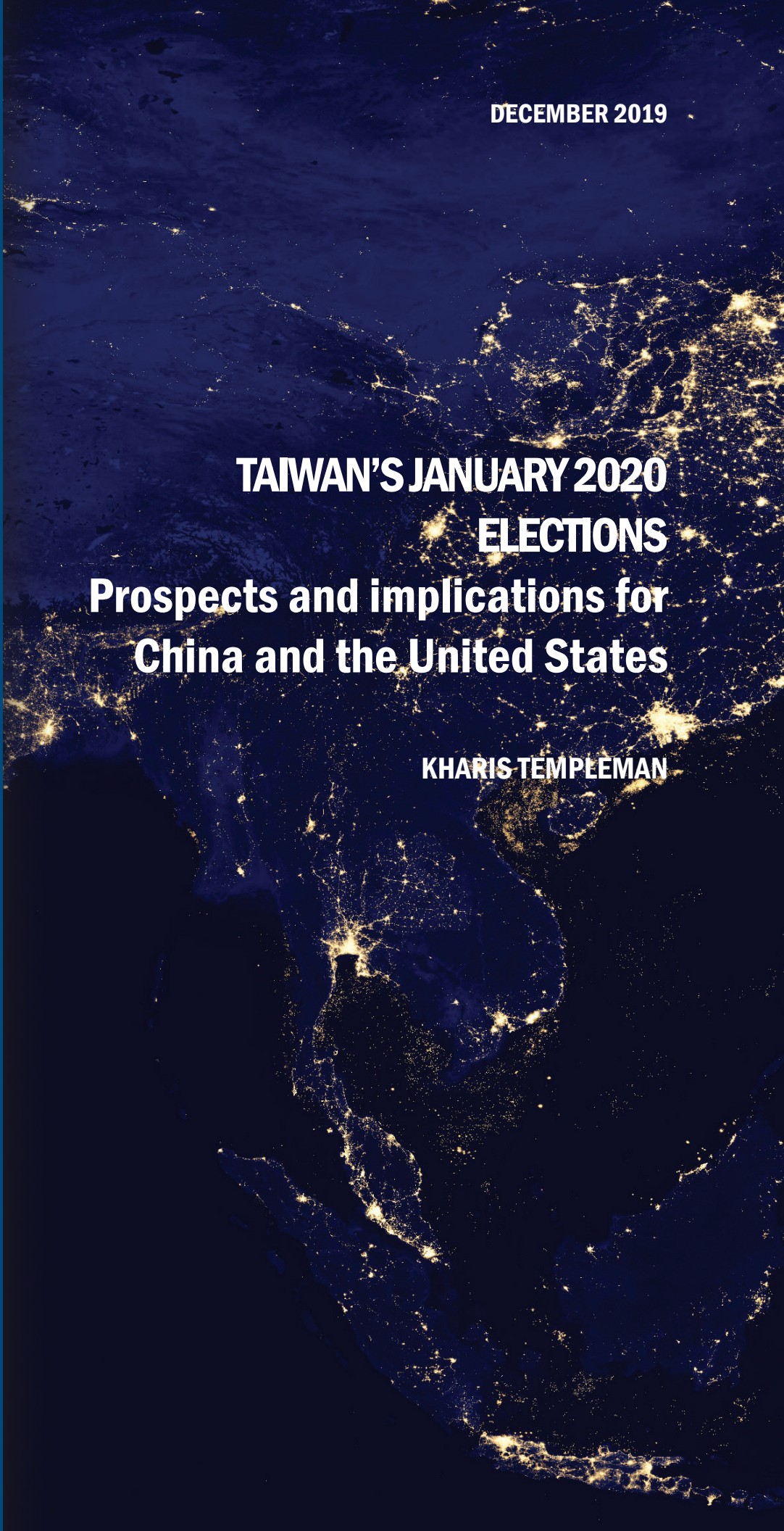


**THE NEW GEOPOLITICS**  
ASIA

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A satellite night view of East Asia, showing the Korean Peninsula, Japan, and the Philippines. The landmasses are outlined by a dense network of yellow and white lights representing cities and urban areas. The surrounding oceans are dark blue.

# **TAIWAN'S JANUARY 2020 ELECTIONS**

## **Prospects and implications for China and the United States**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Taiwan will hold its presidential and legislative elections on January 11, 2020. The incumbent president, Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), appears increasingly likely to prevail over her main challenger, Han Kuo-yu of the Kuomintang (KMT). In the legislative campaign, the DPP now has better than even odds to retain its majority over the KMT and several smaller parties. As recently as six months ago, President Tsai's path to re-election looked difficult. But the eruption of protests in Hong Kong and surprisingly robust economic growth in Taiwan, combined with the latest steps in Beijing's ongoing pressure campaign, significant missteps by the opposition KMT and potential independent challengers, and continuing tensions between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC), have together left her and the DPP in a greatly improved electoral position.

The results of the election will have significant implications for the PRC's Taiwan policy and for the United States. Under Xi Jinping, the PRC has pursued a multifaceted pressure campaign against the Tsai administration over the last four years, constricting Taiwan's remaining international space, restricting government-to-government cross-Strait communication, and ramping up military exercises and covert influence operations, but also selectively engaging with China-friendly elements of Taiwanese politics and society as well as expanding the array of benefits available to Taiwanese on the mainland. If Tsai and the DPP remain in power after the 2020 elections, as now appears increasingly likely, this strategy will not have delivered on its objectives, and it will present Beijing with a hard choice: double down, recalibrate, or fundamentally reassess its Taiwan policy.

Depending on which option it chooses, Beijing's response to the election could in turn create a new dilemma for U.S. policy toward Taiwan. Tsai Ing-wen has been a responsible steward of cross-Strait diplomacy, despite PRC hostility toward her, and a reliable partner with Washington. Her re-election would ensure the continuation of a

stable hand at the Taiwan corner of the historically fraught U.S.-PRC-Taiwan triangular relationship. If Xi chooses to double down on the pressure campaign after Tsai's probable re-election, the United States may be forced to respond more directly in order to maintain the cross-Strait status quo. But Washington does not currently have a particularly sophisticated toolkit of its own to deter Beijing's coercive actions, many of which occur in a kind of diplomatic and economic "grey zone" between open hostility and peaceful friction. In the next four years, Taiwan could then emerge as an important test case for whether the United States can develop a more robust set of diplomatic and economic tools to counter the PRC's rising influence across the Indo-Pacific.

## INTRODUCTION

United States support for Taiwan has been a fundamental point of contention with the People's Republic of China (PRC) since the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1979.<sup>1</sup> In the 1990s, the gradual democratization of the Republic of China (ROC) regime on Taiwan introduced new elements into this relationship: popular elections, and through them the shifting opinions of the Taiwanese public. The PRC's reaction to Taiwan's first direct presidential election campaign precipitated the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-96, which saw the re-election of incumbent president Lee Teng-hui in the face of military threats. The second, in 2000, brought the independence-leaning Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to power and marked the first-ever defeat for the long-time ruling Chinese Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (KMT). The third, in 2004, saw Chen narrowly win re-election despite Beijing's overt opposition to his presidency. The fourth, in 2008, resulted in a sweeping victory for Ma Ying-jeou and the return of a more China-friendly KMT administration, dramatically altering the tone and direction of cross-Strait relations—a change reaffirmed by voters in the fifth with Ma's re-election in 2012. And in the sixth direct presidential election, in 2016, the Taiwanese electorate delivered a major shift in the other direction, carrying DPP chairwoman Tsai Ing-wen into power and a DPP majority in the legislature—and once again, Beijing reacted with deep suspicion toward the new government.

