

Miles Yu On Taiwan: The meaning of Taiwan

Written by Miles Yu

Monday, 10 January 2022 06:31



The world has radically changed in the last half decade. Tired consensus are being questioned and discarded. Global dialogues on international security issues are growing more urgent. Democratic nations are recognizing the challenges they face. And the most profound transformation has to do with how free societies understand the threat posed by one entity: the Chinese Communist Party.

The transformation of the United States' understanding of the CCP was initiated and led by the Trump Administration. It was best articulated by then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. He described how the central threat of our times is the Chinese Communist Party. This threat is no longer regional, but global. It is a threat to human freedom that is more dire than even the Soviet Union during the Cold War. At the root of that threat is an ideologically-driven communist tyranny bent on global hegemony. And while promising a "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation," the communist elites in Beijing brutalize their own people through genocide, Orwellian surveillance, repression, censorship, secret police, and ideological brainwashing. These are difficult facts to swallow, but they're true.

Leaders across the political spectrum in the United States are now in agreement on these facts. And this understanding has continued into the Biden Administration. It unites America with likeminded partners around the world in a long overdue, but necessary coalition against the Chinese Communist Party. And few understand just how necessary this coalition is better than the people of Taiwan.

So what does this mean for Taiwan? Taiwan has a rightful place in the free world. A de facto self-ruling island nation, it shows what a free and democratic Chinese-speaking people can achieve. For seven decades, it has been a flashpoint in the US-China bilateral relationship. Now the democracy of 23 million citizens takes on a new, and even more important, role in a global contest between free peoples and tyranny.

THE DEFENSE OF TAIWAN IS A GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Taiwan is not alone. Its peace and stability matter not only for the region, or for the United States, but for the entire free world. A growing number of nations recognize that Taiwan is but the beginning of the CCP's global chain of aggression. Just as the Nazis didn't stop at the annexation of Austria, and Imperial Japan didn't stop at annexation of Manchuria, so too would the CCP not stop at taking Taiwan.

Beijing's ambition is guided by a revisionist view of history and hostility toward the US-led international order. This view makes it the aggressor in nearly two dozen territorial and maritime disputes with other nations, not counting some global commons such as the South China Sea. China's land and sea neighbors in nations as diverse as India, Nepal, Bhutan, Vietnam, Myanmar, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and even tyrannical North Korea are its victims. While Taiwan is the prime target, no one is spared.

Nations outside of the Indo-Pacific are deeply vested in the peace and prosperity of the world's most populous and dynamic region, including Taiwan. Many European nations have painful, still living, memories of what appeasing aggressors in the 20th century wrought. They are alarmed by the CCP's aggression, and have shown unmistakable signs of solidarity with Taiwan.

In 2019, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg made a historic declaration that the CCP posed a security threat to Europe, and that the Taiwan Strait is also the concern of the NATO Alliance. That new NATO posture has since been reinforced by numerous NATO officials. France and the United Kingdom have sent warships and delegations to the region as well. Even tiny Lithuania, with a population just over a tenth Taiwan's size, is standing up to Beijing alongside Taiwan, leaving the 17+1 format and allowing a Taiwanese representative's office to open in Vilnius.

Non-NATO countries of consequence, especially Japan and Australia, have also stepped up. They've made it explicit that, in the event of the CCP's aggression against Taiwan, their countries would join the fight on Taiwan's side, most likely under the leadership of the United States. Beijing is powerful, but that power is nothing compared to a united free world. All of this demonstrates that Taiwan is no longer alone in fighting for its survival, it has become an implicit member of an international anti-CCP aggression coalition, for in the global community of democracies, a threat toward one is a threat to all.

HISTORY, INTERNATIONAL LAW AND TAIWAN'S SOVEREIGNTY

Shared values and interests are building an anti-CCP coalition centered on Taiwan. But there's something else that rallies these nations together: the truth. And the truth is, simply, that Taiwan does not belong to Beijing. This is true based on history, international law, and the facts on the ground.

The CCP uses and abuses history to make extravagant territorial and maritime claims on other nations. Most of these claims are bogus.

In November 2020, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated the basic truth of the matter, "Taiwan has not been a part of China." This reaffirmed the official US government's long-standing stance on Taiwan's sovereignty first articulated in the 1982 "Six Assurances" by the Reagan Administration. Bad history cannot be the basis for bad claims of sovereignty.

Even more importantly, historical presence alone should not form the primary basis for a sovereignty claim if the existing international law says otherwise. The Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling in the landmark 2016 South China Sea case affirmed this fundamental principle and dismissed Beijing's claims to much of the South China Sea. The Court rejected China's sovereignty claim based upon historical rights, let alone untruthful historical claims. In July 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued another historic statement on the matter on behalf of the US government. He declared officially, for the first time, that China's claims over the resources of the South China Sea are "completely unlawful, as is its campaign of bullying to control them."

Beijing's claims fly in the face not only of law and history, but of reality. The reality is that the People's Republic of China has never exercised any sovereign administration over Taiwan. Whether or not Taiwan should, or will, be part of the People's Republic of China will be solely decided and agreed upon by the Taiwanese people.

This is the consensus on the island. It has been upheld, implicitly or explicitly, by both the KMT and the DPP administrations in Taiwan. In May 2009, then-Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) of the KMT declared that "Taiwan's future should be decided by the Taiwanese people." His successor, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) of the DPP, and her vice president, William Lai

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(), have frequently stated that there is no need for Taiwan to declare independence, for Taiwan is already an independent country, and its name is the Republic of China (Taiwan). And poll after poll of the Taiwanese people shows that they stand firmly against Beijing's aggression and attempts at so-called "reunification."

