

CHINA

# Hong Kong Unrest an Ominous Lesson on Chinese Rule: Taiwan Leader

In National Day speech, President Tsai Ing-wen said Taiwan must stand up and defend itself against Beijing's goal of unification



Taiwan leader Tsai Ing-wen during National Day commemorations in Taipei on Thursday. PHOTO: MAURICE TSAI/BLOOMBERG NEWS

*By Eva Dou*

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BEIJING—In a fiery speech likely to upset Beijing, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen called on the island's people to draw lessons from the violent protests in Hong Kong and pledged to defend Taiwan's sovereignty.

Speaking on the self-governed island's National Day, Ms. Tsai said the Hong Kong protests illustrated the failure of Beijing's "one country, two systems" governance of the Chinese special administrative region. She said Taiwan had to stand up and defend itself against Beijing's goal of one day putting the island under a similar system.

"We are witnessing China's rise and expansion, as they challenge free, democratic values," said Ms. Tsai. "Taiwan has become the first line of defense for democratic values."

Saber-rattling from Taiwan's president is typical on Oct. 10, a day commemorated on both sides of the Taiwan Strait for the 1911 overthrow of China's last imperial dynasty. But Ms. Tsai's tone was more urgent this year, as she gears up for a presidential election in January. The Taiwanese people have watched Beijing's tightening of its grip over Hong Kong and the violent clashes with trepidation, fearing the island may face a similar future.

"Truly what happened in the last few months in Hong Kong has alarmed a lot of people in Taiwan," said Yen Chen-shen, a professor at the National Chengchi University's Institute of International Relations in Taiwan. "If China wants to approach Taiwan about any sort of negotiations, it will not be trusted."

Ms. Tsai, Taiwan's first female president, said in her speech that she would stand firm against China and dismissed opponents' charges that she is the one provoking Beijing.

"As president, standing up to protect national sovereignty is not a provocation—it is my fundamental responsibility," she said.

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—Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen

China has intensified the pressure on Ms. Tsai's administration as Taiwan's presidential election nears. On Thursday, Beijing hosted the prime minister of the Solomon Islands. The small Pacific nation a few weeks ago broke diplomatic ties with Taiwan, recognizing Beijing instead, a move that left Taiwan further isolated diplomatically.

Taiwan's diplomatic allies dwindled to 15 after the Solomon Islands and another Pacific nation, Kiribati, made the switch last month following pressure from Beijing.

The U.S. hasn't formally recognized the government in Taipei since 1979, but still sees the island—dubbed an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" by U.S. Gen. Douglas MacArthur—as key in containing China's regional influence. The Trump administration has stepped up arms sales to Taiwan this year, and U.S. officials on Monday hosted a diplomatic forum to shore up support for Taiwan from Pacific nations.

Ms. Tsai's speech was attacked Thursday by members of the opposition Kuomintang, which favors warmer relations with Beijing. Among them was Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu, who is attempting to unseat her in January. Mr. Han criticized Ms. Tsai for comparing self-ruled Taiwan to Hong Kong, which was returned to China's jurisdiction in 1997.

"How can you put Hong Kong and the Republic of China in the same category?" said Mr. Han, using Taiwan's formal name. "This is irresponsible."

Still, the events in Hong Kong have loomed large in Taiwan's political discourse this year, with thousands of Taiwanese rallying in support of the Hong Kong protesters.

The Beijing-Taipei rift dates back to 1949, when Kuomintang officials fled to Taiwan after being defeated by Mao Zedong's Communist troops in the Chinese Civil War. Since then, Beijing has been steadfast in insisting that Taiwan must return to the fold one day, by force if necessary.

In January, Chinese President Xi Jinping signaled that Beijing's patience for negotiations with Taiwan was finite, saying that unification was the ultimate goal for any talks. He said China would maintain the Taiwanese people's legal freedoms under a "one country, two systems" framework.

If Ms. Tsai stays in office, Beijing will likely continue to punish her government politically and economically for refusing to cooperate toward a future reunification. If Mr. Han wins, a thaw in cross-Strait relations is expected.

Meanwhile, her own party's hard-liners would like to see Ms. Tsai pushing back harder against Mr. Xi and are threatening to back a pro-independence, third-party candidate in January.

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