on each side of the Taiwan Strait.

Premier William Lai (賴清德) burned the bridges by publicly backing Taiwanese independence. For Taiwan’s highest executive leader to announce that Taiwanese independence is his ultimate goal is a historical breakthrough for Taiwan. His vision, courage, honesty and straightforward attitude deserve praise.

During the Martial Law era, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) made supporting Taiwanese independence a capital crime. Many activists died trying to promote independence. Today, their stories still make people cry.

Polls show increased support for Taiwanese independence since the lifting of martial law, but the concept was long been frowned upon and the term has been almost exclusively used to discriminate against, insult and mock Taiwanese. Lai’s decision to openly embrace it has imbued it with a new sense of dignity and pride, and brought it into the political mainstream.

Pro-unification parties are both worried and pleased with Lai’s remarks: They fear the growing influence of independence supporters, but they are pleased with the possibility that China could issue a warrant for Lai’s arrest for violating China’s “Anti-Secession” Law, which they, absurdly, worship.

They thought China would react strongly to Lai’s remarks, but China’s Taiwan Affairs Office simply reiterated its “one China” clichés and moved on.

They then hoped that something would happen at the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) 19th National Congress, but in his three-hour-long address, Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) barely said anything new about cross-strait relations and even added, quite considerably, that Beijing would “respect the current system and way of life” in Taiwan.

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The pro-unification camp are of course very disappointed, which explains why they have been trying to exaggerate rumors that China could invade Taiwan in 2020 and occupy Taiwan's outlying islands.

Today's disputes over national territory cannot be simply resolved by violence, especially when an authoritarian country tries to invade a free and democratic country. For China, the problem that Taiwan presents is not so much a military problem as a political one, as it is related to how China is perceived in the world and whether the regime can continue to exist.

If China invaded Taiwan, Japan and the US would definitely intervene. The EU would also impose economic sanctions on China. So far, the CCP has managed to justify its rule by ensuring that China's economy and living standards continue to improve. If the economy stops growing and if the standard of living were to deteriorate, the party would lose its legitimacy.

Xi knows that he must deal with Taiwan with extreme caution because, although China's military leaders call for attacking Taiwan, they might not be ready to stake their lives on an invasion, as most of them live a comfortable life as successful businesspeople or corrupt officials. Xi surely knows that invading Taiwan would mean the end of his political career.

As China's security policies become increasingly similar to North Korea's, Taiwan must continue to uphold the values of democracy and freedom and make them an essential part of its culture and political system, thereby clearly distinguishing itself from China. The more obvious that is, the more likely that Taiwan will receive support from the international community.

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