Taiwan is approaching the next iteration in this cycle, as it will hold its next presidential and legislative elections on January 11, 2020. The incumbent president Tsai Ing-wen appears increasingly likely to defeat her main challenger, Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu of the KMT. As recently as six months ago, President Tsai's path to re-election looked difficult. But the eruption of protests in Hong Kong and surprisingly robust economic growth in Taiwan, combined with the latest steps in Beijing's ongoing pressure campaign against her administration, significant missteps by the opposition KMT and potential independent challengers, and ongoing tensions between the United States and the PRC, have together left her and the DPP in a greatly improved electoral position.

If President Tsai does win another term, the Taiwan policy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Xi Jinping will be at a critical juncture. Xi could decide to continue with the "dual-track" strategy of external pressure and selective engagement that the PRC has pursued for the last four years. But that approach has not so far delivered on its objectives and may have actually been counterproductive in the short run. So, a Tsai win in the presidential race could instead force a reevaluation of Beijing's goals, strategy, and tactics—perhaps similar to how Chen Shui-bian's narrow re-election in 2004 generated a reassessment of Taiwan policy under Hu Jintao.



President Tsai herself could also be in a stronger position after the election to try to reset the cross-strait relationship. She will no longer have to worry about re-election, and she may be less constrained by a need to placate the more pro-independence, “deep green” wing of her party. Depending on the results of the legislative election, she might also be denied a DPP majority and need to forge a working coalition there with one or more centrist parties. The beginning of her second term would provide a good opportunity to consider additional steps that Beijing has long demanded of her, such as freezing or eliminating the Taiwan independence clause in the DPP party charter. If she could be confident of some positive reciprocation from the PRC side, she might be willing to try.

This essay does the following:

- Reviews key developments in the cross-strait relationship since 2016.
- Discusses the domestic sources of Tsai’s struggles in her first term and the reasons behind the KMT’s surprising victory in the 2018 local elections.
- Examines the context of the 2020 presidential and legislative campaigns and discusses the possible outcomes of the elections.
- Considers how the PRC might react to the election results.
- Explores the implications for U.S. policy toward Taiwan.

## DEVELOPMENTS IN CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS SINCE 2016

The 2016 general elections ushered in a historic power shift in Taiwan. Tsai Ing-wen carried over 56 percent of the vote, a record high for a DPP presidential candidate. In the election for the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan’s unicameral parliament, the DPP won a majority for the first time, capturing 68 of 113 seats (60.2 percent). The results gave the DPP an unprecedented opportunity to advance its core policy priorities and left the KMT defeated, divided, and demoralized.

As with previous opposition party victories in 2000 and 2008, the 2016 transition also created new uncertainty in the cross-strait relationship. During the previous eight years of the Ma Ying-jeou presidency, governments in Taipei and Beijing greatly extended and deepened the institutionalization of cross-strait interactions. The two sides signed 23 agreements that led to the introduction of direct cross-strait commercial flights, a surge in mainland Chinese tourists, and improved cooperation and information-sharing on many technical issues between the two governments.<sup>2</sup> The PRC was willing, even eager, during this period to work with the Ma administration, as the KMT-led government in Taipei was itself keenly interested in pursuing greater economic integration with mainland China and therefore willing to make many of the diplomatic and rhetorical concessions that Beijing demanded.

By contrast, Beijing has been far less interested in cooperating with Tsai and the DPP. This is in part because PRC leaders are inherently suspicious of the DPP’s commitment to *de jure* Taiwan independence—a position inserted into the DPP charter in 1991 and never repealed, though partially superseded by subsequent statements. But they have also long been wary of Tsai Ing-wen herself. Whether accurate or not, they saw her as

playing an important role in the development of then-president Lee Teng-hui's 1999 statement that cross-strait relations were a "special state-to-state relationship"—an expression that quickly joined the long list of phrases unacceptable for a Taiwan leader to say to Beijing. Tsai also worked under former president Chen Shui-bian as the head of the Mainland Affairs Council and then as a deputy premier in Chen's second term, which only deepened paranoia in the PRC about her intentions: if the clearly pro-independence Chen trusted her that much, then she herself must also be a closet Taiwan independence supporter.

As a consequence, as Tsai prepared to take office, Beijing laid out a daunting set of preconditions for maintaining positive working relations with the new DPP government. Beijing signaled that accepting the cross-strait "status quo" was not enough and that Tsai needed go at least as far in her inauguration as her predecessor Ma had to oppose Taiwan independence and accept the "1992 Consensus" and its core connotation, the One-China Principle (OCP)—the position that both Taiwan and mainland China are part of the same country, and *de jure* independence for Taiwan is not an option.<sup>3</sup> From the other direction, Tsai was also under pressure from her own supporters not to use Ma's 1992 Consensus formula to describe cross-strait relations, which much of the DPP vehemently opposed.<sup>4</sup>

Tsai's inauguration speech should be read as trying to balance these two contradictory objectives. In it, she made several rhetorical moves that could be interpreted as concessions to the PRC, and that collectively went further than any other DPP leader had gone before to express support for the cross-strait status quo. She noted that she was "elected President in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of China," and that it was therefore her "responsibility to safeguard the territory and sovereignty of the Republic of China." She pledged to maintain the "existing mechanisms for dialogue and communication across the Taiwan Strait," mechanisms that had "enabled and accumulated outcomes which both sides must collectively cherish and sustain." She also observed that the 1992 meeting from which the 1992 Consensus formula was subsequently derived resulted in "various joint acknowledgements and understandings," and that she would "respect this historical fact," repeating language that Xi Jinping himself had used the previous February. She acknowledged that the "existing realities and political foundations" of the cross-strait relationship had enabled its "stable and peaceful development," and that they "must be continuously promoted." She also asserted that the "two governing parties across the Strait must set aside the baggage of history, and engage in positive dialogue, for the benefit of the people on both sides," hinting at the possibility of some kind of concession from her own DPP membership, if they could be assured of reciprocation from the CCP.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, Tsai's embrace of the status quo and the other conciliatory words in her inauguration did not meet the impossibly high political bar that Beijing had set for her. Within hours of her inauguration, the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) of the PRC released a statement asserting that "the new leader of the Taiwan authorities" was "ambiguous about the fundamental issue, the nature of cross-Straits [sic] relations... She did not explicitly recognize the 1992 Consensus and its core implications, and made no concrete proposal for ensuring the peaceful and stable growth of cross-Straits [sic] relations. Hence, this is an incomplete test answer." Tsai faced "a choice between upholding the common political foundation that embodies the one China principle and pursuing separatist propositions," and she "must give [an] explicit answer with concrete

actions” to this question. To ensure “continued and institutionalized exchanges between the two sides,” the statement concluded, “only affirmation of the political foundation that embodies the one China principle” would be acceptable. Tsai had not, in Beijing’s determination, met this requirement.<sup>6</sup>

### ***The PRC’s dual-track strategy for Taiwan***

With this response, the direction of cross-Straits relations for the rest of President Tsai’s first term was effectively set. After a brief “wait and see” period following Tsai’s inauguration, Beijing has returned to a modified version of the strategy it pursued during the latter part of the Chen Shui-bian era—what the PRC Taiwan analyst Qiang Xin has termed a “dual-track” Taiwan policy.<sup>7</sup> On the first, “hard” track, focused on the diplomatic, political, and security domains, Beijing has introduced a steady succession of policy changes and actions that appear intended to keep up political pressure on the Tsai administration for as long as she refuses to move toward its preferred One China position, and possibly for as long as she remains in power.

