

## Taiwan's Growing Political Turbulence Creates a Problem for Washington

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U.S. policy goals over the decades since President Richard Nixon initiated a rapprochement with the People's Republic of China (PRC) have been quite consistent. Officials in various administrations, conservative and liberal, Republican and Democrat, have sought to preserve the status quo between Taiwan and the PRC. That means perpetuating Taiwan's de facto independence, but encouraging steps to reduce tensions between the island and the mainland. As far as U.S. officials are concerned, decisions about Taiwan's ultimate political status should be put on hold indefinitely. In essence, Washington's "Goldilocks" scenario favors a cautious relationship between Taipei and Beijing that eschews both confrontation and progress toward reunification. Unfortunately, growing political volatility in Taiwan, impacting both the governing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the opposition Kuomintang Party (KMT), poses a major threat to that goal.

It's not the first time that there are troubling developments in Taiwan from the standpoint of U.S. interests. During the initial years of the twenty-first century, Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian alarmed U.S. officials because he seemed to take too seriously the DPP's official position in favor of full-fledged, official independence for the island. Chen repeatedly blindsided Washington with pro-independence initiatives that provoked Beijing. U.S. leaders were more relaxed with Chen's successor, KMT leader Ma Ying-jeou, who pursued an array of closer economic and cultural ties with the mainland. As the number of cross-strait agreements grew, however, some hawkish elements in the U.S. foreign policy community began to fret that ties between Beijing and Taipei might be growing a little too close.

A majority of Taiwanese voters appeared to harbor similar concerns, not only electing DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen as president in 2016 but also giving the DPP control of the national legislature for the first time. Tsai has proceeded more cautiously than Chen did regarding independence, but Beijing's disappointment and anger at Taiwan's retreat from Ma's conciliatory policies has led the PRC to adopt even more belligerent measures than during Chen's years in office.

Washington has seemed reasonably content with Tsai. Indeed, the Trump administration and Taiwan's admirers in Congress have adopted measures to increase U.S. backing for Taipei in response to Beijing's bullying behavior. Support at home for Tsai's presidency, though, has ebbed, and the DPP suffered major setbacks in November 2018 local elections. Tsai was pressured to quit her post as party chair, and she now faces a strong internal challenge for re-

election as Taiwan's president from her onetime prime minister, William Lai, who is competing with Tsai for the DPP's nomination in an upcoming primary.

Washington has reason to see Lai as another Chen Shui-bian — a potential loose cannon when it comes to relations with the mainland. Lai has sharply criticized Tsai for ineffectual leadership and is taking a markedly more pro-independence stance. He warns against any consideration of Beijing's offer of a "special status" for Taiwan — acceptance of official reunification, but with Taiwan enjoying political autonomy akin to that of Hong Kong. Lai expresses emphatic opposition to such an agreement, noting that Beijing has gradually eroded Hong Kong's autonomy, and that acceptance of a similar special status would ultimately result in Taiwan becoming another Tibet — a victim of communist subjugation. Some of Lai's supporters are even more adamant about the need for full independence, and voice extreme impatience with Tsai about her unwillingness to take a stronger stand on the issue.

Political trends are equally unsettled in the KMT. In a crowded, multi-candidate race with New Taipei Mayor Eric Chu having emerged as the initial frontrunner, two individuals especially worry Washington and those Taiwanese who are determined to preserve the island's de facto independence. One is Kaohsiung mayor Han Kuo-yu, a populist maverick, who shocked the nation with his upset 2018 win for that post. Han has drawn comparisons to Donald Trump, especially because of outlandish policy promises and unflattering comments about women and minorities. Potentially even more worrisome, though, are his extremely accommodating views about relations with Beijing. Indeed, there are indications that the PRC launched a subtle propaganda campaign to nudge Taiwanese voter opinion in his favor. Although Han announced on March 31 that he would not run for the KMT nomination, he now appears to be wavering about that decision.

The entry of Terry Gou into the race creates similar concerns about China policy. Gou, the business tycoon who founded Foxconn, Apple's leading manufacturer of iPhones, also has led to Trump comparisons, in part because, like Trump, he has never held public office before making a run for the presidency. Like Trump and Han, Gou also has drawn fire for insensitive, if not blatantly sexist, views. That's no small matter when Taiwan's incumbent president is female.

KMT partisans worry that with Gou's candidacy, the party faces the growing danger of a bruising, divisive, and close-fought primary battle among multiple candidates. The KMT's new fissures could waste the apparent advantage caused by the Tsai-Lai feud in the DPP. Indeed, the bitter divisions in both parties could open the path for a strong independent or third-party bid, especially by Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je.

Gou's views on China may worry Washington at least as much as those of Han and Lai. Gou stresses the goal of dampening tensions with the mainland and rejects the notion that Taiwan can preserve its de facto independence by military means or outside support. When he asked rhetorically: "Why should Chinese people fight Chinese people?" it set off a political firestorm for two reasons. First, a majority of people on Taiwan identify as Taiwanese, not Chinese. Second, his cavalier comment appeared to reflect a very casual attitude about the hardline tactics that Beijing has already deployed and appears determined to intensify. Tsai immediately scorned Gou, suggesting that he tell China to refrain from warlike behavior and the pursuit of an arms race.

Washington has ample reason to be uneasy about the political trends in both the DPP and the KMT. If Lai unseats Tsai in the primary and goes on to win the general election, U.S. policymakers will have to deal with a Taiwanese leader perhaps even more determined than Chen was to push the envelope on Taiwan's independence. The result almost certainly would be a spike in already worrisome cross-strait tensions, increasing the danger of an armed clash between the PRC and Taiwan's protector, the United States.

The prospect of Han or Gou as president is less dangerous, but Washington still has reason to dislike the potential impact on U.S. policy in East Asia. Both men seem to blur the distinction between a cautious, moderately accommodating policy toward Beijing and one of outright appeasement. That approach could bring Washington's hopes for a continued Goldilocks scenario regarding Taiwan's status to an abrupt end.

American leaders should conduct a comprehensive reassessment of U.S. policy toward Taiwan. Smart great powers don't allow themselves to be put in a situation where they can get whipsawed by volatile domestic political developments in a client state. Yet that is where Washington now finds itself regarding Taiwan, and the consequences could be extremely unpleasant.

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