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## Taiwan Votes For Change, But Will China Accept Revolution?

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In one of the least surprising election results in Taiwanese history, Tsai Ing-wen has won the presidency in a landslide. The Democratic Progressive Party will regain the presidency after eight years in opposition and, even more dramatically, take control of the legislature for the first time.

Tsai's victory is a devastating judgment on the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou. A member of the long dominant Kuomintang, he presided over a slowing economy and tightening embrace with China. Neither endeared him to voters.

Tsai may do no better on the economy. A small trading nation like Taiwan is inevitably buffeted by economic difficulties and political crises elsewhere. China's ongoing economic slowdown may prove to be a particular challenge, given the close business ties between the island of just 23 million and much larger mainland.

Nevertheless, continued slow growth is unlikely to destabilize the region or endanger the peace. A change in Taiwan's policy toward the People's Republic of China could.

Although known to most of the world as Taiwan, the Republic of China views itself as an independent nation and is recognized by 22 countries. The island was taken by Japan after its 1895 victory over Imperial China. Taiwan went back to the Republic of China, then ruled by Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang, after Japan's surrender in 1945. With the imminent triumph of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, Chiang moved his government to the island, still claiming to be the legitimate ruler of all China.

In this Taipei was supported by America, despite the obvious fantasy that Chiang's regime represented the mainland. Finally, nearly a quarter century later, Richard Nixon opened a dialogue with the PRC and Jimmy Carter then switched official recognition to Beijing.

Nevertheless, the U.S. maintained semi-official ties with Taiwan, as well as an ambiguous military relationship, including continued sales of “defensive” weapons.

As China began to reform economically it also developed a commercial relationship with Taipei. Trade and travel have exploded in recent years: inter-China commerce has almost doubled since 2005 and nearly four million Chinese visited the island in 2014. While the KMT agrees with the mainland that there is but one China, the DPP remains formally committed to independence. Indeed, the latter’s governing charter backs a “Republic of Taiwan.” Tsai realizes that implementing such a policy would risk a Chinese military response and appears disinclined to commit national suicide. Nevertheless, the DPP will never embrace the mainland as motherland. Explained Tsai during the campaign, “Taiwan needs a new model.”

Beijing realizes that Tsai’s victory is not just a rejection of Ma but of China. Despite the PRC’s recent emphasis on diplomacy and commerce, ever fewer Taiwanese identify with China. Most favor engaging rather than fighting the PRC, but more than 80 percent would support independence if they didn’t fear a military response. In 2014 only 7.3 percent of Taiwanese advocated reunification, barely a third the number in 2003. Support even for economic cooperation has dropped significantly over the last decade. Students led the so-called Sunflower Movement and even took over the Legislative Yuan to block passage of a KMT-negotiated trade agreement with China.

The PRC’s status as a Communist dictatorship obviously discourages closer ties. Even KMT officials say reunification is impossible without a democratic mainland. From the murdering madness of the Cultural Revolution to the rising authoritarianism of Xi Jinping to the shrinking autonomy of Hong Kong, what Taiwanese citizen would want to surrender to the (not so) tender mercies of the Chinese Communist Party?

Moreover, the mainland is a colossus of 1.3 billion people. The independent identity forged by 23 million Taiwanese would be overwhelmed by reunification. Worse, China is foreign. Most people in the ROC today feel Taiwanese, not Chinese. Other than a brief period after WWII, the island has been separate from the mainland since 1895. For young Taiwanese the PRC isn’t even a memory. Nothing about rule from Beijing attracts them.

Which leaves China’s strategy toward Taiwan in ruins. Beijing once tried coercion. In 1996 it fired missiles into waters near the island in an attempt to intimidate voters during President Lee Teng-hui’s election bid. Taiwanese voters responded by giving him an overwhelming majority. Since then Chinese officials have relied more on diplomacy and economics. The PRC even suspended its attempts to steal away nations recognizing the ROC, mostly small states susceptible to offers of generous “aid” packages. Yet Taiwanese voters still have decisively rejected the political party most willing to accommodate Beijing.

In desperation in November Xi met Ma in Singapore, the first summit between the two Chinese leaders. Beijing may have hoped to promote the KMT campaign or set a model for the incoming DPP to follow. The two officials avoided any hint of recognition by calling each other “Mr.” rather than “President,” but the concession came mostly from Beijing, which had never before treated the ROC as an equal.

The official talks were predictable and involved mostly platitudes. More important was the dinner afterwards, say Taiwanese officials, during which the two presidents and their aides talked freely, especially about their shared history. However, the Xi government obviously was wrong if it thought the summit would boost the KMT. If anything, the meeting may have reminded voters of a connection which seemed too close for comfort.