These steps have included:

- Suspending the cross-Straits hotline and all other formal, high-level mechanisms of communication established during the Ma era between Taiwan’s semi-official Straits Exchange Foundation and the PRC’s corresponding body, the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait.
- Blocking the participation of Taiwanese representatives in international bodies to which they had previously been admitted as observers, such as the World Health Assembly and International Civil Aviation Organization.
- Encouraging a change in recognition from the remaining 22 formal diplomatic allies of the ROC—seven of which have since made the switch to the PRC (Sao Tome and Principe, Panama, Dominican Republic, Burkina Faso, El Salvador, Solomon Islands, and Kiribati).
- Reducing by more than half the number of Chinese tourist groups permitted to visit Taiwan and, more recently, suspending the individual traveler program.
- Extraditing Taiwanese nationals accused of telecom fraud from several countries, including Malaysia, Kenya, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Spain, directly to the PRC for prosecution over objections from Taiwan’s representatives.
- Introducing a new northbound civilian flight route (M-503) near the midpoint of the Taiwan Strait, without warning or prior consultation with Taiwan’s aviation authorities.
- Ordering foreign companies, including American air carriers and hotel chains, to list destinations in Taiwan as Chinese territory on their websites or face regulatory punishment.
- Pressuring the members of the East Asian Olympic Committee to rescind the rights of Taichung to host the 2019 East Asian Youth Games, which were originally awarded to the city in 2014 when it was still led by a KMT mayor.

- Detaining and imprisoning several Taiwanese nationals, including the DPP activist Lee Ming-che, without prompt notification to Taiwan authorities for the vague charge of “engaging in activity that endangers national security.”<sup>8</sup>
- Increasing military patrols and exercises in or near Taiwanese territorial air and sea space, including several circumnavigations of the main island and an apparently deliberate incursion of fighter jets across the midline of the Taiwan Strait in March 2019—the first in two decades.
- Blocking the participation of the mainland Chinese movie industry in the Golden Horse Awards, the Mandarin-language equivalent of the Oscars held annually in Taipei.

The PRC’s policies for civil and cultural exchanges have also shifted from broad accommodation to more “selective engagement,” blacklisting or freezing out groups and individuals that are suspected of “pro-independence” leanings. Prior to 2016, for instance, prominent DPP members were able to travel to the mainland with some regularity: then-Kaohsiung Mayor Chen Chu in 2009 and former premier Frank Hsieh in 2012 both visited Beijing, Tainan Mayor William Lai attended a forum in Shanghai in 2014, and Taoyuan Mayor Cheng Wen-tsang paid a visit to Hong Kong in 2015. But after inauguration day, Beijing imposed much tighter conditions on these meetings. No mainland cities responded to Chen Chu’s invitation to join the Global Harbor Cities forum in Kaohsiung in September 2016. The Taoyuan-Hong Kong city exchange, which provided the rationale for Mayor Cheng’s previous visit, was suspended. And the Asian Youth Games, which were awarded to Taichung in 2014, were revoked in 2018 due to Chinese pressure (at this point, Taichung, too, was led by a DPP mayor, Lin Chia-lung).

In addition, there is growing evidence that the CCP has stepped up its influence operations in Taiwan since Tsai Ing-wen took office, quietly and covertly increasing the resources going to cultivate or bribe potential allies, discredit opponents, corrupt or undermine Taiwan’s democratic institutions, and shift public opinion in a pro-unification direction. Some of these activities have become public knowledge only very recently, including the detention of an alleged high-level CCP operative at the Taoyuan airport as he attempted to leave Taiwan, the arrest of a former KMT county-level official for helping CCP officials come to Taiwan while evading security checks, and the suspension by Facebook of numerous pro-Han Kuo-yu fan pages for “inauthentic behavior.” These operations could plausibly have contributed to the Tsai administration’s first-term troubles and to the KMT’s surprise victories in 2018. But their exposure now, during the election campaign, appears only to be adding to a growing backlash in public opinion against the PRC in the run-up to the 2020 elections.

Beijing has attempted to balance this “hard” track with a “soft” one, rolling out additional policies aimed at increasing economic opportunities for Taiwanese firms and individuals—though in practice, even most of these policies have some coercive elements and are probably better characterized as reflecting the use of “sharp” rather than “soft” power. Most notably, the PRC has not suspended or voided any of the 23 Ma-era cross-Strait agreements, although it has refused to entertain discussion of new ones with the Tsai administration and has implemented some of them unevenly. In addition, it has announced a number of other changes intended on the face of it to benefit Taiwanese firms and workers, especially those already operating on the mainland:

- In February 2018, the TAO announced the introduction of “31 preferential policies” that would relax or eliminate restrictions on investment from Taiwanese firms and give them the same treatment and opportunities as domestic firms in a wider array of industries, including energy, entertainment, finance, and infrastructure. The measures also lifted work restrictions on high-skilled workers from Taiwan in 134 professions.
- From September 2018, Taiwan residents who have lived in mainland China for at least 6 months with a stable job and accommodation can apply for a residence permit, which will give access to social insurance, unemployment benefits, education, and medical care.
- On January 2, 2019, in his speech to “Taiwan compatriots,” Xi Jinping pledged to “treat Taiwan compatriots equally” to PRC nationals. Local governments followed this cue by announcing their own initiatives to benefit Taiwanese living in their jurisdictions.
- In March 2019, Premier Li Keqiang announced that Beijing would introduce additional preferential policies toward Taiwanese on the mainland. One of the first manifestations of this push came from the Supreme People’s Court, which later in March released a package of 36 new measures intended to provide judicial services to and ensure litigation rights of Taiwanese, and to enhance cross-strait judicial mechanisms.
- In November 2019, the TAO announced an additional 26 measures, including consular services and protection abroad for Taiwanese nationals residing on the mainland, and access to employment and contracts in additional restricted industries such as civil aviation and 5G networks.

Beijing has also continued to allow low-level political and cultural exchanges with groups that do not support the DPP or the Tsai government. Most notably, then-KMT party chair Hung Hsiu-chu visited Beijing in November 2016 and was granted an audience with Xi Jinping. Prior to that, in September 2016, representatives from eight KMT-run localities were treated cordially on a trip to Beijing, and in November they received a reciprocal visit to Taiwan from an agricultural purchasing mission from the mainland.

More recently, in March 2019, Han Kuo-yu, then the newly-elected mayor of Kaohsiung, traveled to Hong Kong and met with the PRC’s chief liaison officer there, Wang Zhiming, as well as Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Chief Executive Carrie Lam, before crossing the border to Shenzhen for a meeting with TAO head Liu Jieyi. The PRC has even engaged with Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je, after he described cross-strait relations as “one family sharing a common destiny”—a phrase consistent with Xi Jinping’s rhetoric about unification being both “inevitable” and part of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” Beijing subsequently decided not to boycott the Taipei Universiade sports event in 2017 and sent 200 athletes to participate, and in July 2019 Mayor Ko was permitted to attend the Taipei-Shanghai forum in Shanghai.

