

Security implications of Taiwan's Presidential and Parliament Elections

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On Saturday 13th, Lai Ching-de (or William Lai), the candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the current ruling party, won a third and unprecedented mandate (40 % of the votes; 5,583,974 votes, almost one million votes more than the ones for Hou You-yi, the KMT candidate).

Yet, while the last two presidential elections gave an absolute majority (more than the half, that is to say 57) of seats within the Legislative Yuan (unicameral Parliament in Taiwan) to the DPP (68 in 2016; 61 in 2020), for these 2024 elections, neither the DPP nor the KMT won more than 57 seats. The DPP won 51 seats, the KMT won 52 seats and the TPP got 8 seats. This situation gives an important power to the Taiwan People's Party (TPP): it could either paralyse the President by blocking his legislative priorities, or advance his agenda while shaping it.

This DPP victory and this unprecedented situation within the Legislative Yuan will certainly have implications in terms of Cross-Strait relations.

First, it sends a signal to Beijing regarding the Taiwanese population's rejection of rapprochement with China and the Chinese failure of its cognitive warfare towards Taiwanese people by framing this election as a choice between war and peace. Second, as the government's policy on China should be a continuation of Tsai Ing-wen's, we can expect that, on the medium-long term, Beijing will keep freezing official communication channels with Taipei and use its different military, diplomatic, economic, informational and political tools to coerce Taiwan. Third, if some blockades could happen within the Parliament regarding domestic policies on which the three parties disagree the most, defence and foreign affairs policies should be two fields in which the Legislative Yuan could much more easily find a consensus, which is not in Beijing's interests. Therefore, it is only on the short term that we can expect China to adopt a more cautious and wait-and-see behaviour to try to see to what extent a divided Parliament could benefit Beijing and the policy of William Lai on China does not cross its red lines.

A DPP presidency for four other years: which consequences for the Cross-Strait relations?

A strong signal to Beijing of the Taiwanese population's rejection of rapprochement with China and more, broadly, of "peaceful reunification"

With cross-strait relations dominating the issues discussed in presidential debates, the DPP's unprecedented third term in office illustrates the extent to which, despite China's coercive military, diplomatic and economic manoeuvres to intimidate the Taiwanese population, and above all, sanction the DPP, the Taiwanese population is not giving in to China's cognitive warfare and other hybrid tools. On the contrary, through this vote, the majority of Taiwanese people show to what extent they want to distance themselves ever further from Beijing, rejecting the KMT¹ and TPP policies calling for the re-establishment of economic and cultural ties between the two shores of the Strait.

During presidential debates and campaigns, both KMT and TPP candidates jointly criticized the ruling government for being responsible for the increase of size and frequency of Chinese military exercises

¹ The KMT popularity is indeed waning, due, among other things, to a foreign policy towards China that is not particularly evolving, despite Beijing's changing behaviour. For instance, while Hou You-yi did not wish to recognize the 1992 consensus, he was forced to do so in order to consolidate his electoral base with the party's harder line. He also named as his running mate Jaw Shaw-Kong, co-founder of the pro-unification New Party, who only recently joined the KMT. His stance on unification, however, goes against the opinion polls, with a very small minority of the Taiwanese population in favor of unification (11,8 % according to a September 2023 poll from the Public Opinion Foundation).

around Taiwan and, on a larger scale, the break of any cross-strait dialogue. They argued that the DPP was exposing Taiwan to the risk of conflict. Hou You-yi and the KMT² framed the situation as a choice between war and peace, a rhetoric widely employed by China, thus using its narrative presenting the DPP as directly responsible for tensions in the Strait. The KMT failure for the presidential mandate therefore shows Beijing the extent to which the narrative of a military threat for which the DPP is partly responsible does not work to pressure Taiwanese society and influence voters' choices. The DPP victory may confirm to Beijing that the possibility of "peaceful reunification" is becoming increasingly remote – an observation that is not new to China, however – but also that the KMT's weight in Taiwanese politics is waning, perhaps leading China to modify its relays and proxies and no longer rely on this party to advance its agenda. Beijing is indeed likely to rely more on Taiwanese businessmen communities in China and other people-to-people exchanges to interfere into Taiwanese domestic politics.