Perhaps sensing the futility of his mission, Xi proclaimed: "History will remember this day" and argued that "There's no force that can separate us, because we are brothers who are still connected by our flesh even if our bones are broken." He warned that backing away from the 1992 consensus of one China could cause cross-strait relations to "encounter surging waves, or even completely capsizes." It's obvious which nation he believes would sink as a result.

Unfortunately, Xi speaks for more than the CCP. Nationalism is fierce even among the young, who disdain many government restrictions. Students have insisted to me that Taiwan is part of China while others have asked how China can reassert control over the island. They see the issue more as sovereignty by the nation of China rather than the government of the PRC. Ironically, pressure to forcibly reunify actually might rise in a democratic China, since today the CCP dampens as well as manipulates nationalist sentiments.

Nevertheless, Tsai is not inclined to bend. She criticized Ma's summit performance: he failed "to note Taiwan's democracy, Taiwan's freedom, the existence of the Republic of China, and most importantly, the rights Taiwanese have to decide their future freely." Of course, had he done so his meeting with Xi would have been even shorter.

While Tsai, backed by a legislative majority, apparently plans no formal move toward independence, she also rejects the 1992 consensus of "one China, separate interpretations," with the meaning left up to the two Chinas. The likelihood of dialogue between her and Xi seems minimal. In commenting on the impending election, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said that his government would "oppose Taiwan independence, oppose two Chinas" and that "No matter what changes take place on the island, this position will never change."

Washington is in a difficult position. The U.S. has a historic commitment to Taiwan, whose people have built a liberal society, both capitalist and democratic. They are entitled to forge their own political future, over which Beijing has no legitimate claim.

Yet America has much at stake with its relationship with the PRC. The economic cooperation and security competition affect not only the two countries, but most everyone else in East Asia. Controversies and disagreements are inevitable, but conflict is not. A battle over what Beijing views as a "renegade province" would be far worse than previous territorial contretemps in the Asia-Pacific.

Washington should start by congratulating President-elect Tsai. U.S. officials might pine for continued KMT rule, but the Taiwanese are entitled to elect whoever they wish. The Obama administration should counsel Taipei to step carefully, however. Cross-strait ties would be sensitive at any time. Today, in the midst of economic turmoil and possible political instability

on the mainland, Taiwan's new government shouldn't give the PRC any reason (or excuse) to react forcefully.

The U.S. should accelerate efforts to expand economic ties with Taiwan. A free trade agreement would benefit both nations. More commerce is good at any time, and strengthening economic relations now would affirm America's commitment to a free (if not exactly independent) Taiwan by other than military means.

America should continue to provide Taipei with weapons for its defense. Taiwan must be able to deter if not defeat the PRC to remain free. At the same time, the new government should make good on the DPP's pledge to make "large investments" in the military. Outlays rose a bare .2 percent last year, the first hike since 2012, and continue to lag below Ma's stated objective of three percent of GDP. It makes little sense for the U.S. to anger Beijing with new arms sales if Taipei is unwilling to spend enough to make a difference.

Washington should press friendly states throughout Asia, Europe, and elsewhere to communicate a consistent message to China: military action against Taiwan would trigger a costly reaction around the world. While there would be no global military coalition to rescue the island, many nations would not continue "business as usual" with the PRC. The mainland would pay a high economic and political price, particularly in East Asia, where any remaining illusions of a "peaceful rise" would be laid to rest.

Finally, American officials should explore ideas for a peaceful modus vivendi. One possibility is for Washington to repeat its acceptance of "one China" and eschew any military commitment to Taiwan. Taipei would accept its ambiguous national status and announce its neutrality in any conflicts which might arise in East Asia, including involving America and Japan. The PRC would forswear military means to resolve Taiwan's status and reduce the number of missiles in Fujian targeting the island.

The objective would be to make it easier for both China and Taiwan to "kick the can down the road." Both parties would continue to reap abundant economic benefits from their growing ties. The bilateral relationship would continue to be dominated by voluntary interaction among the two peoples. There would be more time for the PRC's political system to evolve and Taiwan's people to judge the result. Neither Beijing nor Taipei would stage an international challenge forcing the other to respond. A final resolution of their relationship would be put off well into the future, without any artificial deadline.

The ROC's people deserve praise. They have modeled democracy with Chinese characteristics, yet again peacefully ousting a governing party after years in office. China's citizens cannot miss the lesson. Hopefully someday the PRC's people will be able to do the same.

In the meantime, President-elect Tsai is set to govern a nation which has decisively voted for change. However, if her rule turns into a political revolution she could risk her country's future. If the PRC's leaders fear they are about to "lose" the island—and perhaps even power at home—they may feel forced to act decisively and coercively, at high cost to Taiwan, China, America, and the world. International ambiguity remains a small price to pay to avoid a cross-strait war.

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