Over Tsai’s first term, the cross-strait relationship has settled into a pattern somewhat similar to the late Chen Shui-bian era, though moving to greater extremes on the “hard” track. Beijing has tried to keep up pressure on the Tsai administration through a multifaceted and relentless elimination of Taiwan’s remaining international space,



more frequent military and security activities, and a stepped-up covert political influence campaign on the island, and it has become more selective about whom it engages with from Taiwan. At the same time, it has continued its “soft” efforts to make living, working, and doing business on the mainland more attractive to Taiwanese, and to cultivate political relationships in Taiwan beyond the KMT—but also to try to accentuate existing weaknesses in Taiwan’s economy, shift public opinion in favor of greater economic integration, and erode support for the Tsai administration’s domestic policies.

## DOMESTIC POLITICS DURING THE TSAI ERA

Tsai Ing-wen’s first term has been a political roller-coaster ride. She took office after a sweeping presidential win and with a large DPP majority in the Legislative Yuan, and she began as a broadly popular president. However, she did not get much of a political honeymoon: her approval ratings rapidly declined, and by the end of the year they were underwater, where they remained for the next two years. The nadir for her came in Taiwan’s November 2018 local elections, when dissatisfaction with the Tsai administration’s domestic reform efforts acted as a drag on many DPP candidates in local races and contributed to KMT wins. In the wake of that defeat, Tsai was forced to resign as party chairwoman, and she looked rather unlikely to win re-election in a year’s time. But in a remarkable turnaround, she has recovered much of her initial support over the last year and now appears to be a strong favorite to win a second term in January 2020.

### *The DPP’s domestic governance challenges*

There is a tendency among observers outside of Taiwan to view everything that happens there through the prism of cross-Strait relations, and to attribute dramatic political ups and downs to some combination of Taipei’s China policies and Beijing’s treatment of Taiwan. But in fact, President Tsai’s first-term slump has had much more to do with her handling of domestic issues than the freeze in cross-Strait relations, and disapproval has come as much from her own DPP supporters as from swing voters or the KMT’s “blue” base. By rallying these “green” voters back to her side, she has found what looks like a clear path to victory in 2020.

The winning coalition that brought Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP to power in 2016 was complex, unified only by its shared opposition to Ma Ying-jeou and the KMT. Tsai assumed office facing unrealistic expectations from many parts of this coalition and unresolved policy differences within the DPP, and she was almost immediately beset by conflicts over changes to labor regulations, energy policy, and LGBTQ rights. Proposals to increase overtime and holiday leave requirements turned into a political minefield for the DPP, and the party ultimately managed to alienate both pro-business and pro-labor supporters by strengthening and then watering down rules for work hours and overtime pay.<sup>9</sup> A similar dynamic occurred over energy policy: the DPP-led legislature passed a law phasing out nuclear power by 2025, and the Tsai administration temporarily blocked restarts of nuclear reactors that had been shut down for maintenance. That required generating more electricity from gas- and coal-fired power plants, stressed Taiwan’s electricity reserve margins, and left the administration’s energy policy vulnerable to criticism during a blackout in the summer of 2017 and serious air pollution events in the winters of 2016 and 2017. On LGBTQ rights, a constitutional court ruling in 2017 mandated the addition of same-sex marriage to the civil code, but its adoption remained stalled in the legislature until the spring of 2019. On each of

these issues, the DPP ultimately disappointed advocates on both sides and left many former supporters disillusioned.

President Tsai also struggled to manage relations with the rest of her party. Her first cabinet included mostly academics and technocrats, but almost no prominent DPP members or open supporters of Taiwan independence. For instance, her first choice of premier, Lin Chuan, was an economist who had previously served as Minister of Finance in the Chen Shui-bian administration, but he was not a member of the DPP and had never held elected office. Coordination of policy-making between the executive branch and the DPP caucus in the legislature suffered as a result, and both intra-party and executive-legislative disagreements regularly had to be elevated to the Presidential Office for resolution. Tsai also faced rising criticism from many pro-independence supporters, who, like Beijing, distrusted her instincts, but for the opposite reason—they thought she was too China-friendly. When Tsai's moderate rhetoric on cross-Straits relations won her no concessions from the PRC, she was criticized for not taking stronger actions to promote a separate Taiwanese identity, and for not using the DPP's majority to push through additional steps to "Taiwanize" state institutions.

As a consequence, within months of taking office, President Tsai's approval ratings had turned negative. A poll published in November 2016 by the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation, a green-leaning organization whose results tended to portray Tsai in a more favorable light than others, found her approval rating at 41.4 percent, versus 42.6 percent disapproving, and the downward trend continued. By August 2017, a little over a year into Tsai's first term, her approval rating hit a new low of 29.8 percent.<sup>10</sup> In early September, Tsai finally responded by shuffling her cabinet and replacing Lin Chuan with the prominent DPP mayor of Tainan, William Lai. Lai's greater popularity with the DPP base helped the Tsai administration to a modest recovery in the polls in the fall of 2017.

But then the DPP took on public pension reforms. Although these changes were probably necessary to keep the government's fiscal outlook on a sustainable trajectory, they also ignited passionate KMT opposition in a way that few other issues could have. In December 2017, the DPP majority in the Legislative Yuan passed a bill that cut the preferential interest rates paid on special savings accounts held by retired civil servants and public school teachers. While this move most directly impacted older retirees who tended to support the KMT, it also threatened the interests of younger civil servants of all political stripes across a wide range of fields and contributed to the DPP's slumping popularity. In early 2018, a separate bill adjusted pensions for retired military officers—another key constituency of the KMT. By July 2018, when the scheduled cuts and adjustments had come into effect, government agencies were "inundated with appeals" from the over 300,000 people affected by the changes.<sup>11</sup>

### ***The 2018 local elections***

With comprehensive local elections looming in November 2018, the DPP appeared to be facing an uphill battle in the fall campaign: its own core supporters were impatient, restless or disappointed, with little movement on many long-cherished goals. Many younger voters, especially left-leaning or "progressive" ones, had also become discouraged by the Tsai administration's reversals on labor reform, its slow and halting approach to economic and tax changes, and the lack of movement on same-sex marriage.

By contrast, the KMT's base was fired up over pension cuts, the deterioration in cross-strait relations, and investigations by Tsai-appointed committees of the party's authoritarian-era abuses and misappropriation of state assets. Defying predictions that it would continue its electoral decline, the KMT went into the fall campaign better organized and positioned than it had been in the two previous election cycles. In May 2017, the party chose a new chairman, the veteran political operative Wu Den-yih, to replace the pro-unification firebrand Hung Hsiu-chu. Wu quickly reversed Hung's changes to the KMT's cross-strait platform and repositioned the party back toward the median voter.<sup>12</sup> The KMT also managed to recruit high-profile candidates with previous political experience to run in many of the local executive races.

