

National Day of Taiwan, R.O.C.

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The Ambassador's Speech, October 2019 *Representative Harry Tseng*

I am delighted to welcome you once again to celebrate Taiwan's National Day. This is always a wonderful occasion to catch up with old friends, make new ones, and celebrate together not only the founding of the Republic of China in 1912, but also the country that Taiwan has become. It is also a chance to reflect on where we are now compared with twelve short months ago.

Last year, I left you with the image of Taiwan as a litmus test to determine the resilience of democracies around the world. I talked about the threat to Taiwan's values and freedoms, and urged the support of our friends in the international community.

Now, as we stand here in 2019, the message remains unchanged, but Taiwan's position grows ever more critical.

Just a few months after we celebrated our National Day last year, China's president Xi Jinping began the new year with a speech focused on China's relations with Taiwan, the so-called "Message to Compatriots," which was given every once in a decade.

This was the fifth time a People's Republic president had made a speech of this kind, and it marked the 40th anniversary of the first such statement China made to Taiwan in 1979. The stage was set for Mr. Xi to lay out his vision for the future of Taiwan-China relations.

What did we learn about that vision?

We learned first of all that China's president Xi is hell-bent on achieving what he sees as "reunification" with Taiwan. He used the word for "unify" in various forms 46 times during the speech. It's clear this has become a deeply personal mission for him.

Second, we learned that he intends to impose, not negotiate. The head of Taiwan Affairs Office, traditionally sit on the stage as a symbol of cooperation between the two sides, was sitting among a big audience: an indication that the days of cooperative diplomacy are giving way to unilateral impatience. Many also noted that Mr. Xi emphatically refused to rule out the use of military force to take Taiwan back. And we were reminded once again about how China defines the terms of any future cooperation – the famous "one country, two systems." Allow me to elaborate. The concept of "one country,

two systems" was developed back in the early 1980s by Chinese leaders as a model for Taiwan to be brought under the governance of Beijing. The promise was life would continue as normal, just under a different flag, a PRC flag.

We can think of Hong Kong as a test for "one country, two systems". When the territory was handed back to China in 1997, Beijing used this framework along with a promise that it would not meddle with the way of life enjoyed by the people of Hong Kong for 50 years. It was a promise written in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration and in the Basic Law of Hong Kong.

Anyone who has followed the news over the past several months knew that this promise has proven to be vacuous. A new extradition bill is just the latest in the long list of encroachments on Hong Kong's freedoms. As we see from those incredible images of streets packed with protesters, the people of Hong Kong have stood up in the millions to show solidarity in the face of authoritarianism.

As Hong Kong police, backed up by China, staged up heavy-handed crackdown, the people of Hong Kong did not flinch. They continued week after week to take to the parks, streets, metro stations, airports in hundreds of thousands; and inspired by the human chain of the "Baltic Way" in 1993, a "Hong Kong Way" was formed on 23rd August, with people hand-in-hand all over the island -- a view that stunned and touched the heart of the world.



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If Hong Kong is a lesson to learn, it isn't hard to understand why the people of Taiwan utterly reject this model of "one country, two systems". It isn't hard to understand either why Mr. Xi's New Year speech, the situation in Hong Kong, the various ways in which China meddles with Taiwan through fake news, disinformation and intimidation, are all causes of grave concern.

But for some people, the question may be: why bother? Why concern ourselves with this relatively small island nation, thousands of kilometers away?

Well, I could talk about Taiwan's economic achievements – the 22nd largest GDP in the world according to the IMF, the 13th most competitive in the world according to the IMD, and holding the world's 5th largest foreign exchange reserve. Or I could talk about its innovation, its manufacturing prowess, its contributions to the world's medial expertise, and so on.

But the simple answer is this: because Taiwan is worth protecting. It's worth protecting for the 23 million plus people who call it home. It's worth protecting for its hard-won freedoms and democracy. It's worth protecting as proof that it is possible to come through the darkness of an authoritarian past, to reflect and to grow into a genuine democracy.

In a recent speech at Columbia University, President Tsai Ing-wen stressed the dangers that Taiwan faces. She spoke of how far Taiwan has developed, of the progressive values that some said could never take root in East Asia, but which today have led to her own election as the first female president of Taiwan, of a country that is now the first in Asia to have legalized same-sex marriage.

It is Taiwan's progressive values which allow us to work so effectively and cordially with the European Union, in areas ranging from trade and technology to the environment and human rights. And we look forward to even more fruitful cooperation in the months and years ahead.

As our President Tsai pointed out in her speech, democratic nations are at their strongest when they come together. To lose Taiwan would be to lose a crucial link in the chain.



Let me end the speech where I began. I think you'd agree that we are living in strange times. In many places around the world people are turning their backs on empathy and turning instead to a politics of hatred and discrimination; turning to strong leaders, where "strong" is shorthand for charismatic, manipulative or authoritarian; turning to an "us" versus "them" mentality, which diminishes us all.

In these times, it's more important than ever that we uphold and defend the core values of democracy, rule of law, freedom of press, right of assembly, religious freedoms, the list goes on. These are values that Taiwan has worked incredibly hard to foster. These are values that are directly under threat.

So I ask you once again to use whatever voice you may have to speak up for Taiwan. Taiwan's freedoms, its democracy, its way of life and its sovereignty must be cherished and defended. Our future, the future of liberal democracy in general, may just depend upon it.

But let me end on a happier note. Taiwan has much to be proud of and much to be grateful for. A great deal of that is thanks to the support we have received over the years, even from some of you standing here. Thank you for this, and thanks to all of you for being with us tonight. We are delighted you could share these National Day celebrations with us and I wish you every success for the future.

Please raise your glasses and join me in a toast to everlasting friendship between Taiwan, the EU and Belgium!