



Elections in Taiwan – Scenarios and Potential Repercussions for International Security

On January 13, 2024, presidential and parliamentary elections are scheduled to take place in Taiwan (Republic of China). These elections have drawn significant global attention due to the increased tension in recent years between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China, which considers the island a part of its territory. There are concerns that mainland China may use the election results as a pretext to further escalate pressure on the island, even considering the possibility of using military force. Given that Taiwan's security is indirectly guaranteed by the United States, such a situation could potentially lead to a global conflict with difficult-to-estimate consequences, though at this moment, such a scenario seems relatively unlikely.

Elections in Taiwan

The main candidates in the January presidential elections represent the two largest political parties in Taiwan: the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the opposition Kuomintang (KMT), which have dominated the country's political scene since the democratisation of the island in the late 80s and early 90s. A third candidate, seen as a potential "dark horse" in the presidential race, is Ko Wen-je, the leader of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) formed in 2019.

The DPP candidate is the current Vice President of the Republic of China, Lai Ching-te. A medical doctor by profession, he served in the Taiwanese parliament (Legislative Yuan) from 1999 to 2010, then became the mayor of the nearly two-million-strong Tainan. From 2017 to 2019, he served as the country's prime minister before running as the vice-presidential candidate alongside President Tsai Ing-wen in 2020. His potential presidency is expected to continue the political line adopted by Tsai and the ruling DPP. Traditionally considered more liberal, sovereign-minded, and cautious about cooperation with China, the Democratic Progressive Party, born in opposition to the KMT that governed the island since 1949, has strained relations with the People's Republic of China.

The Kuomintang candidate is former police officer and mayor of the four-million-strong New Taipei City from 2016 to 2023, Hou Yu-ih. Although historically anti-communist and nationalist, Kuomintang programmatically in official line still sticks to the idea of the unity of China. His potential victory might be better received by China, as during the previous KMT-led administration under President Ma Ying-jeou (2008-2016), relations between the island and mainland China noticeably improved.

The third candidate, considered a potential "dark horse" in the presidential race, is Ko Wen-je. A medical doctor by training, he served as the mayor of Taipei from 2014 to 2022 and currently leads the Taiwan People's Party, which he founded in 2019. Ko Wen-je initially leaned towards the DPP and the "green camp," advocating for Taiwan's independence from China. Over time, he moved closer to the "blue camp" (KMT and smaller parties), supporting the maintenance of the status quo in Taiwan's status while developing constructive economic and social relations with mainland China. His candidacy might be potentially more acceptable to Beijing than a victory for the DPP representative.

Currently, Lai Ching-te holds a slight lead in polls, as Hou Yu-ih and Ko Wen-je have somewhat divided the electorate that is negatively disposed towards the ruling DPP (the average of recent polls gave the candidates 36%, 31%, and 24%, respectively).¹ Simultaneously with the presidential election, parliamentary elections will also take place. According to polls, no party, despite winning the presidential election, will be able to secure a majority in the parliament, complicating the exercise of power (despite Taiwan's presidential system with strong presidential prerogatives).

The issue of relations with mainland China is, of course, a focal point of the election campaign. In this context, the opposition Kuomintang argues that President Tsai's current policy has led to a breakdown in relations with China, framing the upcoming elections as a choice between war and peace, where only the Kuomintang candidate can ensure the benefits of cooperation with China while protecting the interests of the island. The DPP, on the other hand, points to the Chinese threat and the need to strengthen Taiwan's capabilities in response. The party's candidate assures that he does not intend to violate the status quo by declaring independence and plans to continue President Tsai's moderate approach. However, social and economic factors,

especially issues related to an aging population and the lack of prospects for young Taiwanese due to low wages and high living costs, seem to play a more significant role in the campaign than relations with the PRC. Despite generally positive evaluations of President Tsai's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and dealing with Chinese pressure (over 47% of Taiwanese expressed satisfaction with her presidency at the end of 2023),² social and economic factors could determine the DPP's ability to stay in power. In this area, the opposition Kuomintang criticises President Tsai and the DPP for not fulfilling campaign promises. Hou, in this context, promises to improve the healthcare system for the elderly, support programmes for parents of minors, and implement a new housing policy to enable young Taiwanese to acquire properties. An important distinguishing factor between the main parties is also their energy policy, as the DPP declares a departure from nuclear energy and zero-emission by mid-century, which the opposition considers idealistic and unrealistic.³

Elections and the People's Republic of China

The upcoming elections in Taiwan have captured public attention primarily due to the potential risk of escalation from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in response to their results. Regardless of party affiliations and campaign rhetoric, all three candidates have expressed relatively similar positions regarding their vision for relations with the PRC, declaring an intention to maintain the status quo (in line with the expectations of the majority of Taiwanese). Nevertheless, the election results could potentially be used by Beijing as a pretext to increase pressure on Taiwan.