William Lai cross-strait policy: a continuation of Tsai Ing-wen's policy on China

William Lai's cross-strait policy is essentially identical to that of Tsai Ing-wen. Although Beijing calls him a "separatist" – like all DPP members for that matter – and a "troublemaker", William Lai – despite his formerly pro-independence stance – has repeatedly stated that he would adopt the same political line as Tsai Ing-wen, namely:

- No declaration of independence (which would be a red line for Beijing and immediately trigger a military response), as the DPP considers Taiwan to enjoy a *de facto* independence.
- Refusal to accept the 1992 Consensus³, even though Beijing makes the resumption of dialogue with Taipei conditional on acceptance of this consensus. William Lai considers that accepting the 1992 Consensus would be recognizing Beijing's sovereignty over Taipei. He is nevertheless in favour of a dialogue⁴ with China that would not be conditional on this consensus.
- No constitutional amendment to change the name of the Republic of China (ROC), despite William Lai's criticism of this official name inherited from the Civil war between the KMT and the CCP.

As a result of this dynamic, Beijing will refuse to establish a formal dialogue with the DPP due to its refusal to recognize the 1992 Consensus.

Which China's reaction to expect?

² The former President Ma Ying-jeou declared: "Vote for the DPP and young people will go to the battlefield. Vote for the Guomindang, and there will be no war on either side of the Taiwan Strait". Hou You-yi's running mate also said: "Next year's elections are a choice between war and peace. If people want peace, prosperity, a corruption-free government and stability in the Taiwan Strait, then vote for the KMT".

³ The « 1992 Consensus » refers to discussions held in Hong Kong between China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) and Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) to discuss cross-strait trade relations and the One China policy. The 1992 Consensus – misnamed because in reality no consensus was reached, and there was no evidence of agreement on Beijing's part that there would be different interpretations of one China – refers to the fact that each Taiwanese and Chinese side would have recognized the fact that there would be only one China, but with different interpretations of what that one China is. Ma Ying-jeou was the first and only President to recognize the 1992 Consensus in 2008, leading to negotiations between Taiwan and China resulting in the ECFA (Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement) in June 2010, and an informal meeting between Xi Jinping and Ma Ying-jeou in Singapore in 2015. The 1992 Consensus is thus rejected by the DPP in the sense that it supports the One China idea, to which the DPP does not adhere, unlike the KMT, which retains the legacy of its civil war with the Chinese Communist Party and has long hoped to reclaim mainland China and integrate it into the Republic of China, Taiwan's official name. It is also because the Chinese interpretation of the 1992 Consensus has evolved that it is becoming increasingly problematic in the eyes of the Taiwanese population. China is interpreting it to mean that there is only one China, that Taiwan is part of China and the People's Republic of China is the only legal government representing China. In 2019, Xi Jinping started to associate it with the concept of "one country, two systems" which is even more rejected by the Taiwanese people (and the KMT as well), especially after the 2020 national security law was passed in Hong Kong.

⁴ To show his goodwill towards Beijing, William Lai declared Xi Jinping to be the world leader he would most like to dine with.

With regard to military coercion on China's part, two hypotheses can be put forward:

- Either Beijing adopts a wait-and-see posture until the investiture in May 2024 to see to what extent William Lai's inaugural speech would indicate a more radical policy than that pursued by Tsai Ing-wen.
- Either Beijing decides to step up military pressure ahead of this inaugural speech to push William Lai to clarify his cross-strait policy and, at best, force him to adopt a cautious attitude. This second option is very likely, given that a DPP victory would represent a victory for the "separatists" in Beijing's eyes, that China has no illusions about the DPP's agenda as regards cross-strait relations, and that it also needs to reaffirm to its local population that its goal of "reunification" remains unchanged, in line with President Xi Jinping's New Year's statements that "reunification" is inevitable.

