



Taiwan's 2024 election

By Elizabeth Lindley

On 13th January 2024, the 24 million citizens of Taiwan will vote in an election with implications extending far beyond the Indo-Pacific. Beijing is watching the run-up to the elections closely, and has warned Taiwan that 'voting the wrong way' may lead to war.¹ This Explainer examines the three parties competing in the elections; the domestic challenges facing the island country; and Beijing's strategic use of political warfare to influence Taiwan's electorate.

The electoral process in Taiwan

Taiwan has four-year general and local election cycles. Voters cast three votes: one for the president, one for their district representative (73 in total), and one for party-list representatives in the Legislative Yuan (34), Taiwan's parliament. A further six seats in the Legislative Yuan are reserved for Taiwan's indigenous population, bringing the total to 113 legislators. A 'first past the post' system is used for electing both the president and parliament. Thus, executive and legislative branches can be controlled by opposing parties, complicating the

¹ Lawrence Chung, 'Taiwanese presidential front runner William Lai uses US stopover to ditch pro-independence tag', *South China Morning Post*, 20/08/2023, <https://bit.ly/3NP7PHq> (checked: 09/01/2024).

crafting of long-term policy and fostering partisan polarisation. The traditional bifurcation of Taiwan's politics between the two major parties, the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), has ended with the emergence of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP).

Green versus blue: Identity and status

Two factors are important for understanding Taiwan's electoral politics:

1. The individual voter's self-identification – whether as Taiwanese, Chinese, or both – influences their voting behaviour heavily; and,
2. Voters' support for either independence, unification with the People's Republic of China (PRC), or maintenance of the current status quo (effectively a de facto independence) will weigh heavily on their decision.²

The age of the voters also plays a role in shaping these preferences.

Since the early 1990s, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of Taiwan's population who identify as 'Taiwanese' (now 60%), and a corresponding decrease of those who consider themselves to be 'Chinese' (2.3%), or hybrid Chinese-Taiwanese (32.3%).³ Meanwhile the latest polls show that less than 6% of Taiwanese support independence or unification, and that over 88% would like to maintain the status quo.⁴

So, Taiwan's political parties are divided not by familiar left-right distinctions, but by their approach to relations with the PRC. The KMT is seen as more pro-engagement with Beijing (characterised as 'blue'), while the DPP is more PRC-sceptic ('green'). The TPP, associated with cyan and white, attempts to straddle both positions.

The KMT, DPP and TPP: Differing attitudes to 'China' and identity

After their defeat in the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949), the KMT and 1.2 million Chinese nationals, known as waishengren [外省人], fled to Taiwan. There, the KMT established a one-party dictatorship and imposed martial law to suppress the native Taiwanese, the benshengren [本省人], enacting a rigorous policy of

² Shelley Rigger, Lev Nachman, Chit Wai John Mok, and Nathan Kar Ming Chan, 'Why is unification so unpopular in Taiwan? It's the PRC political system, not just culture', Brookings Institute, 07/02/2022, <https://bit.ly/48lYpeZ> (checked: 09/01/2024).

³ '2023 Survey Results of the "American Portrait" – Press Release', American Portrait, 08/11/2023, <https://bit.ly/3H8HNv6> (checked: 09/01/2024).

⁴ Mark A. Green, 'Taipei, Beijing, and the "Status Quo"', Wilson Centre, 05/09/2023, <https://bit.ly/48GRKvD> (checked: 09/01/2024).

‘Sinicisation’ which enforced Mandarin Chinese and promoted Chinese nationalism.⁵ During the 1980s and 1990s, as Taiwan democratised, the KMT’s vision shifted from ‘reclaiming’ China to seeking peaceful relations with the PRC through economic and political channels. During Ma Ying-jeou’s presidency (2008–2016), this strategy manifested in policies such as the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), which reduced tariffs and barriers to trade. However, the KMT’s continued push for deeper ties with the PRC, as seen in the pro-PRC services investment pact known as the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA), sparked widespread opposition, culminating in the Sunflower Movement of 2014.⁶ Today, the KMT favours maintaining the status quo, but continues to advocate amicable relations with the PRC as key to Taiwan’s economic prosperity and national security.⁷

