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## Taiwan's election poses a challenge for China

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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. Even more dramatically, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) will take control of the legislature for the first time. Tsai's victory is a devastating judgment on Ma Ying-jeou's presidency. Voters were dissatisfied over a slow economy and closer ties with China.

With the imminent triumph of the Chinese Communist Party, Chiang Kai-shek moved his government to the island in 1949. For a quarter century Washington backed him. Finally, President Richard Nixon opened a dialogue with the mainland and President Jimmy Carter switched official recognition to Beijing. Nevertheless, the U.S. maintained semi-official ties with Taiwan.

As China began to reform economically it also developed a commercial relationship with Taipei. While the ruling KMT agrees with the mainland that there is but one China, the DPP remains formally committed to independence.

Beijing realizes that Tsai's victory is not just a rejection of Ma but of China as well. More than 80 percent of Taiwanese would support independence if they didn't fear a military response. Support even for economic cooperation has dropped significantly over the last decade.

China's status as a communist dictatorship obviously discourages closer ties. Moreover, China is a colossus of 1.3 billion people, which would submerge 23 million Taiwanese on reunification.

China's strategy toward Taiwan is in ruins. In desperation, in November Chinese President Xi Jinping met Ma in Singapore, the first summit between the two leaders. Beijing may have hoped to promote the KMT campaign or set a model for the incoming DPP to follow.

Perhaps sensing the futility of his mission, Xi warned that backing away from the 1992 consensus of one China could cause cross-strait relations to “encounter surging waves, or even completely capsize.” 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.

Taipei’s friends, especially Washington, are in a difficult position. The United States has a historic commitment to Taiwan, whose people have built a liberal society. Yet it has much at stake with its relationship with China. Everyone would lose from a battle over what Beijing views as a “renegade province.” Washington should start by congratulating Tsai. The Obama administration should counsel Taipei to step carefully, however. Taiwan’s new government shouldn’t give China any reason (or excuse) to react forcefully.

The U.S. should accelerate efforts to expand economic ties with Taiwan. Strengthening trade ties would affirm America’s commitment to a free (if not exactly independent) Taiwan by means other than military. America should also continue to provide Taipei with weapons to enable it to deter if not defeat China. At the same time, the new government should make good on the DPP’s pledge to make “large investments” in the military. 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 encourage 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. China would pay a particularly high economic and political price 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. China would forswear military means to resolve the issue of 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.” A final resolution of their relationship would be put off well into the future, without any artificial deadline.

Taiwan's people have modeled democracy with Chinese characteristics. Hopefully someday China's people will be able to do the same.

In the meantime, Tsai is set to govern a nation that has decisively voted for change. However, if China'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. International ambiguity remains a small price to pay to avoid a cross-strait war.

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