

How Would Beijing Assess Taiwan's election of 2020?

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The presidential election of January 2020 is the seventh in Taiwan. It is fundamentally different from the past six: voters would not simply choose a “government,” but a “country” as well. For the past 20 years after Dr. Tsai Ing-wen’s “two-state” narrative was frustrated in 1999, she has patiently followed her then established roadmap, moving from small steps to big strides, covertly or overtly, and hopes to eventually realize her ideal of Taiwan independence. If she succeeds in re-election, Taiwan will become a “new country” based on a new type of “one-party rule.” Consequently, none of the competing parties can afford to lose. Washington and Beijing are understandably anxiously watching on the sidelines.

Of the two great powers, Beijing’s thinking is more directly relevant to and worthy of Taiwan’s attention. Beijing now has a strong leadership with many tools available and sufficient time to respond to Taiwan’s situation. If we still look at the upcoming election with old thinking as if business will be as usual, we may well be caught ill-prepared.

How would Beijing assess the election? First, whether and how the US intervenes is the key. A new book recently published in Hong Kong, “The Last Secret,” collected the speeches made by top officials at the time of the Tiananmen Square Incident. It revealed the key CCP thinking behind its hardline decision: “the collusion between internal and external hostile forces.” In 1996, the CCP’s verbal intimidation and saber rattling against Taiwan’s first presidential election was also piqued by the US-Taiwan connection. During the six months in the wake of President Tsai’s inauguration of May 2016, Beijing did not close the door on communication with Taipei. The cross-strait relations came to a deadlock only after the “Trump-Tsai” telephone call of December 2016. As the United States passed the Taiwan Travel Act in March 2018, the “deadlock” deteriorated into “confrontation” involving the military sea/air cruise surrounding Taiwan. Every above-mentioned turn was caused by the impact of the US factor.

Therefore, if Tsai gets re-elected, Beijing will first determine if it is due to the US factor or Taiwan's internal factor (e.g., KMT's split). If the former, and Beijing still swallows the consequences, it will lose not only on Taiwan but also on US-China relationship.

Second, Beijing will assess whether the new situation is irreversible. Since the Tsai administration has promoted "incremental Taiwan independence" and "one-party rule" inside Taiwan over the past three years, and externally carried out "pro-US, anti-China" policy, if President Tsai wins re-election and continues to hold majority seats in the Legislative Yuan, she may interpret the election as a "referendum" and join with the international community to demand that the CCP accept the "new normal." Beijing, which had held no hope for Taiwan's "government," may become desperate because Taiwan's "people" also choose to deviate. If so, cross-strait relations will plummet sharply.

Third is the impact on the internal political situation in the mainland. Taiwan is only an issue among many for policy elites in the United States, but it is a hot topic for the entire nation on the mainland – elites, households, and common folks. In recent years, many mainlanders feel deeply wounded by Taiwan's callousness toward their sincere friendship. If the salt of "despair" is further sprinkled on their wounds, the pressure will surely surge toward the party and government. Xi Jinping will surely bear the brunt due to his 22 years of working and living just across the Taiwan Strait. His grand plan for the future China will definitely suffer a severe blow. At this point, is it more important to maintain the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, or to protect himself?

The fourth is power calculations. The mainland has faced Taiwan for decades. Its concern has never been the "small guy" at the front, but the "big guy" standing behind it. Now we are witnessing an overall change in the power relationship between the US and China and the apparent fading US influence in East Asia. Recently, the United States has exhibited neither intention nor capability to mediate disputes between its key allies Japan and South Korea. The Chinese and Russian warplanes openly challenged the traditional airspace of Japan and South Korea; North Korea repeatedly tested missiles, and President Trump simply turned a blind eye. To make matters worse, the US military is in an awkward period of transition. The aircraft carriers have long carried out the "counter-insurgency" missions, but neglected how to deal with near-peer rivals like the PLA. The political and military circles in the U.S. have been generally concerned that a new "fait accompli" would have emerged before the aircraft carriers could trek long distance to reach the

Taiwan waters and found it hard to reverse. With this in mind, Beijing is less in a bind in decision-making than in the past.

The fifth concerns cost. When dealing with contradictions with Russia, the United States and Vietnam in the past, Beijing repeatedly demonstrated its penchant to downplay the cost. Perhaps the mainland is no longer “poor and blank” as it used to be and its cost considerations may have become more important than previously. However, because Taiwan is so highly valued, and Xi Jinping and his colleagues have all weathered through trials and tribulations of the Cultural Revolution, their cost consideration is mostly likely to be far lower than that of the United States and, certainly, President Trump, who has always enjoyed an affluent life and is proud of his acumen in business deals. It is expected that Beijing's cost considerations regarding Taiwan in the future will not be focused on “whether,” but on “what to do and with what tools” to minimize all potential costs.

If President Tsai wins the election, all of the above five points will likely be established. Taiwan can only struggle to sustain the policy tools chosen by Beijing, or accept the consequences of a US-China deal as Hong Kong did in 1997 as a colony. Unless the premise of Tsai’s electoral victory does not exist at all.

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