The nativist Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was formulated officially in 1986 and advocates for democratic reform and liberalisation, human rights, environmental protection, and Taiwanese self-determination. Chen Shui-Bian, the DPP’s first president, played a crucial role in fostering a burgeoning Taiwanese self-consciousness which had taken root in the 1990s, notably through the introduction of compulsory nativist education [*xiangtu jiaoyu*, 鄉土教育]. Two separate DPP administrations have also furthered a number of socially progressive policies, including the introduction of labour reforms, social welfare programmes, the safeguarding of indigenous peoples’ rights, and same-sex marriage. Regarding the relationship with the PRC, the DPP holds a moderate position which seeks to maintain the status quo and Taiwan’s sovereignty without pushing for formal independence, a stance informed by a desire to maintain Taiwan’s domestic stability and international relationships.

The Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) is a new party, established in 2019 as an alternative to the entrenched KMT–DPP duopoly. The TPP has sought to distance itself from Taiwan’s traditional ideological debates about unification and independence, championing ‘pragmatic and professional’ politics. Its focus on bread-and-butter issues holds particular appeal to a younger generation of voters who feel both alienated from the KMT’s overtly pro-China orientation, and that their needs have been sidelined after eight years of leadership under the DPP.

⁵ Gerrit van der Wees, ‘Taiwan: Facts of history versus Beijing’s myths’, Council on Geostrategy, 08/01/2024, <https://bit.ly/3Uc3ClI> (checked: 09/01/2024).

⁶ ‘專題報道：台灣抗議兩岸服貿協議’ [‘Special Report: Taiwan Protests Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement’], BBC News, No date, <https://bit.ly/3tNWbFZ> (checked: 09/01/2024).

⁷ Debby Wu, ‘President Ma says Taiwan needs free trade and China for economic security’, *Nikkei Asia*, 20/05/2014, <https://bit.ly/48mDMiO> (checked: 09/01/2024).

The presidential tickets and cross-strait stances

The DPP: 2024 elections are a choice between ‘democracy and autocracy’

William Lai [賴清德], the DPP’s presidential nominee and current vice president, is a Harvard educated former physician. Lai came to political prominence as mayor of the pan-‘Green’ stronghold Tainan in 2010, where his popularity and outspoken views about Taiwan’s sovereignty earned him the moniker the ‘Golden Child of Taiwanese Independence’ [台獨金孫].⁸ Positioning himself as ‘pragmatic worker for Taiwanese independence’ in 2017, Lai vaulted over the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) ‘red line’.⁹ However, as Lai has risen through the DPP’s ranks he has adjusted his pro-independence stance and reassured the international community that he will support the current status quo.

Hsiao Bi-khim [蕭美琴], Lai’s running partner, began her long career in foreign policy as the DPP’s international affairs director in 1999, and later served as Taiwan’s Representative to the United States (US). Hsiao’s ‘cat warrior’ diplomacy – developed in response to the CCP’s aggressive ‘wolf warrior’ diplomats – emphasises Taiwan’s commitment to human rights and democratic values, and distinguishes Taiwan’s international identity as separate from the PRC. Her expertise will likely reassure observers in free and open countries that a Lai administration would maintain a conservative cross-strait policy.

The DPP’s policy remains that Taiwan does not need to declare independence, because it is already independent.¹⁰ Lai’s defence policy would continue to lean heavily both on large arms deals with the US, strategic collaboration with other democracies, and continuing to build up Taiwan’s so-called ‘porcupine strategy’ of asymmetric defence.¹¹

Taiwan’s largest trading partner is the PRC, and its export-driven economy is sensitive to the PRC’s domestic fluctuations.¹² In 2023, Taiwan’s economy

⁸ 賴清德 [Lai Qingde], ‘台獨金孫、賴神、賴功德都不愛 賴清德：叫我清德就好’ [‘Taiwan’s independent Jin Sun, Lai Shen, and Lai Gongde all don’t love Lai Qingde: Just call me Qingde’], 中央廣播電台 [Radio Taiwan International], 24/08/2023, <https://bit.ly/4iOKV94> (checked: 09/01/2024).

⁹ 王承中 [Wang Chengzhong], ‘賴清德：台灣主權獨立 台獨定義就是兩岸互不隸屬’ [‘Lai Ching-te: The definition of Taiwan’s sovereignty and independence is that the two sides of the Taiwan Strait are not subordinate to each other’], 中央通訊社 [Central News Agency], 30/12/2023, <https://bit.ly/3S4AhYy> (checked: 09/01/2024).

