



Taiwan Elections and the Impact on U.S.-China Relations

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Figure 1: Taiwan Elections 2024, IMAGE Courtesy Reuters

Christopher L. Kolakowski

Lai Cheng-te, the current Vice President of the Republic of China, has just won a four-year term as President. He will take office in May. Lai's election is an important event for the region, and for cross-strait relations overall. Given his pledges to continue the cross-strait policies of his predecessor, Tsai Ing-wen, it should provide some predictability to Taipei's actions and stances over the next four years. That said, it is also the first time since 1996 that one party has won three consecutive terms - which can be read as a definite shift in the electorate's mood. All of this has, and will, serve to put Beijing on alert.

It should be noted that Lai's running mate, Hsiao Bi-khim, was once Taiwan's representative in Washington. The relationships he developed in that position will prove highly valuable during the next years. The symbolism of his presence on the ticket also is an affirmation of how Taipei values the U.S.-Taiwan partnership. The period between now and the inauguration in May will be worth watching closely, as both sides may try to exploit the transition to set conditions for the first part of Lai's term. This likely could include statements or demonstrations by Beijing - to include possible military exercises and other demonstrations of power.

Lastly, the election featured a third-party candidate who won 26% of the vote on a general platform of neutrality. As the results are analyzed further, it will be interesting to see what they reveal about the Taiwanese people and their range of views - something that could potentially be a factor in the coming years and provide openings for Beijing's influence operations.

Grant T. Willis

The 2024 Taiwanese elections have resulted in another Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) victory, with President-elect William Lai Ching-te continuing the DPP's hold on power for an unprecedented third term. The continuation of

former President Tsai Ing-Wen's policies marks the DPP's continued position of a separate Taiwanese identity and the rejection of Communist China's territorial claim over the island of nearly 24 million.

As tensions rise in the Indo-Pacific, with wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, Taiwan's election represents a clear signal from Taipei to Beijing that despite any interference efforts made by the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan's population will for the time being, continue to display defiance to Chairman Xi's dreams of reunification. President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have made it clear that although peaceful reunification is preferred, China touts that it retains the right to use force to quell any "separatist" attempts of a declaration of unilateral independence from the mainland. China warned the Taiwanese voters that their vote would be between "peace and war." Taiwan's democratic society and free market economy system seem to disagree with the CCP's final vision, but with this victory for continued Taiwanese sovereignty, the Pacific may see an increase in the likelihood of war between Beijing and the Western Allies. The status quo may tread forward in the Taiwan Strait, but Xi's clock may have moved forward.

With this successful election for the Alliance's goal to keep Taiwan separate, the increase in the chances for a military clash should motivate the principal Allies in the immediate region, like the United States, Philippines, Australia, Japan, and South Korea, to increase their conventional defense capabilities to counter a joint invasion of Taiwan by the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Japan has recently taken a major step by increasing its defense budget by 16 percent, which will make the Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF) the 3rd largest global military power behind the U.S. and PRC. As the new year dawns, the risk of an expansion of global conflict into the Pacific remains a constant anxiety in the minds of many analysts and defense watchers.

It is vital that a conventional Allied military capability keeps pace with PLA capabilities to deter Beijing from taking advantage of any perceived vacuum caused by any further instability elsewhere. Will the DPP's victory

solidify Taiwan's sovereignty and maintain the status quo, or will the new administration in Taipei need further support for the possibility of a red wave poised to make a historic attempt from across the Strait? We shall see.

Brendan H. J. Donnelly

The new president of Taiwan, Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), as he stated, will work to stand up for Taiwan in front of China. Still, this election will likely not present a dynamic shift in the region. This claim stems from the fact that the DPP has its third president-elect and has held the top position in Taiwan for the last eight years. For this reason, Beijing already knows that Lai will keep with the status quo idea that Taiwan is already independent and, therefore, does not need to declare it, but will cooperate with open discussions. Overall, Beijing's reaction will likely be much of the same but at a different time.

The immediate reaction from Beijing, aside from what has already been said, is increased military pressure. For Beijing to drive home the idea that the DPP is not the party for Taiwan, a strong, provocative military response, such as incursions into the Taiwanese airspace and international waters, will occur to put additional pressure on Taiwan after the election. Next, Beijing will likely refuse to work with Lai and the DPP since China does not see them as a "relevant" political party. Instead, opening relations with the Kuomintang (KMT), who lean more towards warm relations with China, are the opportune party to build economic and diplomatic ties with. Ultimately, cooperation between the KMT and Beijing works towards the goal of combating the rise in the "independence ideology" displayed in the 2024 election.

Finally, since the U.S.-China top leaders met in 2023 and talks were held to reduce the tensions, the Taiwan election results will impact these discussions. The immediate impact on the U.S. is that China will very likely call out any support to Lai or the DPP as "Provocative action" or direct

aggressive politics against Chinese interests. Although these impacts may sound dramatic; China will likely continue its rhetoric and attempt to dismantle it. Democracy in Taiwan and harm relations with the U.S. instead of kinetic or direct actions towards war.

Jeffery A. Hollman

Taiwan's Presidential election, held on January 13th, 2024, was probably the most consequential election of this decade. Stakes remained high as more than thirteen million eligible voters headed to the polls. The result? A forty percent vote for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party or DPP, its third straight victory over the China-friendly KMT and newly formed Taiwan People's Party. In the months leading up to the election, China had warned the choice at the polls would be one between "peace and war, prosperity and decline." Fearing a DPP win, China denounced its candidate, Lai Ching-te, as a dangerous separatist bent on Taiwan's independence. Lai, for his part, has expressed a desire to improve relations with China through cooperation and dialogue based on mutual respect and parity. However, that seems unlikely, as Beijing has rebuffed Lai's calls for such dialogue.