Other tools of coercion will continue to be used: economic (new sanctions on products covered by the ECFA), diplomatic (continued policy of drying up diplomatic support for Taiwan as Nauru's decision to break diplomatic ties with Taiwan can show it), political (sanctions on political figures from the DPP such as Hsiao Bi-Khim who is forbidden to enter mainland China), informational, etc. At the end of December 2023, for example, Beijing announced sanctions on Taiwanese imports covered by the ECFA from January 1, 2024. Preferential tariffs were suspended on 12 categories of petrochemical industry products following anti-dumping investigations initiated in August after Vice President William Lai's stopover in the USA.

At the same time, Beijing should continue to rely on people-to-people exchanges and the community of Taiwanese businessmen in mainland China or the people eager to study, invest or work in China (like Chinese policies issued in the "Proposal on supporting Fujian Province in exploring a new path for the integrated development across the Taiwan Strait" for instance) to support its narrative about a "community of common destiny" between Taiwanese population and mainland Chinese.

Nevertheless, as the DPP did not win the absolute majority of the seats and the KMT and TPP could join together to block the adoption of policies that could directly or indirectly harm Beijing (such as the "anti-infiltration law" passed under Tsai Ing-wen and promulgated in January 2020 to combat United Front operations in Taiwan, which the KMT opposed), it is also possible that China will initially avoid being too coercive on the military front, especially as this DPP's half-hearted victory allowed China to "save face"⁵. Otherwise, it would be all the more difficult for the opposition parties (KMT, TPP) to justify their opposition to the DPP's policies to the Taiwanese population.

It is indeed the unprecedented legislative results – that is to say, no party dominates the Parliament and the DPP will need the TPP's support for passing laws and voting budget – which could make Beijing adopt a more cautious behaviour in the short term. China could try to gain more influence towards the 8 TPP members of the Parliament in order to interfere in the voting process, especially as the negotiations would be longer and more complex with a divided Legislative Yuan and, therefore, offer more space and time for China to try to meddle in.

A Parliament with no absolute majority for the ruling party: which consequences for Taiwan's policy implementation towards China?

A consensus between the three parties on defence and foreign affairs policies

While on economic and domestic issues, the programs of the three candidates differ a lot, the positions of the three candidates differ much less when it comes to national defence and foreign policies.

Indeed, as far as defence policy is concerned, both parties agree on the fact that Taiwan has to prepare for the worst-case scenario with China and, therefore, strengthen its defence capabilities to deter China from invading Taiwan. Building Taiwan's defence capabilities is the first pillar of the four pillars for peace developed by William Lai (the second being economic security, the third being the partnership with democracies around the world and the fourth being the commitment to a "steady and principled cross-strait leadership") whose defence policy is mostly a continuation of Tsai Ing-wen's defence policy. Within the 3D policy of Hou You-yi, the "deterrence" came before "dialogue" and "de-escalation". Defence policy and the role that meaningful deterrence plays in stabilizing cross-Strait relations are areas in which

⁵ The spokesman for China's office in charge of relations with Taiwan indeed used the fact that the DPP did not win the majority of legislative seats to say that the DPP cannot represent Taiwan's mainstream public opinion.

Hou You-yi clearly differs from the previous KMT administration. Ko Wen-je has claimed that “Taiwan has to prepare for war and be able to fight” so that Taiwan can be eventually not afraid of war.