¹⁰ 者陳昀 [Chen Yun], ‘賴清德：務實認定台灣已是主權獨立國家 沒有再宣布獨立必要’ [‘Lai Ching-te: It is pragmatic that Taiwan is already a sovereign and independent country and there is no need to declare independence again’], 自由時報 [Liberty Times], 18/01/2023, <https://bit.ly/47lTRUt> (checked: 09/01/2024).

¹¹ Lee Hsi-min and Eric Lee, ‘Taiwan’s Overall Defense Concept, Explained’, *The Diplomat*, 03/11/2020, <https://bit.ly/3bhKjzG> (checked: 09/01/2024).

¹² ‘Taiwan – Country Commercial Guide’, International Trade Administration, 15/09/2022, <https://bit.ly/3tLfwYv> (checked: 09/01/2024).

experienced record-low growth, partly due to slumping exports following the PRC's stringent Covid-19 lockdowns of 2022. To reduce this economic dependency, the DPP has sought to diversify Taiwan's trade's links – the New Southbound Policy, for example, aims to enhance collaboration with the ten countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia, and New Zealand.¹³ The DPP government has also committed to Taiwan's accession into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). The PRC has, too, applied for membership, and will pressure the existing 12 signatories to veto Taiwan's entry to the bloc. If voted into power, Lai would continue to advance Taiwan's economic integration into the Indo-Pacific through regional blocs and like-minded democracies.

The KMT: KMT for peace; DPP for war

The KMT has positioned itself as the peace party for the 2024 elections. Hou You-yi [侯友宜], former Director-General of the National Police Agency and Mayor of New Taipei City, is its presidential candidate. The selection of Hou, as a beshengren Taiwanese, reflects a broader KMT attempt to reinvent itself as multicultural, and thus appeal to both a Chinese and Taiwanese electorate. Joining Hou on the KMT ticket is Jaw Shaw-kong [趙少康], a media commentator and pro-Beijing political hardliner. Jaw's selection indicates that the KMT intends to balance Hou's political moderatism and nativist 'Taiwan flavour' [台灣味] with an appeal to KMT's traditional voting base.

Hou has denounced the DPP's 'reckless' foreign policy as a 'complete failure' and promises to re-initiate amicable relations with the PRC on the basis of the '1992 Consensus' (see: Box 1).¹⁴ Friendly engagement with the PRC will be balanced with decreasing the risk of military tensions through the 'three Ds' strategy (deterrence, dialogue and de-escalation) which Hou has proposed to maintain the status quo.¹⁵ Hou also intends to maintain strong relations with the US, and would rely on boosting Taiwan's defences against Chinese military adventurism through collaboration with the Americans in both military training exercises and intelligence sharing.

¹³ 'Taiwan's New Southbound Policy', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 07/2019, <https://bit.ly/423duQp> (checked: 09/01/2024).

¹⁴ 'KMT's Hou backs "1992 consensus that conforms with ROC Constitution"', *Focus Taiwan*, 04/07/2023, <https://bit.ly/3S6N9NN> (checked: 09/01/2024); and, 'KMT presidential nominee Hou pledges better ties with both US, China', *Focus Taiwan*, 07/12/2023, <https://bit.ly/48J6ie4> (checked: 09/01/2024).

¹⁵ Hou Yu-hi, 'Taiwan's Path Between Extremes', *Foreign Affairs*, 18/09/2023, <https://fam.ag/48PMXrV> (checked: 09/01/2024).

Box 1: Positions on the ‘1992 Consensus’

In 1992, PRC and Republic of China (ROC) interlocutors ostensibly reached a tacit agreement which acknowledged the existence of only ‘One China.’ The 1992 consensus provided a framework ambiguous enough to allow divergent interpretations of ‘One China’ by the two sides. While the KMT’s interpretation includes the possibility of differing views of what ‘China’ represents, Beijing adheres rigidly to its own explicit interpretation, known as the ‘one-China Principle’ and does not acknowledge the ambiguity in the ROC’s stance. Until 2016, this arrangement allowed the KMT to sidestep the underlying sovereignty dispute, facilitating temporary cooperation in trade and cultural exchanges. For Beijing’s part, the 1992 Consensus constitutes a reassurance that Taiwan is on the path to eventual ‘reunification’, integral to its 2049 vision of the ‘Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’. The DPP’s position, however, is that the Consensus was never an official policy. The TPP, under Ko Wen-je’s leadership, views the 1992 consensus as an outdated concept which no longer resonates with the Taiwanese population, advocating instead for a more pragmatic and contemporary approach to cross-strait relations.¹⁶

