

Young generation to defend Taiwan

Written by Rajagopal Devara
Thursday, 16 June 2022 05:45

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to destruction and displacement, and has taken the lives of thousands of civilians, and yet Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to describe it as a “special military operation.”

Small, but strong and determined Ukraine has admirably fought back the mighty Russian power, to the surprise of its authoritarian admirers.

The West’s indirect support of Kyiv, and especially the shipment of sophisticated arms, ammunition and weaponry, has rendered the lethal power of the Russian artillery ineffective.

Why did Russia invade Ukraine? How is it relevant and important to Taiwan vis-a-vis its mighty authoritarian neighbor China? Is the Ukraine war a continuation of the Cold War, which divided the world into two blocs of democratic or autocratic regimes?

The authoritarian regime in Moscow might have been irritated by Ukraine’s desire to be an independent and democratic nation, and uphold values such as liberty, freedom and rule of law. These values, combined with close cultural ties to Russia, would have been discomfiting or even threatening to the Russian government, which has scant regard for democratic values. Taiwan has a resonance with Ukraine’s predicament.

Taiwan has developed a distinct, democratic identity since its first democratic presidential election in 1996. As it last year celebrated the silver jubilee of its successful democratic experiment, state power has been seamlessly transferred back and forth between the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party.

The success of Taiwan’s democracy warranted celebration on a grand scale, even though the silver jubilee was unfortunately not observed with the fanfare that it deserved. The celebration of the success of democracy reinforces the belief in democratic values. The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index last year ranked Taiwan eighth, with a score of 8.99, ahead of South Korea and Japan. Taiwan’s ranking, accorded by a credible organization, proves former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) wrong when he says that Taiwan is slowly degenerating into an “illiberal democracy.”

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However, Taiwan's leaders have to guard against challenges such as disinformation campaigns by authoritarian regimes and its agents to sabotage and divide democratic countries. The Asia-Pacific region's vibrant democracies pose a threat to the "exalted positions" enjoyed by totalitarian leaders.

Taiwan has a legacy of resistance and struggle. Commemorating the scars of such struggles is essential to create a national identity.

These scars become the emotive symbols of culture and create common consciousness among a nation's citizenry.

The biggest scar in Taiwan's history is the massacre of thousands of innocent protesters that started on Feb. 28, 1947, when the then-KMT regime violently suppressed a protest under orders from Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石), who told his generals to "kill them all, keep it secret."

The 228 Incident marked the beginning of a massive slaughter of Taiwanese. The atrocities that followed stand as a unique symbol of struggle, leaving searing memories in the nation's collective consciousness.

A network of memorials to commemorate the scars of struggle throughout the nation would help crystallize the solidarity that is critical to Taiwan's nation-building process.

The low-key, sullen celebrations to commemorate the crackdown is surprising, and does not fit the respect and reverence for the heroes who laid down their lives for Taiwan. Their sacrifice demands a year-long commemoration to recall the events leading to the uprising and the sacrifices made to rekindle the memories, as well as to inspire a new generation of Taiwanese.

The culturalization of the Incident would help construct a cultural identity based on memories and help with the completion of Taiwan's nation-building process.

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Taiwan's Generation Z, mostly born after 1996, are referred to as "children of democracy."

Teenagers have since the 1990s been introduced to Taiwan's liberal and democratic political culture.

The experiment of democratization has over the past 26 years forged a strong civic identity, in stark contrast to China's authoritarian model.

This powerful cohort of almost 4.75 million, now aged 15 to 30, have a critical role in maintaining and upholding Taiwan's democracy.

Fortunately, the "children of democracy" have increasingly weaker ties with China.

Living in an age of information driven by the Internet, younger Taiwanese see China for what it is, which has hardened Taiwan's identity.

The disconnection from China is further accentuated by Beijing's aggressive campaign against Taiwan in international forums and targeted attacks of its international allies.

The "children of democracy" are mostly influenced by Western educational standards and liberal values, which have enabled a distinct, democratic political identity to evolve in Taiwan, despite sharing ancestry, language and cultural practices with China.

At the Copenhagen Democracy Summit on Saturday, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) said via teleconference that Taiwan is determined to defend itself and its democratic way of life.

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Irrespective of political ideologies, all the nation's political parties across its spectrum should unite to defend Taiwan's democratic identity, and reinforce its collective consciousness by celebrating its struggles and scars.

The future warriors of Taiwan's freedom culture will be the "children of democracy." They will defend the nation against China and decide Taiwan's future.

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