The history of the dispute between the PRC and the Republic of China on Taiwan dates back to 1949 when, following the Nationalists' defeat in the civil war, Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-shek fled with his loyal forces and officials to Taiwan, which had been under Japanese control until the end of World War II. Since the Korean War, the island became a crucial point for the United States in the strategic fight against the spread of communism in Asia, and Washington recognised the Taipei government as the legitimate authorities of all of China. However, by the end of the Cold War, the Kuomintang's authoritarian system began to crumble, allowing opposition, emphasising the independent identity of the Taiwanese people, led by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), to enter the political scene in the late 1980s. In

1979, the United States officially recognised the government in Beijing as the sole legitimate authorities of China, although, through the Taiwan Relations Act, indirectly guaranteed the island's security in the face of mainland China.

The new geopolitical reality at the end of the Cold War compelled both Beijing and Taipei to address the frozen relations. In the early 1990s, they managed to establish the "1992 Consensus," serving as a basis for the development of economic and social relations between the PRC and the Republic of China. However, political relations between mainland China and Taiwan remained tense. For example, during the presidency of Lee Teng-hui, who strongly advocated for increased subjectivity and freedom of action for Taiwan in the international politics, informal visits to the United States in 1995 led to the so-called Third Taiwan Strait Crisis (the first two occurred in the 1950s). Similarly, during the presidency of the first DPP pro-independence president, Chen Shui-bian (2000-2008), significant tension emerged. His symbolic gestures emphasising Taiwan's independence from mainland China led to worsening relations not only with Beijing but also with Washington, with the latter concerned about being dragged into a conflict with the PRC due to the recklessness of Taiwanese politicians. Only the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou from the Kuomintang (2008-2016) brought relaxation in relations between Taipei and Beijing, leading to a significant increase in economic and social ties between the island and the mainland. The culmination of his efforts was the historic meeting between the leaders of China and Taiwan in 2015.

The current president, Tsai Ing-wen, has never explicitly confirmed, despite Beijing's pressure, the recognition of the "1992 Consensus." Her presidency has been a period of constant crisis in relations with China. On the one hand, Beijing deprived Taiwan of space on the international stage, limiting the number of countries recognising the Taipei government and blocking Taiwanese participation in international organisations. On the other hand, it continued military pressure with military exercises near the island and sending large groups of aircraft and ships into Taiwanese airspace and territorial waters, with escalation occurring during the visit of U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August 2022.

Scenarios

The most likely scenario after the elections is the maintenance of the status quo and the continuation of varying degrees of pressure on Taiwan, depending on the final result. As mentioned, it is highly unlikely that any of the candidates in Taiwanese elections would decide to change the existing policy towards China, declaring independence, or engaging in deep reunification talks with China based on the "one country, two systems" framework. The former could lead to actual armed intervention by China, as it was repeatedly and clearly announced by the PRC government, and ruin Taiwan's relations with the U.S. The latter approach lacks public support, and Hong Kong's experience and the systematic erosion of its autonomy by Beijing serve as evidence to Taiwanese people of the true intentions of Communist China. For China, the scenario of at least temporarily maintaining the status quo appears to be the least risky. At this moment, China is going through economic difficulties resulting from the pandemic and restrictions in cooperation with the U.S. Therefore, escalating tensions with Taiwan would be unproductive for Beijing.