The following common features and divergences in defence policies of the three candidates can be observed:

- **Both parties agree to increase the defence budget.** William Lai did not precise any number. Ko Wen-je asked for an increase from 2.5% of GDP to 3% of GDP. In contrast with Ma Ying-jeou, who oversaw the stagnation of the defence budget, considering war as unlikely while the two shores of the strait were discussing, Hou You-yi was supporting the idea to keep the current budget (2.5% of GDP), at least, and maybe progressively increase it to reach 3% of GDP. The KMT and the TPP, however, are more inclined to use part of the budget to increase military pay and living conditions for military men in order to improve recruitment and retention rates, while the DPP is more inclined to favour the purchase of armaments. However, the TPP expressed its will to push to amend the Budget Act to ensure the government does not use special budgets⁶ outside of the general budget as a “blank authorization” for unrestrained spending. Besides, Ko Wen-je said in September 2023 that, in terms of funding levels, “the priority should be cybersecurity, the air force, the navy, then the army, in that order”, advocating as well for the creation of a “cyber army” along the lines of the Israeli army’s cyber units.
- **Both parties do not put into question the asymmetric defense strategy⁷ adopted in 2017 under the Tsai Ing-wen administration.** Some debates can be observed between the combination of asymmetric capabilities and more conventional military programs (such as the indigenous submarines). Hou You-yi insisted for instance on the importance to develop urban guerilla warfare capabilities. Although Hou You-yi has pledged to continue submarine production, his running mate Jaw Shaw-kung has already threatened to investigate the retired Admiral in charge of Taiwan’s submarine manufacturing program because of the vessels’ high costs and questionable capabilities. Ko Wen-je does not reject asymmetrical defense but believes that platforms such as fighter jets and submarines have a psychological and political utility that must be assessed alongside their “substantial” contribution to defence.
- **Both parties agree on strengthening Taiwan’s capability to deal with unconventional CCP threats,** such as cognitive warfare, public opinion warfare, cyber attacks and grey zone tactics.
- **Both parties agree on the importance for Taiwan to develop its own defence technological and industrial base** in order not to rely only on foreign exports, and mostly, from US weapons sales. Yet, when voting the defence budget including US military equipment acquisition, it may not be impossible that some of the programs meet an opposition from the KMT and the TPP and lead to lengthy debates.
- **Regarding the military service,** William Lai supports its extension to one year which has been introduced under Tsai Ing-wen in 2022. Ko Wen-je said that the military service should even be longer. During his campaign, Hou You-yi called for compulsory military service to be reduced to four months, but then backtracked, while leaving the door open to a reduction in conscription to four months should cross-strait relations improve. For its content, both parties agree on the fact

⁶ Under Article 83 of the law, special budgets can be proposed for wars or emergency national defense installations, major national economic events, major calamities or “major political events that take place irregularly or once every few years”.

⁷ According to the October 2021 Defense White Paper, “the defense strategy is described as ‘resolute defense and multi-domain deterrence’, and is now based in its application on a concept of ‘asymmetric warfare’”. To develop an asymmetric defense strategy, Admiral Lee His-min (Chief of Staff from 2017 to 2019) promoted the “Overall Defense Concept” (ODC) in 2017. Taiwan’s defense establishment acknowledges that it has limited resources and is unable to destroy its adversary, being able only to challenge its air-sea superiority, prevent it from gaining a foothold on the beaches and, where necessary, adopt guerrilla modes of action to deny it control of the territory. The latest white paper makes no mention of ODC, but asserts that “the ROC’s armed forces must develop asymmetric capabilities using the geographical advantages of the island’s defense” and refers to capability enhancement in six areas: (1) long-range strike (2) air counter-attack operations (3) sea control operations (anti-ship missiles, acquisition of new-generation submarines, surface-to-air missiles) (4) homeland defense (5) information, electronic and cyber warfare, and (6) joint C2ISR.

that the training should be improved and more substantial by limiting subordinate or less militarily important tasks.

As far as the USA is concerned, all three parties unanimously see it as a key partner for Taiwan⁸, with whom defence cooperation should be maintained and even strengthened.