The most startling development in the 2018 campaign, however, was the sudden, meteoric rise of Han Kuo-yu. An obscure politician who had been out of the public eye since the 1990s, Han was nominated by the KMT to run as a sacrificial lamb in Kaohsiung, which the DPP had led for 20 years. But Han was able to make headway there by running an unconventional campaign. Rather than repeating KMT talking points about cross-strait relations and stock criticisms of Tsai Ing-wen, he talked instead about how Kaohsiung had increasingly fallen behind other cities in Taiwan and how it looked "old and poor." Though tinged with elements of populism and offering only empty slogans as solutions to complex policy problems, Han's distinctive rhetoric and charismatic speaking style drew large crowds to his campaign events, as well as a saturation of media coverage from Taiwan's KMT-friendly media outlets. By the end of the campaign, he had nearly universal name recognition across Taiwan, was in high demand for appearances in support of other KMT candidates, and had attracted a passionate following, particularly among the party's core supporters.

In the end, the local elections delivered a stinging defeat to the DPP: in the races for city and county executives, the DPP lost in eight of the 14 localities it had previously controlled, while failing to pick up any. Despite considerable speculation in previous years that a so-called "Third Force" of new parties would rise to challenge both main political camps, the main beneficiary of the DPP's struggles turned out to be the KMT. The headliner result was in Kaohsiung, where Han Kuo-yu won 53 percent of the vote, upending conventional wisdom that the municipality's electorate would always support the DPP. But KMT candidates ran quite strong campaigns in most of the other local executive races as well. In Taichung, legislator Lu Shiow-yen defeated incumbent mayor Lin Chia-lung by a 57 percent to 43 percent margin, a 14-point reversal from Lin's victory in 2014. In New Taipei, deputy mayor Hou You-yi won with 57 percent of the vote over the former Taipei County executive Su Tseng-chang. And around the rest of Taiwan, KMT candidates nearly swept the slate of competitive executive races, picking up Yilan, Changhua, Yunlin, Chiayi City, and Penghu from the DPP, and Kinmen and Hualien from independents, while holding on to Miaoli, Nantou, Taitung, and Hsinchu counties. The only toss-up race in which the KMT candidate fell short was in Taipei, where independent mayor Ko Wen-je was narrowly reelected in a three-way race. In all, KMT candidates won in 15 cities and counties, up from six after the last election, while the DPP won in only six, down from 14.

## THE CAMPAIGN FOR 2020

The sweeping defeat of the DPP in the local elections erased any remaining doubt that the party would face a tough 2020 re-election campaign. The magnitude of the losses forced Tsai Ing-wen to resign as party chairwoman, creating a temporary power vacuum within the DPP and adding to the sense that she was vulnerable to an intra-party challenge. For its part, the KMT's surprisingly strong electoral showing raised expectations that it had a serious shot at winning back power in 2020, and its own prospective presidential candidates began jockeying for advantage. Moreover, it appeared increasingly likely Tsai would also face an independent presidential run from Ko Wen-je, who had just defeated both DPP and KMT candidates in the Taipei mayor's election. The stage was set for a fiercely contested election campaign.

In the spring of 2019, as the first head-to-head polls of the race with possible KMT challengers began to trickle out, they showed President Tsai well behind, trailing by anywhere from 10 to 30 points. But her prospects for victory have turned around dramatically over the last six months. As recently as July, when he secured the KMT nomination, Han Kuo-yu enjoyed a lead of 10 points or more over Tsai in many polls, but Han's support has steadily declined while Tsai's has risen, and they have now flipped positions. Tsai is currently leading in the race for president by somewhere between 15 to 30 points and looks like a clear favorite to win reelection, while the DPP now has at least even odds to retain its majority in the legislature.<sup>13</sup>

### *The presidential race: factors behind Tsai's rebound*

There are at least four reasons for this dramatic reversal in political fortunes.

First and foremost, Tsai has managed to reconsolidate her position within the DPP. One part of her low approval ratings was always due to disappointment from the more independence-leaning wing of her own party. Bringing these supporters back to her side appears to have given her a major boost.

The beginnings of this turnaround occurred in early January. On January 2, 2019, Xi Jinping gave a speech commemorating the 40th anniversary of Deng Xiaoping's "Message to Taiwan Compatriots." While mostly a restatement of core PRC positions on Taiwan, Xi's speech also included some new language that created an opening for Tsai: he defined the "1992 Consensus" as "the two sides of the Strait belong to one China, and both sides will strive to seek national reunification," and he emphasized that peaceful unification under "One Country Two Systems" (OC2S)—the same general formula that was used for the handover of Hong Kong and a non-starter for the large majority of Taiwanese—as the only possible future for cross-Strait relations, without offering any new specific concessions.<sup>14</sup>

Tsai responded within hours. She denounced the 1992 Consensus, saying "we have never accepted" it because Beijing's "definition of it is 'One China' and 'One Country Two Systems.'" She also noted that the "vast majority of Taiwanese resolutely oppose" OC2S, and she restated her "four musts" for the "orderly, healthy development" of cross-Strait relations: Beijing must face the reality of the existence of the Republic of China (Taiwan) and its democratic system of government; must respect the commitment of Taiwanese to freedom and democracy and not attempt to interfere with their political choices; must handle cross-Strait differences peacefully and on the



basis of equality; and must engage in government-to-government negotiations and not seek to bypass the legitimately chosen leaders of Taiwan, in order for consultations between the two sides to be called "democratic."<sup>15</sup> The forcefulness of this rebuttal, and the attention and support across party lines that it received in Taiwan, plainly caught Beijing off guard. It also put the KMT in a bind, as the party attempted to clarify that its own acceptance of the 1992 Consensus did not mean it supported unification under OC2S. In the wake of this speech, Tsai enjoyed a significant bump in public opinion; the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation's monthly poll showed a sudden 10-point jump in her approval rating in January, from 24.3 percent to 34.5 percent—a rise that persisted through April.

Tsai also successfully fended off a challenge for the DPP nomination that left her (and the DPP) in a stronger electoral position. After her response to Xi's January 2 speech, Tsai appeared to have bolstered her standing within the party. But on March 17, her former premier William Lai suddenly announced he would challenge her, catching just about everyone by surprise. Lai's candidacy posed a serious threat to Tsai's political survival: his public approval ratings had consistently been several points higher than hers during his time as premier, and despite having led her cabinet for 14 months, their differences on policy were well-known. Before becoming premier, for instance, he had referred to himself as a "pragmatic Taiwan independence supporter," positioning himself further to the green end of the spectrum, and closer to the center of the DPP, than Tsai. He had also taken distinctive positions on labor reform (more pro-employer), social issues (less supportive of same-sex marriage), and infrastructure development (pro-construction and less concerned about environmental impact).

However, Lai apparently misjudged the depth of his own support among the party elite, and his challenge to Tsai was criticized even by strongly pro-independence people within the party. His entry into the race also led to prolonged negotiations about how to conduct the primary, which under DPP rules was to be decided via an average of public opinion polls. But which polls, sampling which voters, over what time frame, and comparing the candidates against whom? These details had not seemed important when Tsai was unopposed, but they suddenly became critical to the outcome. With no clear precedent for challenging an incumbent president, the lack of an intra-party consensus about how to conduct the primary led to a significant delay until the rules could be negotiated, and the DPP did not put the polls in the field until mid-June.

