

## Vilnius on democracy's front line

Written by The Liberty Times Editorial  
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Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda said on Dec. 4 last year that his country's decision to allow the opening of a Taiwanese mission in Vilnius bearing the name "Taiwan" was a "mistake." Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Vytaute Smaizyte-Kuliesiene responded by saying that "the Lithuanian government stands firm on its decision to welcome the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office."

Lithuanian Seimas Speaker Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen also expressed disagreement with Nausėda and questioned why he had only criticized the decision after China launched retaliatory actions against the Baltic state.

As Taiwan and Lithuania are strengthening ties, the political temperature in Vilnius is heating up. Clashes have been occurring between the Lithuanian Cabinet and the president, as they apparently have different views on the country's foreign policy.

Political tensions within Lithuania influence its exchanges with Taiwan. China has not only imposed economic coercion on Vilnius, it is also interfering in its domestic politics. This is not just an issue of suppressing Taiwan's international space, but a case in point of a global crisis of democracy.

Nausėda was elected in 2019, before Cabinet positions were filled after a new coalition won parliamentary elections in 2020. Regarding Lithuania's China-critical and Taiwan-friendly moves, the president and the Cabinet are apparently not on the same page.

Nausėda said that the name of the mission must be acceptable to "all parties," and he suggested that a non-diplomatic trade office should be established with "Taipei," meaning that the Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania should be renamed.

Reacting to Nausėda's "mistake" comment, China saw its chance, saying that it would be more important to take action and correct the "mistakes."

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Beijing used Lithuania's domestic divisions to exert its influence, and the country's politicians could not see that China's coercion was the root of the problem, so they turned their guns inward. Such scenes are familiar to Taiwan and other democracies; it is the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) old trick of dividing people.

The Lithuanian government in May last year announced that it would withdraw from the Cooperation Between China and Central and Eastern European Countries initiative, and called on other EU members to do the same.

In response, China said it "will make Lithuania regret it."

In July, Vilnius agreed with Taipei to set up the Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania, making it the first European country to have a mission bearing the name "Taiwan." This move was soon followed by Beijing's economic retaliations.

In August, China State Railway Group Co suspended freight links with Lithuania. The state-run operator stopped transporting goods to and from Lithuania, and products from the country were banned from entering the Chinese market.

Last month, Chinese customs excluded Lithuania from its declarations system. Beijing also targeted multinational companies and traders from other countries that interact with Lithuania, demanding them to side with Beijing if they want to continue doing business in China, as well as apply pressure on Lithuania.

With such unconventional trade sanctions, Beijing is not only targeting the Baltic state, but also testing the waters to see how other democracies, especially the EU, respond.

If democracies keep looking the other way, it would only facilitate China's infiltration of the rules-based liberal international order, which democracies have established over many years.

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From an international point of view, Lithuania bolstering its bond with Taiwan, as well as its focus on the Indo-Pacific region, is part of an initiative to expand links between democratic partners. If Beijing wants to block the deepening of ties between Taipei and Vilnius, it undermines the consolidation of relations within the democratic camp.

The issue is no longer just on the level of bilateral exchanges between Taiwan and Lithuania, but an issue of how democratic countries jointly respond to pressure from dictatorships.

This is why major European countries have successively voiced their support for Lithuania. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken allying with European partners is also a means of defense against authoritarian forces.

There might be differences between Lithuania and other EU countries with regard to their implementation of policies to counter China.

However, if Europe lets Beijing get away with its aggressions toward Lithuania, and the name of the office is changed, it would not only have an adverse effect on Taiwan's ties with the country, but would be a major setback for the democratic camp. It is precisely what China wants.

Beijing routinely uses two tactics to suppress democracies: military intimidation and economic coercion.

China's neighbors, such as Taiwan, are affected by both, experiencing the most pressure from Beijing. If Lithuania were in East Asia, it would probably be harassed by Chinese air force jets every day.

Taiwan is threatened by an evil neighbor, and major democracies have expressed solidarity, urging peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

Lithuania is targeted and oppressed by the CCP, and it is “because of Taiwan.”

Therefore, Taiwan should speak out for Lithuania.

The CCP criticizes countries with which Taiwan has substantial contacts. It accuses them of breaching the “one China” policy, using it as a rhetorical device to divide the democratic camp and weaken its members’ ability to resist Beijing.

The lesson Beijing should learn from the Lithuania affair is that the more it oppresses a democratic country, the more active the democratic camp supports that country. This would not only be a clear signal to Beijing, but also the staunchest aid to the China-critical faction within the democratic camp.

Developing its relationship with Taiwan would help Lithuania build connections in the Indo-Pacific region. The establishment of a Taiwan-friendly stronghold in Lithuania could in return help Taipei expand its relations with EU countries, especially in central and eastern Europe.

On Wednesday last week, Representative to Lithuania Eric Huang (黃國華) announced that a US\$200 million investment fund would be set up, focusing on central and eastern European industries that are conducive to Taiwan’s and Lithuania’s strategic economic and technological development.

The move showed great determination in response to Lithuania strengthening its ties and developing substantive relations with Taiwan. It is a move in the right direction, but it needs to be pursued with more urgency, especially as funding schedules and project partners have not been announced, and Beijing’s trade retaliations might be looming.

The fund is different from traditional means of economic aid. It is a mutually beneficial cooperation between two progressive and democratic countries. The two sides should strive to use their cooperation to prove that decoupling from China is the right path.

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