Given the DPP's intent to maintain the status quo and reject the "one country, two systems" model used in Hong Kong and Macau, it seems war may, in fact, be inevitable, especially if the U.S. continues to arm the island and maintain a robust forward military presence in China's perceived sphere of influence. It seems doubtful China or Xi Jinping will be able to restrain itself for another four years, given the volatile situation in the South China Sea, maturing U.S. and allied capabilities & interoperability, and the trade wars bent on curbing Beijing's technological advancements in support of its massive war machine.

But are peace and prosperity an impossibility? Can expansionist and authoritarian regimes deny their appetite to dominate their neighbors and

dictate the terms of international relations in their thieftoms? They cannot; they can only be denied by greater power or, in this case, collective power. Integrated deterrence is the only language they understand. They are too proud and stubborn to compromise, to share power & influence, to sacrifice for the greater good. A free and open Indo-Pacific is contrary to China's aims and desires. Though they speak of prosperity under their rule, they remain blinded by the curse of authoritarianism, a system that knows no compromise. As the old saying goes, power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Indu Saxena

In the Taiwan elections 2024, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won its third consecutive election, sending a strong message of democracy, freedom, and self-rule to the Taiwanese people and the Indo-Pacific region. The current vice president and the new President-elect, Lai Ching-te, addressed a rally after the results and said, "This is a night that belongs to Taiwan. We managed to keep Taiwan on the map of the world." Taiwan's result stamped the long quest for maintaining its self-identity and the opposition to altering the status quo. However, something that is not favorable to Beijing will cause friction. Since China's President XI Jinping said in his New Year address that China would "surely be reunified" with Taiwan.

Furthermore, after the vote, China responded, "Taiwan is part of China." However, China's ambition of "peaceful reunification" got pushed backward for a while, which could lead to frustration and anxiety in Beijing. Henceforth, Taiwan will likely see China's assertiveness in its territory and the South China Sea.

China's threat to use force to erode the sovereignty of Taiwan will further deteriorate the peace and stability in the region. It is expected that the U.S. will also try to avoid inflaming any direct conflict situation, given its involvement in a two-front war in the Mideast and in the Russian-Ukraine conflict. However,

Lai's victory will continue to close ties with the U.S. and like-minded democracies. It remains to be seen how proactively Lai's government engages with the U.S. and other democratic partners, given his leadership of the divided parliament without a legislative majority.

Taiwan's election results have regional implications as the other countries in the region have been closely watching the developments of U.S.-China relations vis-a-vis Taiwan as an essential player in the Indo-Pacific regional dynamics.

Jose Antonio Custodio

Lai Ching-Te of the Democratic Progressive Party secured a third consecutive win for his party in Taiwan's recently concluded Presidential elections. He won 40% of the votes, with the second and third candidates securing 33.49% and 26.45%, respectively. Fourteen million Taiwanese voted in the elections. The DPP stands for Taiwan being a sovereign nation, strengthening its defenses, and aligning itself with democratic countries, especially from the West. However, looking at the results, it was not an outright landslide victory for the DPP, which may provide some opportunities for China to undermine the Taiwanese government in the future.

To do that, China will closely observe and, if possible, influence developments in its main rival, which also happens to be Taiwan's main benefactor, the United States of America. Of interest to China is the polarized situation in the United States that has created impasses in the ability of the executive and legislative branches to undertake their responsibilities. Threats of looming government shutdowns, the very noticeable physical deterioration of President Joseph Biden, the investigations into his son's activities, and the refusal of his administration to move decisively on southern border issues, thus affecting funding for the support of Ukraine and Israel and even possibly Taiwan, are all pregnant with opportunity for China to create mischief. What

use is a DPP victory if the main guarantor of Taiwan's existence is wracked by internal discord?

There is a perception that the U.S. is weak, which is trumpeted by opponents of the Biden administration within the U.S. and in actions by state and non-state actors in other parts of the world. Not that the U.S. is physically weak but that it lacks decisiveness and resolve. The way the Houthis goaded the international community in the wake of the Gaza War is an example of that perception. Or worse, the way Iran utilized its terrorist proxies to attack Israeli and American interests in the Middle East reveals a level of contempt for Americans.

That the U.S. so far has been ineffective in directly dealing with Iran's transgressions and Teheran remains unscathed and is on track to obtaining a nuclear weapon in the next few years is not lost on Beijing. Then there is the Ukraine War, which is going into its third year a few months from now. From a war of movement in its first year, it evolved into a stalemate reminiscent of the First World War but fought with 21st-century weaponry. Whatever responses and decisions the U.S. makes on its support of Ukraine or in the diplomatic field will give Beijing clues as to how Washington D.C. will respond to Chinese provocative action in and across the Taiwan Strait.

Expect China then to be proactive in its effort to capitalize on the weaknesses it perceives in the U.S. that neutralize any timely and effective action taken by the Americans on behalf of Taiwan. As it is an election year in the U.S., it is not farfetched to think that China will attempt to shape the environment through its powerful social media tools, such as TikTok, to create doubt and fear among the American public. If China manages to sufficiently disrupt the U.S., it then allows for the application of continued pressure on Taiwan to also create the same level of distrust and fear among the Taiwanese. Thus, the 40% support for the DPP can be whittled down, while those in the opposition who are less confrontational or even sympathetic to Beijing may see their percentages increase with the corresponding expansion of their influence.

To deal with a country like China requires the display and projection of American strength not just in its possession and declaration but in the decisive mobilization of it to push back firmly and convincingly.

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