

## Trump Faces A Dilemma As Taiwan Pokes China In The Eye

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Tensions between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have been at disturbingly high levels over the past four years, and there are signs that the situation is about to become even worse.

Taiwan's just-concluded presidential elections eradicated any lingering hopes that Tsai Ing-wen would be a one-term president and cross-strait relations would return to "normal." Tsai instead won a landslide victory over KMT nominee Han Kuo-yu and a minor party candidate, receiving more than 57 percent of the vote to Han's 38 percent in a record turnout.

Her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) also retained its majority in the legislature, which the party had attained for the first time in Taiwan's history in 2016.

Beijing has been unhappy since Tsai and the DPP swept to victory in those 2016 elections. Before that unexpected outcome, Chinese leaders had believed that the rapidly growing economic ties between Taiwan and the mainland under Taiwan's previous Kuomintang (KMT) government, led by the accommodating Ma Ying-jeou, would continue. The underlying assumption was that expanding economic and cultural links would eventually erode the resistance of the Taiwanese people to political unification.

The DPP's decisive victory in 2016 came as a rude awakening to PRC leaders, and their reaction was harsh. Beijing spent the next four years taking a very hard line toward Tsai's government. It conducted numerous provocative military exercises in the Taiwan Strait, worked on enticing the handful of small, poor countries that still maintained diplomatic relations with Taipei to switch ties to the PRC, and intensified its warnings that Taiwan could not continue refusing to negotiate the terms of unification indefinitely. Tsai's government steadfastly refused to back down, however; indeed, its resistance to pressure seemed to become more determined.

The results of the January election were an emphatic endorsement of Tsai's uncompromising policy toward the mainland, and she wasted no time in acting on that mandate. Indeed, her initial comments likely escalated tensions with the mainland: "We don't have a need to declare ourselves an independent state," she told the BBC. "We are an independent country already."

Some Taiwanese political figures had expressed similar sentiments over the years, noting that the Republic of China (Taiwan's official name) predated the establishment of the PRC. But Tsai

appeared to go further, insisting that Beijing “must accept” the reality of Taiwan’s already independent status. She also used a new formulation of the official name, noting that “we call ourselves the Republic of China, Taiwan.” It was a subtle change but an important one, since it underscored Taiwan’s political separation from the mainland,

Furthermore, the newly re-elected Taiwanese president gave Beijing a stark warning about using force to compel unification. “Invading Taiwan is something that is going to be very costly for China,” she said.

Tsai again rejected Beijing’s longstanding offer of the “one country, two systems” formula, under which Taiwan would have an autonomous political status similar to that granted to Hong Kong. Her decisive victory, she argued, demonstrated how little desire there was among the Taiwanese people for the concept of “one China” or the one-country, two systems proposal. Whereas the PRC insists that those two components must be the basis for any productive talks about Taiwan’s political status, Tsai stated bluntly that Taiwan’s sovereignty was not up for negotiation.

Tsai’s assessment of Taiwanese opinion seems quite accurate. Even before the massive pro-democracy demonstrations erupted in Hong Kong in the spring of 2019 over Beijing’s efforts to undermine that territory’s guarantee of political autonomy, polls showed that 80 percent of Taiwanese rejected the idea of one country, two systems. Support became even weaker as 2019 wore on and Hong Kong’s protests persisted.

The PRC’s clumsy handling of Hong Kong was the single biggest factor in Tsai’s massive victory. A year before the election, her political fortunes seemed bleak, with extensive public grumbling about corruption and Taiwan’s lackluster economic performance. DPP candidates had lost badly in local elections in late 2018, and Tsai had to resign her post as party chairman.

But the events in Hong Kong made Taiwan’s policy toward Beijing by far the leading issue in the presidential campaign. Tsai portrayed herself as the champion of the island’s sovereignty and security, while arguing that the KMT would fail to defend those values. Her message was that a KMT victory would render Taiwan as vulnerable as Hong Kong, with its democracy, civil liberties, and self-rule in peril. “Young people in Hong Kong have used their lives and blood and tears to show us that ‘one country, two systems’ is not possible,” Tsai said at a large rally in Taipei on the eve of the election. Voters gave her message a resounding endorsement.

The danger now is that Chinese leaders may conclude that they have no alternative except to greatly intensify the pressure, including military pressure.

Ironically, though, Beijing’s current preoccupation with its problems in Hong Kong may delay any confrontation with Taiwan. PRC leaders likely would not want to manage two major crises simultaneously. However, there are indications that Chinese policy regarding Hong Kong may be about to become more hardline. An especially ominous development came earlier this month when the longstanding head of the PRC’s Liaison Office, the mainland’s most senior official in Hong Kong, was replaced with a staunch loyalist to President Xi Jinping, a man the *New York Times* calls “an enforcer.” Beijing might be contemplating a severe crackdown in Hong Kong, both to bring that territory under control and to send a stark message to Taiwan

Washington needs to use the current interval to carefully reassess its own policy on the Taiwan issue. Under President Trump and a strongly pro-Taiwan Congress, U.S. policy has become

increasingly supportive of Taipei without much apparent thought as to the potential consequences. A major step occurred in March 2018 when Trump signed into law the Taiwan Travel Act, which encouraged high-level U.S. officials to meet with their Taiwanese counterparts. That legislation ended Washington's practice under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act of holding meetings only with relatively low-level Taiwanese officials. It was especially noticeable that the TTA specifically promoted interactions with "cabinet-level national security officials."

Demonstrations of U.S. support for Taiwan's security have continued to multiply. Former national security adviser John Bolton met with Taiwan National Security Council Secretary-General David Lee in May 2019, in accordance with the TTA. American warships have transited the Taiwan Strait repeatedly in recent years, including just days after Taiwan's latest election. The Trump administration approved a \$2 billion arms sale to Taiwan in July 2019, over China's strenuous objections. Administration officials indicated that such sales were now likely to become "routine," the "new normal" in U.S. security relations with Taipei.

Not surprisingly, Beijing views the proliferation of such pro-Taiwan measures with great concern and irritation. Washington especially needs to proceed cautiously if relations between Taiwan and the mainland become even more tense and confrontational. Under the Taiwan Relations Act, the United States has an implied commitment to defend the island's security and de facto independence. The wisdom of that commitment, given the PRC's mounting economic clout and increasingly potent military capabilities, is highly questionable. But even Americans who support that commitment should caution their government not to exacerbate an already volatile situation.

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