

Will Taiwan's Pivotal 2020 Election be a Prelude to War?

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As Taiwan's January 2020 presidential election approaches, the stakes for Taiwan, China, and the United States are extremely high. In a worst-case scenario, the aftermath could even resemble the debacle that flowed from the pivotal 1860 election in the United States. When voters chose Abraham Lincoln as the new president, several southern states concluded that preserving the delicate status quo regarding slavery was no longer desirable or even feasible. Instead, they opted for secession, and their decision triggered a horrific war. Beijing's reaction to an adverse outcome to Taiwan's balloting similarly has the potential to be drastic and disastrous.

Both the governing Democratic Progressive Party and the opposition Kuomintang Party have selected their nominees, and their positions regarding cross-strait policy have a stark contrast. After a bruising primary battle, DPP voters selected incumbent president Tsai Ing-wen. She survived a strong challenge from her former prime minister, James Lai, who had accused her of being an ineffectual leader in general and insufficiently strong in standing up to Beijing's bullying tactics in particular. Lai's campaign highlighted the extent of the discontent within the party's militantly pro-independence wing. Tsai's margin of victory was a modest 8.2 percentage points, despite the advantages of incumbency.

Meanwhile, the Kuomintang Party selected Han Kuo-yu, the maverick populist mayor of Kaohsiung, who has advocated for closer relations with the mainland. Earlier this year, Han visited China and met with Communist Party officials from both Hong Kong and Macau. He seemed highly fond of the PRC's "one country, two systems" arrangement (under which Hong Kong received a considerable degree of self-rule) for Taiwan. However, Beijing's thinly veiled threats to intervene against the growing pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong appear to have caused Han to beat a retreat from the one country, two systems issue. To rebut innuendos that he would embrace an appeasement policy toward Beijing, he asserted that if he were elected president, Taiwan would accept China's one country, two systems proposal "over my dead body."

The perception that Hong Kong's political autonomy (most recently due to the now-withdrawn extradition law that many feared, despite being initiated to address the extradition of a Hong Kong resident accused of murdering another Hong Kong resident while in Taiwan, would have enabled the PRC to extradite Hong Kong-based dissidents and try them on criminal charges in mainland courts), has caused Taiwanese public opinion to turn even more emphatically against the one country, two systems formula. A PRC military crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators would likely produce a further political shift in favor of Tsai, despite Taiwan's continuing economic malaise under her presidency.

Tsai has shrewdly exploited Beijing's clumsy response to the calls in Hong Kong for democracy to rebuild her domestic political support. The PRC's one country, two systems offer has never been popular among Taiwanese voters, but the recent events in Hong Kong have eroded what little support existed. A poll published by Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council in late July found that 88.7 per cent of the respondents rejected one country, two systems, up from 75.4 per cent in a January survey. "As long as I am here, I will stand firm to defend Taiwan's sovereignty," Tsai pledged in July. "As long as I am here, you would not have to fear, because we will not become another Hong Kong."

Han may be an especially vulnerable opponent for Tsai if regional tensions continue to rise. In addition to a documented track record of favoring accommodation with Beijing, Han has exhibited a fondness for authoritarian rule, suggesting that some recent autocratic East Asian leaders were a model for Taiwan. At a June 1 rally, Han singled out three political figures for praise: Chiang Ching-kuo, the former Kuomintang dictator of Taiwan; Lee Kuan Yew, the late authoritarian ruler of Singapore; and Deng Xiaoping. Taiwanese voters who recall that their country achieved democratic rule only in the mid-1990s after nearly four decades of brutal martial law may have difficulty trusting a political figure who holds such views.

Tsai is not only exploiting the growing domestic worries about China, but she is also actively pursuing closer political and security ties with Washington and courting U.S. public and congressional opinion. Gerry Shih, the Washington Post's China correspondent, noted that when Tsai announced her plans to seek reelection, "she didn't stage a rally in Taipei or stream a speech in Chinese over social media. She chose to go on CNN." Shih also detected an important shift in Washington's attitude toward her. "For years, officials in Washington—which is legally bound to provide Taiwan with defense equipment and services—viewed Tsai with skepticism, if not outright concern. Now, the political calculus may be shifting at a time when the United States is stepping up its global competition against Beijing."

Indeed, there are multiple signs of a more active and supportive U.S. policy regarding Taiwan. For the first time since Washington severed formal diplomatic ties with Taipei and switched them to Beijing in 1979, high-level U.S. security officials are meeting with their Taiwanese counterparts. The Trump administration also is approving a multi-billion-dollar arms sale to Taiwan that includes sophisticated F-16 fighters.

Conditions are converging that could make Taiwan's upcoming election a catalyst for an armed conflict. The DPP's landslide victory in 2016 came as a shock to Beijing. PRC leaders had counted on the growing cross-strait economic ties to gradually erode the Taiwanese public's resistance to political reunification. That appeared to be a logical approach under Tsai's accommodating Kuomintang predecessor, Ma Ying-jeou. But the DPP's electoral triumph suggested that Taiwanese voters were capable of wanting economic ties to the mainland without retreating on the issue of continued de facto political independence.

Beijing's response has been decidedly unfriendly, with a surge of military exercises in and around the Taiwan Strait, increasingly strident denunciations of Taipei's policies, and an ongoing campaign to poach the handful of Taiwan's remaining diplomatic partners. A key question is what the PRC leadership will do if the 2020 election results in another DPP victory and another four-year term for Tsai. The danger is that Chinese leaders may then regard developments in Taiwan as even more threatening to the Communist Party's political position and territorial unification goals than the Hong Kong turmoil has become. Rising impatience could very well

cause Beijing to conclude that the goal of peaceful reunification is impossible and respond by escalating pressure on Taipei and perhaps even resorting to military force.

Such a move, though, would trigger an extremely dangerous crisis with the United States. It is unlikely that any U.S. government would abandon Taiwan in the face of PRC aggression. Given its increasingly cozy ties with Taipei, it is even less likely that the Trump administration would back down.

It may be premature to predict a war from the convergence of these trends. There are still significant incentives for Beijing, Taipei, and Washington to avoid adopting reckless policies, especially given the vast trade and other economic ties that would be endangered. But recent developments are ominous, and numerous wars start even though the contending parties do not seek such an outcome. American leaders in 1860 did not desire a 4-year-long bloodbath, but the cascade of events beginning with Lincoln's election nevertheless produced that result. One only hopes that Taiwan's 2020 election, even if it results in a victory by Tsai and the DPP, has far milder consequences.

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