Economically, the approach of the KMT differs greatly to that of the DPP as it advocates for stronger economic ties with the PRC to boost Taiwan’s economy.¹⁷ Hou has also articulated plans to reintroduce the controversial CSSTA – the initiative which sparked the 2014 ‘Sunflower Movement’. Engagement with China would be balanced by diversification of Taiwan’s regional trade pacts: Hou pledges to secure Taiwan’s entry into the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), Japan-led CPTPP, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the latter which includes the PRC.¹⁸

The TPP: The middle-ground

This election cycle is notable for the rise of a serious third-party contender. The TPP was established by Ko Wen-je [柯文哲], its current presidential candidate who was also formerly a surgeon and Mayor of Taipei. Ko has tapped into growing public disillusionment with the traditional party rivalries, proposing to

¹⁶ ‘Maintaining “status quo” Taiwan’s only choice, Ko says’, *Taipei Times*, 16/09/2023, <https://bit.ly/3TL6DsF> (checked: 09/01/2024).

¹⁷ ‘ELECTION 2024/KMT, DPP trade barbs over free trade investment deal, ECFA’, *FocusTaiwan*, 17/12/2023, <https://bit.ly/3RQh8YV> (checked: 09/01/2024).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*



'end the vicious cycle' of blue-green ideological contestation.¹⁹ This anti-establishment sentiment has been reinforced by Ko's blunt and unorthodox manner. The TPP's vision for Taiwan under Ko's rule is a middle-of-the-road pathway to 'peace with sovereign dignity'.²⁰ Ko's running partner for the election is legislator Cynthia Wu [吳欣盈] from family-founded enterprise Shin Kong Group, and is someone with little political experience. However, her choice may go some way in addressing the allegations of misogyny levied against Ko after multiple inflammatory public statements.²¹

Ko's detachment from traditional ideological debates has been a double-edged sword: his stance on important matters, including relations with the PRC, often appears ambiguous and inconsistent. Though Ko has rejected the '1992 Consensus', unlike the DPP, he claims that the two sides of the strait are 'irrevocably connected'.²² Ko intends to re-establish official channels of communication with the PRC, though the formula by which he would do so is unclear.

As with the other candidates, Ko seeks to maintain the status quo. His defence policy sees a strengthening of Taiwan's self-defence capabilities as a priority to protect the island in the event of a blockade or invasion by the PRC. His suggestions that high-level dialogue must be resumed with the PRC to alleviate cross-strait tensions aligns his defence policy closely with Hou's.

Ko has been criticised for suggesting the revival of talks with the PRC about the CCSTA to boost Taiwan's economy, despite initially having expressed support for the 2014 protests which it sparked.²³ He has since distanced himself from the deal and proposed instead that Taiwan join RCEP – a compromise which would nonetheless enhance trade links with the PRC.²⁴ Ko has dismissed the CPTPP on the basis that it would require Taiwan to lower tariffs and adhere to stringent

¹⁹ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, 'View from Taiwan: KMT frames 2024 election as a choice between war and peace', *Axios*, 23/05/2023, <https://bit.ly/48BYjJD> (checked: 09/01/2024) and 'Fireside Chat with Dr. Ko Wen-je, Chairman of the Taiwan People's Party and Former Mayor of Taipei', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 20/04/2023, <https://bit.ly/47krk1v> (checked: 09/01/2024).

²⁰ 林湘淇 [Lin Xiangqi], '「選綠是戰爭，選藍是投降」 柯文哲談兩岸：民眾黨是未來的執政黨' [“Voting green is war, voting blue is surrender.” Ko Wenzhe talks about cross-strait: People's Party is the future ruling party], *風傳媒* [The Storm Media], 13/12/2023, <https://bit.ly/3tL7D5l> (checked: 09/01/2024).