- William Lai insisted on strengthening military but also economic ties (trade agreements, joint work on securing supply chains) with the United States. Besides, he is also aware that an overly provocative stance towards China would damage relations between Taipei and Washington (hence the absence of a declaration of independence and the maintenance of the status quo). On the other hand, the choice of Hsiao Bi-khim, Taiwan's former representative to the United States from 2020 to 2023, as vice-president to William Lai is a strong signal from the DPP to maintain solid and stable relations with the United States. Hsiao Bi-khim has worked with both Trump and Biden administrations, and has earned a reputation for skillfully defending Taiwan's interests while maintaining a predictable approach towards the United States. She is, of course, familiar with the issues involved in the relationship between Taipei and Washington, particularly on the defence front (arms sales, training, dialogues and other types of military aid under the Taiwan Relations Act).
- Hou You-yi expressed his support for the Taiwan-US 21st Century Trade Initiative and hoped that the US could help Taiwan join other regional trade and economic agreements, including the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). He also said Taiwan could "play a proactive role" in US efforts to promote friend-shoring and supply chains resilience. Hou You-yi called for closer security cooperation with the US, including joint exercises, something China is opposed to. By saying so, Ho You-yi thus signaled to the USA that his policy of dialogue with Beijing was not allowing Taiwan's deterrent strength to atrophy.
- Ko Wen-je declared the United States to be "Taiwan's most important ally" and called for closer cooperation with the United States. Nevertheless, he expressed more ambiguous views regarding the China-Taiwan-US triangle. He blamed competition between the US and China for shrinking Taiwan's international space, implicitly attributing part of the responsibility for cross-strait tensions to the US and its policy towards China. He said that Taiwan had to manage the US and China in a "dynamic balance", adapting its policy towards Washington and Beijing according to the strength of one or the other.

The three parties also wish to strengthen their relationship with Japan, given the support that Japan could offer the United States in the event of conflict over Taiwan, which could prove decisive.

- William Lai is keen to strengthen the relationship between Taipei and Tokyo, in line with the DPP's view that Taiwan is on the front line of a global battle between democracy and autocracy. William Lai attended the funeral of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022, becoming the highest-ranking Taiwanese official to visit Japan since Taipei and Tokyo broke off diplomatic relations in 1972. He pledged to pursue security cooperation with Tokyo and also expressed interest in joining the CPTPP, the regional trading bloc in which Tokyo plays a leading role.
- Hou You-yi said that he would strengthen ties with Japan. The first country Hou You-yi visited after winning the KMT nomination was Japan to show that he would take a different approach to Japan from that of Ma Ying-jeou, who put forward Taiwan's claims to the Senkaku Islands, leading to friction in bilateral relations.
- Ko Wen-je also mentioned the establishment of a trilateral dialogue between the USA, Taiwan and Japan.

But maybe some blockades to expect

⁸ It has to be noted that Washington announced the visit of a high-level unofficial delegation to Taiwan before the results of the elections were announced, showing to which extent the White House considers that no matter which party has the presidency, the US-Taiwan ties should not be impacted.

Given the legislative result, it is not impossible that opposition lawmakers, who could form a legislative majority with the support of the TPP, form a line to pressure the central government on some topics, such as the development of some economic and cultural links with China.

Indeed, when it comes to cross-Strait relations, it's on the economic and cultural fronts that the dissensions between the three parties are the most evident. While the DPP wants Taiwan to further reduce its economic dependence on China (economic security is the second pillar of William Lai's four pillars for cross-Strait peace) and thus diversify its partners, with particular emphasis on affinity partners, the KMT and perhaps the TPP see an economic rapprochement with China as an opportunity to stabilize relations.

- Hou You-yi and the KMT believe that cross-strait dialogue and cooperation with Beijing on issues such as trade, people-to-people exchanges and tourism have an intrinsic stabilizing function. During the last KMT presidency, from 2008 to 2016, Taiwan signed over twenty agreements with China - based on the 1992 consensus - including the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). Hou You-yi declared that, should he win the election, he would promulgate a law on the supervision of cross-strait cooperation agreements within a year, while supporting the resumption of dialogues and negotiations between cross-strait associations. Hou You-yi also declared that he would allow Chinese students to work while studying in Taiwan, which is currently forbidden.
- On the question of economic and cultural rapprochement with China, Ko Wen-je made a number of contradictory statements. He expressed concern about Taiwan's over-dependence on trade with China, while advocating that Taiwan seek a trade agreement that would increase its commercial exposure to Beijing. As mayor of Taipei, which is twinned with Shanghai, Ko Wen-je had some experience in terms of dialogue with China, organizing an annual forum between the twin cities bringing together officials and members of civil society from both cities. He has made several visits to Shanghai, and once declared "the two sides of the Strait are one family", echoing the rhetoric used by Xi Jinping. As mayor of Taipei, he had also called for the construction of a bridge between Kinmen Island and the Chinese city of Xiamen.