By this point, intra-party criticism of Lai had taken its toll, along with Tsai's own belated efforts to defend her record and make a case for her re-nomination. Lai's argument was primarily based on electability—he asserted that he would be the stronger general election candidate—and when polls started showing him doing worse than Tsai against common opponents, particularly among voters under 40, he had no other compelling case to make. Tsai's team also won a battle over whether to include cell phones in the polls, which ensured greater representation of the views of young voters who disproportionately supported Tsai over Lai, and to include Ko Wen-je's potential candidacy in a three-way comparison rather than a simple head-to-head with the KMT.<sup>16</sup> When the results were released, Tsai had secured a clear though not dominant lead. Despite considerable grumbling from his backers, Lai accepted defeat gracefully and pledged to work for Tsai's re-election, preventing a potentially fatal split in the pan-green camp. Tsai's re-nomination also helped the DPP solidify support among younger voters, whom some political observers believed would have defected in significant

numbers to a third-party candidate such as Mayor Ko if Lai were the candidate. Thus, Tsai emerged from the party primary in a considerably stronger electoral position than she began it, with a unified party behind her. In a final exclamation point to the whole affair, in November, Lai even accepted Tsai's invitation to join the ticket as the vice presidential candidate, something he had refused to do when it was offered before the primary.

The second reason for the reversal in fortunes is the KMT's nomination of Han Kuo-yu as its presidential candidate. Han is an unusually polarizing figure, even by Taiwan standards: he has attracted passionate support from many deep-blue voters, but has triggered equally strident criticism, ridicule, and fear from pan-green partisans. More importantly, after riding an initial wave of popularity as the face of the KMT's stunning victories in the local elections, Han has struggled over the last year to reassure voters outside his deep-blue base that he would be a responsible advocate for Taiwan's interests in cross-strait affairs, and to present ideas for bolstering the economy that voters would find at all credible. In the spring, Han still appeared to be the strongest of the potential KMT nominees in polls of a head-to-head matchup with Tsai or Lai. Yet even then, some of his weaknesses as a potential candidate were already apparent.

Foremost among them was that he had just been elected mayor of Kaohsiung, by far the highest-profile office he had ever held in his career. He had little previous executive experience of any kind, and none in the central government. By contrast, previous KMT nominees had all had long track records of public and party service before running for president. If Han sought the nomination so soon after becoming mayor, he would be breaking with precedent and attempting to leapfrog several other much more experienced contenders, including the 2016 nominee Eric Chu, the former Legislative Yuan Speaker Wang Jin-pyng, the KMT party chairman Wu Den-yih, the former Taipei County executive Chou Hsi-wei, and even the former president Ma Ying-jeou, who had done little to deny rumors he might try to run again.<sup>17</sup> Han also would have to balance the challenge of leading a green-leaning city with a hostile DPP city council caucus against the unrelenting demands of a presidential campaign—indeed, his frequent absences from Kaohsiung and weak grasp of local issues had already made for easy targets for his critics. Furthermore, in part because he had been out of national politics for nearly two decades, he stumbled when asked to articulate his cross-strait positions in more detail, leading to a series of public gaffes and position reversals that added to an air of disorganization surrounding his campaign.

Nevertheless, Han had also developed a large and enthusiastic following among deep blue KMT supporters, and his potential candidacy posed a serious dilemma for the party: if he chose to run, it would be hard to deny him the nomination, despite his apparent weaknesses, since there was no consensus within the KMT about who the alternative to Han should be. The early frontrunner, 2016 nominee Eric Chu, was a rival of party chairman Wu Den-yih, who had barely concealed presidential aspirations of his own. Another potential contestant was former Legislative Yuan Speaker Wang Jin-pyng; but Wang had his own difficult history with former president Ma Ying-jeou, who still wielded considerable influence within the party. In the end, Wu Den-yih recruited Han to join the primary, possibly as a way to deny the nomination to Chu, and Han jumped in.<sup>18</sup> That move in turn triggered a surprise entry by Terry Gou, the founder and chairman of the manufacturing giant Foxconn, one of Taiwan's richest men—and, like Han, an outsider to the traditional KMT party elite. Gou's challenge upended the

sense of inevitability surrounding Han's march to the nomination and led to a fiercely contested primary.

Like the DPP, the KMT then struggled to settle on a procedure to decide the nomination contest. Rather than a vote of party members, the party leadership eventually decided on using public opinion polls drawn from a sample of landlines and pitting each KMT candidate against both Tsai Ing-wen and Ko Wen-je in a three-way comparison. Those rules, especially the restriction to landlines without the inclusion of cellphones, favored Han and his stronger support among older voters, and in July he emerged with the nomination over Gou, Chu, and the others. Unlike in the DPP, however, not all the KMT contestants immediately backed Han. Neither Gou nor Wang Jin-pyng endorsed his candidacy, and both hinted that they might seek to run as independent candidates instead. The KMT's failure to unify after the primary, along with the steady drumbeat of criticism directed at Han from Gou and others, contributed to a downward turn in his polling numbers that continued into the fall campaign season.

The third factor in Tsai's revived fortunes is the surprising absence of any high-profile independent challenger in the presidential race. Most prominently, Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je appeared in the spring to be well-positioned to run an independent, centrist campaign in 2020. His chances looked especially promising if Lai were to win the DPP's nomination, and Han the KMT's; polls showed that he could appeal both to younger Tsai supporters who disliked Lai and better-educated blue-leaning voters who had reservations about Han. But Tsai's re-nomination complicated this calculation, as did Terry Gou's refusal to endorse Han Kuo-yu. Gou did little to tamp down speculation that he could team up with Ko to run on a joint ticket, while Ko repeatedly postponed announcing his intentions and instead presided over the creation in August of a new political party, the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), to compete for seats in the Legislative Yuan. The uncertainty surrounding Ko and Gou persisted all the way until September 17, the deadline for registering an independent candidacy. That week, Gou asked Ko to form a joint ticket together, with Gou in the top slot and Ko as his vice president. However, Ko refused, causing both then to decide against running, leaving the field clear for a conventional green versus blue, Tsai versus Han matchup—which, given Han's difficulties winning over swing voters, increasingly favored Tsai and the DPP.

Tsai will also probably benefit from one final, late entry into the race: perennial candidate James Soong of the People First Party (PFP). The PFP had openly discussed using the party's ticket to support Gou or Wang Jin-pyng, but on November 13, Soong announced that he would once again run for president for the fourth time.<sup>19</sup> Soong is a former KMT member, and the PFP has traditionally identified closely with KMT positions—so, depending on how close voters perceive the race to be, he could draw significant protest votes away from the KMT nominee, as he did in 2016, when he won almost 13 percent.

The fourth factor helping Tsai is an external one: Hong Kong. On June 9, the first large-scale demonstrations erupted against a new extradition law proposed by the Hong Kong government, bringing as many as a million people into the streets of the territory. Protests against Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Chief Executive Carrie Lam and her backers in Beijing continued intermittently through the rest of the summer and into the fall, and by November they had turned increasingly contentious and desperate, with police and mostly young, black-clad protestors engaged in running street battles across parts of the territory.

The precise effect of these ongoing protests on Tsai's rise in the polls is tough to disentangle from other factors. But there is little doubt it has been significant. The Hong Kong demonstrations have been covered increasingly prominently in the Taiwanese media, and they provide a stark illustration of just how fraught a formal political union with the PRC would be for Taiwan. If the OC2S model offered in Xi's January 2 speech was dismissed by most Taiwanese before, it is even more emphatically rejected now, as Hong Kongers have continued to demonstrate very publicly and bravely, in the face of increasingly harsh police crackdowns, against the erosion of the territory's political autonomy and Beijing's repeated denial of their right to elect their own leaders.