ALL EYES ON TAIWAN

In modern society, sovereignty derives from popular consent. Taiwan's sovereignty is based on history, law, reality, and the will of the Taiwanese people. It's also based on shared principles that tie the island nation's cause with that of other free countries.

As America's founding charter, the Declaration of Independence, states, governments "derive their just powers from the consent of the governed." Benjamin Franklin articulated this principle nicely: "In free governments, the rulers are the servants and the people their superiors and sovereigns." It is because of these universal ideals that all eyes are on free and democratic Taiwan.

The cross-Strait relationship between the governments in Beijing and Taiwan has taken on a broader significance. It's not only about the Chinese Communist Party insisting on claiming legitimacy of "China," and forcing Taiwan to become part of Beijing's domain. It is about an epic struggle between freedom and tyranny that predates this contest.

Beijing talks about "national reunification" with Taiwan. But this isn't a question about meeting in the middle. It's a clash between extreme opposites of governance models. Taiwan is free and democratic. The CCP is a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship.

In the Cold War, free nations focused on West Berlin. In this new era, it's Taiwan. And it's a contest that transcends time and place.

TAIWAN IS STRONG, AND WILL PLAY A DECISIVE ROLE

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Taiwan is a small nation, but Taiwan is strong. And it can play a decisive role. Like free peoples everywhere, it is the choices that the Taiwanese people make that will determine its course.

They should take comfort from the lessons of history. Small, democratic Greece defeated the mighty Persian Empire. In the 19th century, the tiny kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia adroitly navigated great-power politics and united the entire Italian nation. In the 20th century, Israel, a country two-thirds the size of Taiwan, prevailed over its much bigger adversaries in three wars over the course of four decades. Like Taiwan, Israel has a powerful friend in the United States. And unlike Israel's then-enemies, China has virtually no true allies that the CCP elites could depend upon to fight alongside them in a battle.

Those who doubt Taiwan's abilities to defend itself often invoke the biblical story of David and Goliath, as if to imply a kind of fatalism. It is useful to remember however that in the end, David defeated Goliath. Like defeatists then, today's naysayers think Goliath is too big to beat. In reality, he's too big to miss during the fight.

Taiwan has strengths Beijing will never possess. Its people would fight freely to defend themselves and their families, not for a dictator's vision. The communist government in Beijing lacks any political legitimacy, living in deep fear of its own people. It is increasingly isolated, quickly becoming an international pariah. As Secretary Pompeo declared at the Nixon Library and Museum in California in 2020, "Communists almost always lie. The biggest lie that they tell is to think that they speak for 1.4 billion people who are surveilled, oppressed, and scared to speak out."

President Tsai recognizes Taiwan's inherent strength, and spoke of it eloquently in her second inaugural address, stating that "being Taiwanese can be an honor that makes you hold your head high." Countless Chinese citizens on the repressed mainland would undoubtedly agree — if only they could speak without fear.

The people of Taiwan have a great deal to be proud of. And it's not only their free and democratic way of life. Taiwan embraces free market and private entrepreneurship. It has a global economic and trade output that beats competitors many times its size. In fact, Taiwan is the United States' ninth-largest goods trading partner.

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As we've seen during this pandemic, which began in Wuhan, Taiwan leads the world in public health and medical services. It has one of the world's highest life expectancies. It is among the most educated nations in the world, with a global impact in film, music, and traditional Chinese arts. It has Asia's freest press.

Taiwan is a critical leader in the global economic and technological supply chain. Its semiconductor design and production industries are crucial. And the world as we know it would come to a halt if there were no Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company.

Most importantly, Taiwan has one of the world's most mature and sophisticated electorates that choose their fate for themselves. The Taiwanese people have consistently chosen their leaders through a lively, often contentious democratic process that empowers people from diverse groups to have a voice and reach their potential, without regard for factors such as socio-economic status or gender.

President Tsai Ing-wen is a case in point. Except for Israel's Golda Meir, President Tsai is the only female head of state in Asia who reached to the top solely by virtue of her abilities and excellence — she had no family ties to a famous, strong man, unlike her counterparts in Bangladesh, Burma, India, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

When the rest of the world speaks about technologically-sophisticated Taiwan, it often talks only of software and hardware. But the Taiwanese people are the source of its true strength. And they are the basis of the nation's soft and hard power.

As President Tsai said, "Taiwan has been deemed a democratic success story, a reliable partner, and a force for good in the world by the international community. All Taiwanese people should take pride in this."

THE WORLD NEEDS TAIWAN AS MUCH AS TAIWAN NEEDS THE WORLD

Taiwan needs the rest of the world to stand with. And the world also needs Taiwan. This will be

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especially true in the years ahead, as likeminded nations continue to work together to counter the threat posed by the CCP.

Taiwan has decades of valuable experiences dealing with the CCP regime. The last two years have provided a tragic case study of the importance of this fact. If world leaders, including those in the World Health Organization, had heeded Taiwanese scientists and health officials' early warnings about the deadly coronavirus coming out of Wuhan, millions of lives and trillions of dollars would have been saved. Taiwan knew early on that it needed to be profoundly skeptical of the CCP regime. As Secretary Pompeo said when the extent of the CCP's mendacity became known, from then on, when it comes to Beijing, "distrust and verify."

When the pandemic began, a hashtag quickly went viral. #TaiwanCanHelp. Whether it's keeping people healthy, keeping countries safe, keeping economies and supply chains going, or keeping fundamental freedoms secure, that fact remains true. Taiwan can help. And Taiwan is helping. That truth should give free nations hope. And it should show Beijing that, when it comes to deciding who will win the future, size isn't everything.

Miles Yu served as the senior China policy and planning advisor to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during the Trump Administration. He is the Robert Alexander Mercer Visiting Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute, and the Project 2049 Institute.

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