The most sensitive point of contention between the DPP on the one hand and the KMT and TPP on the other concerns the Cross Strait Services Trade Agreement (CSSTA). This controversial agreement between Taiwan and China and the cause of a three-week occupation of Parliament by Taiwanese protesters in March-April 2014 could enable Beijing to influence the media, telecommunications, advertising, publishing and translation industries, all sectors targeted by Chinese influence operations. During the presidential campaign, Ko Wen-je was the first candidate to call for a revision of the CSSTA - surprising, since he was part of the "Sunflower movement" that opposed the adoption of the agreement. After Ko Wen-je, Hou You-yi declared that he would also seek to revive the CSSTA.

KMT local governments, which won most of the seats in the November 2022 local elections (14 mayoral or magisterial seats against 5 seats only for the DPP), could add to this pressure as well. This opposition in the Parliament and among local governments as well might give a window for Beijing to bypass the central government to work directly with those opposition figures, such as inviting them to China, selectively lifting import bans on some Taiwanese goods, etc.

Eventually, the choice of the president of the Legislative Yuan – to be done on February 1 through a vote between the 113 legislators between Yoo Si-kun (DPP and the current president of the legislative Yuan) and Han Kuo-yu (KMT) – could have an impact as well on the fluidity of the negotiation process for passing bills. Han Kuo-yu, a dark-blue politician who was the party's 2020 presidential candidate, was the first mayor in Taiwan's history to be outside in a recall election by Kaohsiung residents in June 2020. He is known for his rhetoric favouring closer ties with China, but also for his controversial presidential campaign. He chose a running mate from a secret society with close ties across the Taiwan Strait and his online support campaign was suspected of having been financed by China or Taiwan-based proxies. Soon after his November 2018 election, Han embarked also on a trip across the Taiwan Strait, which took him to Hong Kong, Macau, Shenzhen, and Xiamen. He held closed-door meetings with CCP officials and the Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Office said that Han's delegation refused to make its itinerary known to the Taiwanese government. Therefore, if Han Kuo-yu becomes the next President of the Legislative Yuan, he could make the debate process more complex between the deputies when it comes to Cross-Strait relations related topics.

However, on January 15, the TPP deputies already asked both DPP and KMT to answer to some of the TPP demands expressed during the presidential campaign, that is to say a new parliamentary reform, including amending the law to establish a parliamentary hearing and investigation system, strengthening the review of the right to consent of personnel. They requested that those who intend to run the presidency and vice-presidency of the Legislative Yuan specifically respond to the demands of the TPP, which will be used as a basis for the caucus to vote on their attitudes. Therefore, if the DPP's answer to TPP requests is convincing enough, a white-green alliance could be expected.

Conclusion

To conclude, the presidential and legislative results of the elections could bring China to adopt on the short-medium term a wait-and-see approach and rely more on hybrid tools of coercion (economic, diplomatic, informational ones, strategic use of the law, interference into the Legislative Yuan). In the medium-long term, however, and given the relative consensus between the KMT and the DPP on foreign and defence policies, Beijing is likely to increase pressure on the status quo, in order to signal to its population that China is proactively working towards “unification”, but also to respond to a US-Taiwan relationship that should intensify. At the same time, and both on the short and longer term, it is likely that China still relies on tools of seduction to keep promoting people-to-people exchanges and push for instance local mayors to pressure the central government to adopt a more China-friendly approach, at least in the economic field.