²¹ Loa Iok-sin, 'Gaffe-prone Ko Wen-je answers sexism charge', *Taipei Times*, 09/09/2014, <https://bit.ly/3TPhUId> (checked: 09/01/2024).

²² 'Taiwan's Presidential Election 2024', Taiwan Policy Centre Briefing, 15/12/2023, <https://bit.ly/3HeAeTz> (checked: 09/01/2024).

²³ Courtney Donovan Smith, 'Ko Wen-je intends to revive Taiwan-China trade pact that Sunflower protests killed', *Taiwan News*, 24/06/2023, <https://bit.ly/3S59vPQ> (checked: 09/01/2024).

²⁴ David Sacks, 'Taiwan's 2024 Presidential Election: Analysing Ko Wen-je's Foreign Policy Positions', Council on Foreign Relations, 04/01/2024, <https://bit.ly/495zcWf> (checked: 09/01/2024).

information security and labour rights requirements, for which Taiwan is ‘not yet ready.’²⁵

Domestic issues: Economic and social challenges

Taiwan’s fraught energy transition

Taiwan is heavily reliant on fossil fuels, which constitute around 80% of its energy supply.²⁶ To complicate matters further, 98% of its energy is imported, exposing it to risks such as impending carbon taxes, market fluctuations, natural disasters, and potential blockades.²⁷ Fossil-fuel dependency is particularly acute in energy-intensive industries which dominate Taiwan’s economy, such as semiconductor manufacturing; TSMC alone accounts for more than 6% of Taiwan’s total energy consumption.²⁸

All three parties support the 2050 Net Zero goal mandated by the Climate Change Response Act. The DPP’s ambitious 2025 Energy Transition plan, initiated after the Fukushima disaster of 2011, aimed to phase out nuclear power completely in favour of renewable energy and natural gas.²⁹ Progress, however, has been sluggish, with renewable energy contributing to less than 9% to Taiwan’s current electricity mix.³⁰

The debate on nuclear energy – a controversial power source given Taiwan’s seismic activity – remains highly polarising. The DPP’s denuclearisation efforts have faced increasing criticism as renewable energy targets fail to be met, particularly from the party’s opponents.³¹

In contrast, the KMT proposes reactivating all four nuclear reactors to ensure energy security amid increasing domestic energy demands and potential

²⁵ ‘Taiwan should join China-led RCEP instead of CPTPP: TPP’s Ko’, *Focus Taiwan*, 29/11/2023, <https://bit.ly/48yYrA0> (checked: 09/01/2024).

²⁶ ‘Progress towards 1.5C power sector benchmarks: Asia’, *Ember*, 05/2023, <https://bit.ly/41M3VoA> (checked: 09/01/2024).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Jeff Kucharski, ‘Taiwan’s Greatest Vulnerability Is Its Energy Supply’, *The Diplomat*, 13/09/2022, <https://bit.ly/48jo2gk> (checked: 09/01/2024).

²⁹ Vladimira Lickova, ‘Taiwan’s Energy (In)security: Between Green Ambitions vs. Fossil Fuel Realities’, *The Diplomat*, 20/07/2023, <https://bit.ly/3S7a4Zm> (checked: 09/01/2024).

³⁰ ‘Progress towards 1.5C power sector benchmarks: Asia’, *Ember*, 05/2023, <https://bit.ly/41M3VoA> (checked: 09/01/2024).

³¹ Jono Thomson, ‘Ko Wen-je criticises DPP, KMT plans for Taiwan’s nuclear power’, *Taiwan News*, 26/12/2023, <https://bit.ly/47to83I> (checked: 09/01/2024).

regional tensions.³² The TPP have put forward a plan to extend the operation of two nuclear reactors undergoing decommission, stating that continued use of nuclear power is necessary until renewable developments meet targets.³³ Lai is the only candidate who supports continued decommission of Taiwan's nuclear power plants.

