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Taiwan's 2024 Presidential Election and Taiwan Issues: Prospects and Measures

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Implications of Taiwan's 2024 Presidential Election

Taiwan's 2024 presidential election took place on January 13, 2024, amid geopolitical tensions. With the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate, Lai Ching-te, being elected as president, the DPP won three consecutive terms in office for the first time in Taiwan's history. However, the ruling party lost its majority status for the first time, as the main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), won the parliamentary election. With the weakening of the traditional two-party structure, the DPP and KMT will inevitably need the cooperation of a third party, the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), to take control of the legislature. As the DPP will likely struggle to take the lead in the legislative process, the new government will face difficulties in setting its domestic and foreign policy agenda.

While many saw the election as a "proxy war between the U.S. and China," the election demonstrated that the importance of people's livelihoods has risen above the grand discourse of cross-strait relations in Taiwanese public opinion. It also made clear that pro-China groups are losing ground in Taiwan. As a result, the KMT faces a very difficult task of regaining power by promoting dialogue and exchanges with China.

A lull in the Taiwan issue

Before the election, there was speculation that if the DPP's candidate, Lai Ching-te, won the presidential election, China would launch more aggressive military provocations, and instability in the Taiwan Strait would increase. However, more than a month after the election, the Taiwan issue seems to have entered a lull that is attributable to the United States, Taiwan, and China wanting to stabilize the Taiwan Strait for internal and external reasons.

1. The United States Wants to Maintain the Status Quo in the Taiwan Strait

The United States is likely to be satisfied with the election of Lai Ching-te, since it would be beneficial to the continued implementation of its Indo-Pacific strategy for Lai to carry on Tsai Ing-wen's cautious cross-strait policy and strengthen Taiwan's defense capabilities and ties with the U.S. The U.S. does not seem to want a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait, as it needs to focus on European and Middle Eastern issues, such as the Ukraine war and the Israeli-Hamas war, before the presidential election in November. The Biden administration, which has emphasized value diplomacy to keep China in check,

will likely increase its indirect support for Taiwan, but it will approach the Taiwan issue in a way that avoids provoking conflicts in the region that could lead to a military contingency in the Taiwan Strait.

2. The Lai Government's Difficulty to Actively Promote Taiwan Independence

A political elite from a working-class background, Lai has been considered an icon of Taiwan independence. However, during the election campaign, Lai softened his rhetoric in order to obtain Taiwan's centrist voters and allay U.S. concerns. Even after his inauguration in May, Lai Ching-te is unlikely to move toward formal Taiwan independence, given the U.S. position on the Taiwan issue, Taiwanese public opinion favoring maintaining the status quo, and the political reality of the opposition party holding a parliamentary majority. The DPP, which failed to win a majority of the vote, will likely refrain from pushing for Taiwan independence in the early days of its administration and instead focus on domestic issues and seek cooperation with the TPP to strengthen its domestic political foundation. At the same time, it will continue its "de-Chinaization" movement and strengthen ties with the U.S., in line with Tsai Ing-wen's policies.

3. China's Hostility Toward the DPP Increases Pressures on Taiwan

For the eight years that Tsai Ing-wen has been in power, Beijing has viewed the DPP as a separatist group and has cut off communication channels. Beijing had already made it clear that it would not engage in any dialog or negotiations with Lai Ching-te, so it is unlikely that cross-strait communication will be restored unless the Lai government makes a dramatic turnaround in its approach to bilateral relations.

China's pressure on Taiwan has already begun. Two days after the election, the South Pacific island nation of Nauru declared a diplomatic break with Taiwan. It is worth noting that Beijing did not go through a wait-and-see period like it did under Chen Shui-bian or Tsai Ing-wen. This suggests that Beijing has already finished labeling Lai Ching-te and Vice-President elect Hsiao Bi-khim as "separatists" and has begun to apply pressure, leaving no room for compromise. At the same time, this swift pressure on Taiwan is also an act designed to secure the legitimacy of Xi Jinping's rule and rally domestic support in the face of the economic crisis and the resulting social instability that China is facing. Therefore, China will likely increase pressure on Taiwan. Through the economic coercion of Taiwan and raising tensions in the Taiwan Strait based on extensive gray-zone tactics, Beijing will try to build an image of the DPP as the main culprit behind the deterioration of cross-strait relations.

Policy Recommendations

China's pressure on Taiwan will increase with the DPP's third consecutive term in power. In the process, Beijing will seek to reduce Taiwan's diplomatic leverage by intensifying efforts against Taiwan and its partners. If China's actions pose a direct threat to the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait, the U.S. is likely to respond by expanding the scope of the trilateral security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan to the Taiwan Strait. South Korea should strive to stabilize the Taiwan Strait, which is a vital sea line of communication (SLOC). South Korea should do so in a way that does not provoke a backlash from China and deteriorate Sino-South Korean relations. It should also avoid jeopardizing the U.S.-ROK alliance or trilateral security cooperation by focusing on the Taiwan issue rather than the North Korean nuclear issue. Given these parameters, the South Korean government needs to approach the Taiwan issue in the following ways.

First, it should establish internal principles for involvement in the Taiwan issue. Given the impact of the Taiwan Strait on the South Korean economy, the South Korean government should not treat the

Taiwan issue as a cross-strait or U.S.-China problem. If an accidental military conflict takes place in the Taiwan Strait, South Korea needs to protect the people in Taiwan and the neighboring region. The U.S. would likely extend the scope of ROK-U.S. alliance to the Taiwan Strait and want South Korea to play a role in a Taiwan contingency. In that sense, the South Korean government should establish a principle that prioritizes the security of the Korean Peninsula, taking into account preparations for North Korean military provocations and actual military capabilities.

Second, it should expand communication with regional partners, such as the United States, Japan, and Australia, to convey South Korea's position and discuss joint responses. In the process, South Korea needs to emphasize that by prioritizing stability on the Korean Peninsula, this can prevent the spread of a Taiwan Strait crisis, given the interconnectedness between the Taiwan Strait crisis and the Korean Peninsula crisis. It is also necessary to limit the extent of its involvement in the Taiwan Strait to joint statements rather than direct military assistance.

Third, given its relationship with China, South Korea should approach the Taiwan issue in a way that supports regional peace and peaceful coexistence, rather than making direct and unilateral statements. Despite the fact that stability and peace in the Taiwan Strait are linked to South Korea's national interests, China will react strongly if South Korea becomes involved in the Taiwan issue, claiming that it is an internal affair. In that sense, South Korea needs to carefully adjust remarks related to Taiwan by using the language of regional peace and coexistence. While this may not completely prevent conflict with China, it will provide a basis for responding to China's backlash.

Fourth, South Korea should expand academic exchanges with Taiwan to objectively understand the Taiwan Strait situation. Considering the changes in the political landscape in Taiwan, it is important to accurately understand not only the positions of the U.S. and China but also Taiwan's internal politics and future policies. In this regard, South Korea should encourage and strengthen academic and people-to-people exchanges with Taiwan.

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