An alternative is some form of escalation. In this scenario, Beijing could use the election results (likely the victory of the DPP candidate) as a pretext to intensify military pressure on Taiwan, aiming to force the Taiwanese into reunification talks. The potential actions Beijing might take are broad, ranging from hybrid operations, intensified maritime and aerial exercises with incursions into Taiwanese airspace and territorial waters, to some form of island's blockade or even shelling of the Taiwanese islands of Kinmen and Matsu, located near the Chinese territory. However, the least likely variant in this scenario would be an attempt to militarily occupy the entire territory of Taiwan. This would require a massive amphibious operation (the largest since the Normandy landings) and a complex multidomain operation involving coordination between different branches of the armed forces, for which the modernising and still largely outdated Chinese armed forces do not appear to be ready yet. A full-scale invasion would likely also involve the United States in some form (as explicitly declared by President Biden, going beyond the guarantees of the Taiwan Relations Act), and possibly other regional countries (primarily Japan and Australia, closely allied with the U.S.). The scale of risks was highlighted by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but it should be noted that an operation against Taiwan, from the military point of view, would be much more complicated,

and its failure could lead to a discredit and removal of the current leadership of the PRC.

On the other hand, the escalation scenario could be driven by Beijing's calculations based on the strong U.S. engagement in the war in Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East, resulting in the depletion of a significant portion of U.S. equipment, ammunition, and supplies, making it difficult to support Taiwan. Xi Jinping and his circle might potentially see the current situation as an "window of opportunity" to achieve their goal for the centenary of the People's Republic of China, which, according to U.S. Department of Defense assessments, also means the "unification" of all Chinese territories, i.e., the annexation of Taiwan.⁴

It is also not entirely impossible to consider a scenario of improving relations between Taiwan and China, especially in the context of a potential victory for the KMT candidate. In this case, Beijing, seeking tactical improvement in relations with the West, could show a gesture of goodwill, somewhat "rewarding" Taiwanese society for rejecting the pro-independence candidate. However, such relaxation seems to be of a short-term nature, as it is challenging to envision a return to the intensity of relations during the Ma Ying-jeou presidency in current circumstances.

Conclusions

1. The upcoming elections in Taiwan are unlikely to bring significant changes to the country's foreign policy. Despite electoral rhetoric, the approaches of all potential three candidates to the issue of China appear to be similar, with Taiwanese voters paying more attention to economic issues.
2. The most likely scenario in cross-strait relations after the elections is the maintenance of the status quo with varying degrees of pressure on the island, depending on the final result. However, the possibility of Beijing using the elections as a pretext for escalation to force the Taipei government into reunification talks cannot be ruled out.
3. The European Union, including Poland, should clearly communicate to Beijing the inadmissibility of any attempt at a forceful resolution of the Chinese-Taiwanese issue. In an extreme case, the EU should ensure tools for potential support to

Taiwan. Therefore, it is crucial to enhance the production capabilities of the European defense industry in the field of ammunition (e.g., through tools like The Act in Support of Ammunition Production) and military equipment.

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Founded in 2005, the Casimir Pulaski Foundation is an independent, non-for-profit, non-partisan Polish-think tank conducting research on different aspects of European and Transatlantic security, with a special focus on Central and Eastern Europe.

The Foundation brings together dozens of international experts in various fields (foreign policy, defence, energy, democratic resilience) and publishes analysis describing and explaining international events, identifying trends in the European and Transatlantic security environment and recommending solutions for government decision-makers and the private sector.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is also the initiator and main organizer of the Warsaw Security Forum conference, which since 2014 annually gathers over 2000 stakeholders from more than 60 countries in order to elaborate shared responses to common transatlantic security challenges.

Each year the Foundation presents the “Knight of Freedom” award to outstanding figures who contribute to the promotion of the values of General Casimir Pulaski, such as freedom, justice and democracy. It is also the home to the Polish branch of the Women in International Security network.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation has been ranked as the first among Polish Think Tanks dealing with defence and national security according to the ‘Global Go To Think Tank Index’ report in 2018, 2019 and 2020 respectively. The Foundation also has a status of a partner organization of the Council of Europe.

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¹ “Who will be the next president of Taiwan?,” *The Economist*, January 2, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/interactive/2024-taiwan-election>.

² Ching-hsin Yu, What are the key issues in Taiwan’s 2024 presidential election?, *Brookings*, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-are-the-key-issues-in-taiwans-2024-presidential-election/>, December 20, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-are-the-key-issues-in-taiwans-2024-presidential-election/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, Department of Defense, p. 2., <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.