Social welfare

The modest monthly minimum wage of NT\$26,400 (just over £650) in Taiwan contrasts starkly with rising living costs.³⁴ This is a valence issue in the elections: all presidential candidates have pledged to increase Taiwan's minimum wage. Hou's plan is the most ambitious, promising a gradual rise to a monthly minimum of NT\$33,000 (approximately £830).³⁵ Meanwhile, Ko attributes low wages among young adults to educational deficiencies, proposing reforms to align student capabilities more closely with societal needs.³⁶ A potential Lai administration would be saddled with the baggage of addressing his party's policy shortcomings in this area after eight years in power. The government of Tsai Ing-wen, the current president, has raised the minimum wage in the country every year since 2016, but has fallen short of its pledge to increase it to NT\$30,000 (£755) by 2024.³⁷ 60% of the electorate are dissatisfied with the DPP's economic stewardship.³⁸

Taiwan's ageing population and declining birthrate exacerbate the economic pressure on the island nation's shrinking workforce. In response, Hou has proposed abolishing National Health Insurance fees for those over 65, a move aimed at easing the financial responsibilities shouldered by their children

³² 'KMT presidential candidate to restart nuclear power plants if elected', *Focus Taiwan*, 09/08/2023, <https://bit.ly/4aOiyMb> (checked: 09/01/2024).

³³ 'Taiwan needs nuclear energy, Ko says', *Taipei Times*, 13/08/2023, <https://bit.ly/3vgT8Xh> (checked: 09/01/2024).

³⁴ Michelle Chiang, 'Minimum salaries and wages to increase', *Radio Taiwan International*, 28/12/2023, <https://bit.ly/3tR1jct> (checked: 09/01/2024).

³⁵ 'KMT's Hou proposes raising Taiwan's minimum monthly wage to NT\$33,000', *Focus Taiwan*, 08/09/2023, <https://bit.ly/3H9DmjE> (checked: 09/01/2024).

³⁶ 'Ko proposes bilingual classes, better higher education to address low wages', *Focus Taiwan*, 15/11/2023, <https://bit.ly/3tN7RJ6> (checked: 09/01/2024).

³⁷ Hsin-Yu Wu and Huang Frances, 'Taiwan: Labor groups urge MOL to raise minimum wage to NT\$27,600', *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, 23/08/2023, <https://bit.ly/47o4YML> (checked: 09/01/2024).

³⁸ '美麗島民調:2023年11月國政民調' ['Formosa Island Poll: November 2023 National Political Poll'], *美麗島電子報* [Beautiful Island Newsletter], 05/12/2023, <https://bit.ly/3H5LLEO> (checked: 09/01/2024).



currently.³⁹ Ko would raise Taiwan's retirement age (currently 65) and implement 'baby bonuses' to encourage childbirth.⁴⁰

A housing affordability crisis compounds Taiwan's economic issues: Taiwanese face housing prices comparable to those in nations such as Norway and the Netherlands, yet with only a third of their disposable income.⁴¹ Lai has promised to raise the supply of social housing to 1 million units by 2032 – the number stands at under 200,000 currently, and 800,000 households want to rent. Hou's housing policy aims to make home ownership easier for Taiwan's younger generations. Ko proposes to continue to build social housing and provide more rent subsidies.

Hou has put forth other policies targeted at Taiwan's youth to combat the KMT's waning appeal to a younger Taiwanese demographic; he would reduce the financial burdens of student loans and pay interest on tuition loans.⁴²

Beijing: Watching from across the strait

Taiwan's 2024 elections unfold against a recent history of intense military brinkmanship and tensions across the strait. Wielding its considerable economic and political heft, the CCP has sought to isolate Taiwan on the international stage, not least by preventing Taiwanese participation in international organisations. Since 2016, Beijing has influenced the attrition in states which have diplomatic relations with Taipei – from 22 to 13. The aim is to convince the Taiwanese population that global integration is achievable only after 'reunification' with the PRC.

Beijing's efforts to influence the Taiwanese electorate stretch back to the island's inaugural presidential election in 1996, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched ballistic missiles near Taiwan to deter voters from supporting Lee Teng-hui, former President of Taiwan (1988–2000). In the run-up to Taiwan's 2024 elections, the PRC has employed a multi-pronged strategy of 'grey-zone' aggression.

³⁹ 'Taiwan to consider expansion of free health insurance for the elderly', 07/09/2023, *Focus Taiwan*, <https://bit.ly/3TPhr93> (checked: 09/01/2024).

⁴⁰ 'EDITORIAL: New birthrate plan needed', 09/11/2023, *Taipei Times*, <https://bit.ly/3tJgQeu> (checked: 09/01/2024).