More generally, the ongoing Hong Kong protests have brought democracy, sovereignty, and security issues to the fore in the 2020 campaign in Taiwan. This shift has played to DPP strengths and reinforced KMT weaknesses, and it has created an especially challenging environment for Han Kuo-yu's campaign. Han has been saddled with the perception, whether accurate or not, that he is Beijing's preferred candidate in the race—one that in the current environment has turned into a serious political liability. For instance, on June 9, as giant crowds of people took to the streets in Hong Kong for the first time, Han avoided expressing support for the demonstrations, which he called “a parade.” He then faced a deluge of public criticism before eventually backtracking—at a campaign rally later that month, he felt compelled to say that OC2S would take effect in Taiwan only “over my dead body.”<sup>20</sup> But his preferred tactic has been simply to ignore the topic altogether, and to try to talk instead about the economy and Taiwan's diplomatic isolation in the world. It is only in the last three months of the campaign, beginning with a scripted speech on the ROC National Day on October 10, that he has shifted his rhetoric to try more directly to address concerns about threats to Taiwan's sovereignty and security from the PRC. In an interview with foreign media on November 14, for instance, Han said that “I'd like to tell Beijing that democracy and freedom are not great scourges,” and that “‘One Country Two Systems’ has absolutely no market in Taiwan.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, he is clearly still more comfortable campaigning on other issues. By contrast, Tsai and the DPP now regularly and eagerly invoke Hong Kong in their campaign events; in a rally on December 12, for instance, Tsai asserted that the “whole world is watching” because of the protests and that a vote to re-elect her would ensure that “what is taking place in Hong Kong” would not happen in Taiwan.<sup>22</sup> Overall, then, the Hong Kong protests appear to have shifted the campaign onto ground that the DPP is much more comfortable playing on than the KMT.

There is one other important factor that has probably helped President Tsai: the economy. Taiwan's economic growth has been surprisingly robust in 2019, coming in at an annual rate of 2.9 percent in the third quarter.<sup>23</sup> That is not especially rapid by historical standards, but in the context of the U.S.-PRC trade conflict and Taiwan's heavily export-dependent economy, it is quite a bit better than forecast, and enough at least to ensure that other issues will matter more for the election. Short-term growth has been helped by onshoring of investment from Taiwanese firms concerned about U.S. tariffs on Chinese exports and by a gradual reorientation of production away from the Chinese mainland toward Southeast Asia. Had these shifts instead led to an economic downturn over the last year, the race would probably be much closer.



## ***The specter of CCP election interference in 2020***

One especially worrisome new development in these elections is the increase in covert activities by mainland-linked groups that appear intended to affect the outcome. The most alarming and visible of these is in media coverage of the campaigns. CCP influence over Taiwan's media industry has greatly increased since the beginning of the Ma Ying-jeou era, most notably with the purchase in 2009 of the China Times Group by the pro-Beijing Taiwanese tycoon Tsai Eng-meng (Cai Yanming). Tsai Eng-meng's ownership of the group gave him control over the editorial staff of one of Taiwan's oldest and most prominent newspapers, the *China Times*, as well as the television channels CtiTV and CTV. After their purchase, the editorial lines and news coverage of all of these media properties shifted from relatively centrist positions to the extreme pro-Beijing end of the political spectrum.

The China Times Group television channels played an important role in the rise to prominence of Han Kuo-yu during the 2018 local elections, and they continue to act as cheerleaders for his campaign. Though the overall effect of their coverage on public opinion is hard to estimate with much confidence, the channels' relentless and unabashed devotion to China-friendly candidates and messaging is quite clear. In one revealing instance, a study by National Chengchi University found that CtiTV and CTV had both devoted more than half their election news coverage in November 2018 to a single candidate: Han Kuo-yu.<sup>24</sup> In May 2019, Taiwan's National Communications Commission found that CtiTV had increased its coverage of Han even further to over 70 percent of its total political news time.<sup>25</sup> Later, in July 2019, the London-based international English-language newspaper *The Financial Times* reported what was already an open secret among Taiwanese journalists: the editorial staffs at all three properties were in regular communication with the TAO in Beijing about their political coverage.<sup>26</sup>

Evidence of a stepped-up CCP attempt to distort Taiwan's democratic processes through covert action has appeared elsewhere, as well.<sup>27</sup> In August 2019, Reuters reported that Chinese government agencies were regularly paying to place positive stories about the mainland in several major Taiwanese newspapers, which did not identify them as sponsored content.<sup>28</sup> In the social media domain, poorly disguised accounts have repeatedly inundated Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook page with critical messages, written in the simplified characters used on the mainland, in what appear to be coordinated campaigns. (The PRC, of course, itself still bans access to Facebook.) A number of misleading rumors about Taiwanese politics circulating online have been traced back to mainland Chinese sources as well. In the most prominent instance, a false report was spread initially via LINE, a messaging app popular in Taiwan, that the PRC consulate was evacuating Taiwanese travelers stranded at the Osaka airport after a typhoon because the Taiwan representative office there did not offer assistance; the report led to an avalanche of online criticism of the DPP government and may have contributed to the suicide of the director general of Taiwan's consulate in Osaka.<sup>29</sup> CCP-linked groups now even appear to be attempting to influence programming on Taiwanese radio stations. Many of these have traditionally broadcast in Taiwanese Hokkien rather than Mandarin and voiced stridently pro-independence views. But a recent article published by *Ketagalan Media* noted increased radio airtime in the last 18 months for Mandarin-language mainland Chinese songs, on-air exchanges with radio hosts in mainland Chinese cities, and promotion of the candidacy of Han Kuo-yu.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, one serious concern in the 2020 campaign is that the CCP has ramped up its covert influence operations to try to swing the election in favor of more PRC-friendly candidates, or barring that, to undermine trust in Taiwan's democratic institutions. The barely-concealed preference of Beijing-backed media for Han over not only the DPP but also other, more conventional KMT candidates in the primary has also deepened worries about what a Han presidency might mean for Taiwan's democracy. If the intention has been to bolster the pro-unification camp, however, these operations now appear to have backfired: the stream of revelations about CCP-linked operations in Taiwan has, somewhat ironically, reinforced the rising salience of democracy and security concerns, increased public attention to CCP infiltration of Taiwanese politics and society, and put Han and the KMT further on the defensive in the campaign.

### ***The Race for the Legislature***

In addition to choosing their next president, Taiwan voters will also elect all 113 representatives in the Legislative Yuan. Legislative seats are determined in three different ways: 73 are chosen from single-member constituencies, 34 from a single closed list proportional representation tier via a separate party vote with a 5 percent threshold, and six from two multi-member constituencies reserved for indigenous candidates and voters. The state of the legislative contest remains quite a bit murkier than the presidential race: the DPP looked until recently to be fighting an uphill battle to retain its majority. However, Tsai's lead in polls for the presidential race has now grown so large that, if it materializes on election day, the DPP will be favored to hold on in the legislature and could possibly even add to its current 11-seat edge.