⁴¹ 'Taiwan's Housing Crisis (Part 1): Taiwan's Housing Prices Are Among the Highest Globally but Wages Are One of the Lowest Among Advanced Countries', *The News Lens*, 22/03/2022, <https://bit.ly/4aJkqpc> (checked: 09/01/2024).

⁴² 'ELECTION 2024/KMT's Hou vows to pay student tuition loan interest if elected', *Focus Taiwan*, 16/12/2023, <https://bit.ly/48Jax9u> (checked: 09/01/2024).



Known in PRC military lexicon as ‘political warfare’, ‘grey-zone’ activities fall within the Chinese doctrine of the ‘Three Warfares’ [sanzhan, 三戰]. The first, public opinion warfare [yülunzhan, 輿論戰] moulds favourable public perceptions of the PRC and the benefits of unification, while discrediting independence narratives. Beijing co-opts social media influencers and traditional pro-PRC media conglomerates, or ‘red media’ [紅色媒體], to disseminate PRC-friendly content, and bolster its favoured political candidates.⁴³ PRC agents flood Taiwan’s media ecosystem with disinformation, and bots artificially amplify journalism which promotes scepticism over US security commitments to Taiwan. Throughout October 2023, for example, disinformation purporting to show the recent conflict in Gaza was circulated to highlight the horrors of war and promote a KMT narrative that peace can only be sustained through closer ties with the PRC.⁴⁴ Additionally, in the same month, the PRC extended a trade barrier investigation against Taiwan to the eve of Taiwan’s presidential and legislative elections – a pointed reminder of the mainland’s importance to Taiwan as its dominant trading partner.⁴⁵

An example of the PRC’s ongoing legal warfare (falüzhan, 法律戰) against Taiwan is its 2005 Anti-Secession Law, which mandates Beijing’s desire to bring Taiwan under its own jurisdiction, and, if nonviolent avenues to ‘reunification’ fail, sanctions the use of force.⁴⁶

Psychological warfare (xinlizhan, 心理戰) includes the PLA’s conduction of invasive military exercises around Taiwan’s periphery, ballistic missile overflights, and incursions into Taiwan’s Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) – all of which have increased markedly in frequency since 2022.⁴⁷ PLA sorties into Taiwan’s ADIZ now take place on a near-daily basis. Psychological warfare aims to sap the Taiwanese people’s will to resist, sow societal confusion and discord, and instil a perpetual sense of crisis.

The battlefield of these three warfares is Taiwanese ‘hearts and minds’. The ideal, to ‘win without fighting’ [buzhanersheng, 不戰而勝], would be for ‘Taiwanese compatriots’ to concede willingly to annexation. For the 2024 election, this translates to ‘anyone but the DPP’.

⁴³ Milo Hsieh, ‘Red Media and CCP’s Influence Operations: How Taiwanese Media Became Beijing’s Proxy’, *The News Lens*, 09/07/2019, <https://bit.ly/48I4MZL> (checked: 09/01/2024).

⁴⁴ ‘中華民國推動兩岸和平大會’ [‘Republic of China Conference on Promoting Cross-Strait Peace’], 中國國花黨 [China National Flower Party] via *Youtube*, 15/11/2023, <https://bit.ly/48JHskC> (checked: 09/01/2024); and, ‘[錯誤] 網傳影片「以巴戰爭, 可憐百姓無處可逃」」 [‘[Error] The video “Israel-Palestine war, poor people have nowhere to escape” was uploaded online?’], 台灣事實查核中心 [Taiwan FactCheck Centre], 16/10/2023, <https://bit.ly/41PwW2B> (checked: 09/01/2024).

⁴⁵ ‘China extends Taiwan trade probe, Taipei cries election interference’, *Reuters*, 09/11/2023, <https://bit.ly/3TLAKQy> (checked: 09/01/2024).

⁴⁶ ‘Anti-Secession Law’, European Parliament, 14/03/2005, <https://bit.ly/3TPffOR> (checked: 09/01/2024).

⁴⁷ Gray Sergeant, ‘Slicing away at the status quo: Beijing’s cross-strait strategy’, Council on Geostrategy, 13/12/2023, <https://bit.ly/3vs7K6n> (checked: 09/01/2024).

Outcomes and implications

As of 3rd January 2024, an aggregate of nationwide polls shows Lai leading the presidential race at 38.9%, ratings which have increased since the announcement of Hsiao as his vice president.⁴⁸ Until mid-October, Hou was trailing behind Ko, but polls show his approval ratings rising steadily, and he now follows Lai at 35.8%. Ko's ratings are declining, and currently sit at 22.4%. The likelihood is that the DPP will lose its current majority in the Legislative Yuan: the KMT could win outright or the TPP may hold the balance of power. This may lead to significant ramifications for Taiwan's cross-strait and energy policies.

Beijing has labelled the DPP ticket a 'union of separatists' and has threatened that an administration under Lai may 'bring war to Taiwan'.⁴⁹ If Lai becomes president, Beijing will continue as it has since 2016: official channels of communication will remain frozen, and it will pursue a carrot-and-stick approach combining economically preferential policies to attract young Taiwanese talent to the PRC with punitive sanctions to target Taiwanese industry and individuals. The PLA will likely intensify military activities around the island to signal Beijing's displeasure.

A KMT administration would see Taiwan return to the '1992 Consensus', likely taking the spotlight off the independence issue and leading to a temporary thawing in cross-strait relations. Cross-strait trade and tourism might see a temporary flourishing. It would also afford the PRC greater economic leverage and cultural influence in Taiwan. Any possible rapprochement, however, would be constrained by a fundamentally irreconcilable conflict: that the Taiwanese public do not wish to cede autonomy to Beijing, and the CCP's singular interest in friendly relations with Taiwan lies in its ambitions to annex it.

A TPP victory appears unlikely. But, if Ko were able to find a mutually acceptable framework for resuming dialogue with Beijing, the countries may be able to open channels of trade and cooperation, leading to a 'cooling' of cross-strait tensions.

⁴⁸ 'Final Taiwan Polls Show Ruling DPP on Track To Win Third Term', *Taiwan News via Youtube*, 02/01/2024, <https://bit.ly/410IyTR> (checked: 09/01/2024).

⁴⁹ Lawrence Chung, 'Taiwanese presidential front runner William Lai uses US stopover to ditch pro-independence tag', *South China Morning Post*, 20/08/2023, <https://bit.ly/3NP7PHQ> (checked: 09/01/2024).

Wider implications

Taiwan's foreign policy will not undergo drastic changes, regardless of the outcome of the 2024 elections. While all candidates hold divergent approaches to cross-strait relations, especially in their rhetoric, none is likely to pursue a change to the status quo. The extent of any new administration's aspirations for closer ties with the PRC is inherently limited by both popular will in Taiwan and the balancing act required to sustain Taiwan's relationships with the international community, as well as its commitment to international law.

British interests in Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait – notably in trade and investment; the stability of the island's entrenched democracy; the flourishing semiconductor industry; and the safe passage of commercial shipping through the strait – will thus be under no more threat than they already are due to Chinese behaviour and rhetoric as a result of the decisions to be made by the Taiwanese on 13th January.

The key variable of interest to His Majesty's Government will be Beijing's response to the electoral results. The geopolitical landscape may see some short term alterations in the aftermath of a DPP victory, as Beijing applies the military screw. Any potential activity should both be analysed for insight into the PRC's developing military capabilities – and condemned.

In the event of a non-DPP victory, a less hostile PRC stance might reduce the perceived investment risks associated with Taiwan. Increased foreign direct investment and lower insurance premiums would bolster Taiwan's economy. A possible KMT/TPP administration would continue to strengthen collaboration, particularly in defence, with the US – as well as other free and open countries favourable to Taiwanese prosperity and a stable strait – with the UK, of course, being one of these countries. This will anger the CCP. Any temporary détente under a KMT or TPP government will end when Beijing realises no party in Taiwan will enact meaningful moves towards unification; Beijing will then continue to increase pressure through the Three Warfares. This grey-zone interference should, similarly, be monitored closely. Many of these tactics are also deployed against the UK.

Whatever the result, it is likely that the PRC will continue to upgrade its military capabilities and pursue war readiness, as 'reunification' with Taiwan has become central to Xi's 'China Dream'. Fundamentally, peace and security in the Taiwan Strait hinges upon Xi's willingness to pursue his geopolitical fantasy.



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“ Dedicated to making Britain, as well as other free and open nations, more united, stronger and greener.

ISBN: 978-1-914441-55-4

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