Of the three tiers, the results of the district seat races are the easiest to forecast. Though predictions in any given race are complicated by the presence of many third-party challengers and the importance of candidate connections to local factions in some areas, we can still get a good baseline by looking at the previous presidential vote share in each district. In fact, since Taiwan switched to concurrent presidential and legislative elections, the DPP's presidential and legislative district votes have been closely correlated with one another. In 2016, the DPP did exceptionally well in the Legislative Yuan district races, winning 49 of 73 seats; it also endorsed three New Power Party (NPP) candidates, who all won as well. Crucially, Tsai Ing-wen herself carried a majority in all but five of these districts. If this pattern holds in 2020, then Tsai's share of the vote can also give us a rough sense of how the district races will turn out. If Tsai's performance falls well below the 56.45 percent she won in the previous election, the DPP's legislators will be hard-pressed to hold on in some of those races. In 2016, six DPP candidates won their races with less than 52 percent, and an additional 13 with less than 54 percent, in a very pro-DPP year. Thus, a baseline estimate is that if Tsai's vote share were to drop by 4 percent from 2016, and the party's average legislative vote share declines by a similar amount in each district, the DPP would suffer a net loss of between 6 and 19 district seats to the KMT. On the other hand, if Tsai crests 60 percent, as polls now suggest she might, it is hard to imagine many DPP incumbents in marginal seats losing at the same time, and she could actually carry into office several more candidates on her coattails.

The party list vote is harder to predict. In 2016, the DPP won over half of the at-large seats (18 out of 34) on 44 percent of the party vote, but it faces a more challenging environment in this election: in addition to the NPP, with which it competed for many

of the same voters in 2016, Mayor Ko's TPP is contesting the party list vote and could pull some support away too. For its part, the KMT will probably improve on the record low 26.9 percent of the party list vote it won in 2016, but by how much more remains an open question. The popular appeal of the KMT's list was not helped by the slate of candidates it announced in mid-November: several prominent voices within the KMT, including Han Kuo-yu's own vice presidential candidate Simon Chang, loudly criticized it for including candidates who they perceived as too old, too extreme in their pro-China views, or otherwise unqualified to represent the KMT.<sup>31</sup> Chang even went so far as to suggest that Han supporters consider casting a party list vote for James Soong's PFP instead as a protest. The PFP could be helped enough by Soong's presidential run to emerge once again as a serious alternative for pan-blue voters unhappy with the KMT leadership, and perhaps draw the 5 percent of the party vote it needs to survive one more cycle with seats in the legislature. Until the last month of the campaign, polls suggested a near-even split between support for the DPP and KMT in the party list vote, at about 30 percent each, though the DPP is likely leading here now, too, in line with shifts in the presidential race. Of the smaller parties, the TPP appears most likely to cross the 5 percent threshold to win seats, while the NPP and PFP are hovering in the danger zone around 5 percent. It is still possible, although not terribly likely, that all three minor parties could manage to win enough party list seats to deny either of the two main parties a majority.

The third electoral tier is made up of six indigenous representatives elected from two multi-member constituencies using the old single non-transferable vote system. These seats have traditionally been won by KMT candidates or blue-leaning independents, though in 2016 a DPP member, Chen Ying, captured one in a bit of an upset. The overall partisan balance is likely to shift at most by a single seat in this tier.

Adding up the three tiers, then, suggests a closer contest for the Legislative Yuan than the presidential race, with significant implications for the next four years. If the DPP manages to retain its legislative majority—the most likely outcome as of this writing—it will also remain able to pass legislation opposed by the KMT, and the relatively high degree of cooperation between the executive and legislative branches of the last four years is likely to continue. The DPP will also be able to once again unilaterally decide who holds the important post of Speaker of the Legislature.

If the DPP loses its majority but remains the largest party, the balance of power will likely be held by the TPP, and possibly the NPP and PFP. On the independence-unification spectrum, the NPP is the closest ideologically to the DPP, with the TPP positioned toward the center and the PFP closest to the KMT. So, the DPP's ability to change policy on this fundamental dimension of Taiwan politics would be least limited in coalition with the NPP, more with the TPP, and most with the PFP, which historically has favored closer relations with mainland China and preferred to cooperate with the KMT.

The third possibility is that the KMT wins enough seats to form a single-party majority or to forge a pan-blue coalition with the PFP and, possibly, the TPP. Given past voting patterns, the worse Han Kuo-yu fares in the presidential race, the less likely that outcome becomes. But it is not impossible that Tsai could win re-election while the KMT captures a plurality (or even a majority) in the Legislative Yuan. That outcome would significantly curtail President Tsai's room to maneuver on cross-Strait affairs. But it also raises some interesting coalition-building possibilities, particularly if Mayor Ko's

TPP is involved, and it would probably relieve both some of the intra-party pressure on Tsai to advance pro-independence legislation and some of the concern in Beijing about political trends in Taiwan.

At the moment, the most likely outcome appears to be another DPP majority, though with much depending on Tsai's margin of victory in the presidential race, the degree of strategic voting in the district races, and the distribution of support for the smaller parties in the party list vote. The possible role and influence of the newly-founded TPP, in particular, remains hard to predict at this juncture. Ko Wen-je is the key figure in that party and has been deliberately vague about the party's ideological orientation and policy goals; if the TPP wins enough seats to hold the balance of power in the legislature, he could end up being courted by both the DPP and KMT and playing a "kingmaker" role.

Finally, it is worth sounding a note of caution here. Taiwan's Legislative Yuan operates via consensus much more than is commonly appreciated, and the lack of a single-party majority might not actually be much of a departure from current practice. For instance, over half of the bills to pass in recent sessions have been approved via cross-party negotiation rather than roll call votes, and in the current term, opposition legislators have continued to win committee co-convenor seats, publicly question executive branch officials, and introduce bills that are opposed by the DPP caucus leadership, despite the DPP's majority status. Thus, even if the DPP loses its majority, we are unlikely to see a return to the degree of partisan hostility and executive-legislative gridlock that characterized divided government during the Chen Shui-bian era.

## HOW CHINA MIGHT REACT TO THE 2020 ELECTIONS

If Tsai Ing-wen wins the presidential election, the most likely scenario for cross-strait relations is that the PRC simply carries on with its current strategy: poaching the remaining diplomatic allies, eliminating Taiwan's remaining international space, continuing intimidating military exercises, harassing and even arresting pro-independence Taiwanese who dare to set foot on the mainland, and expanding political influence operations in Taiwan, while still trying to expand selective engagement with Taiwan's people and businesses.

However, from Beijing's perspective, there are also several problems with the current approach which will become increasingly acute in a second Tsai term. For one, the short-term strategy undermines the long-term goal: Beijing is attempting to woo Taiwanese with one hand and punishing them with the other. The nuance contained in the dual-track policy—that the punishment is directed against the Tsai administration and the DPP, not the Taiwanese people—is easily lost in headlines about threatening military exercises and the humiliation of Taiwanese representatives in international forums. After all, the majority of Taiwanese chose President Tsai as their leader and may well choose to reelect her. This means treating her administration badly also disrespects Taiwanese voters. There is also little evidence that the "soft" track has shifted Taiwanese public opinion in favor of unification—and plenty of evidence that the selective punishments of pro-independence Taiwanese and the DPP, as well as the Hong Kong protests, have swung it even further away. The well-known National Chengchi University polling trends on support for independence versus unification, for instance, show a dramatic drop in 2019 in support for unification now or in the future,



down to near an all-time low of 10.4 percent, and a corresponding jump in support for independence now or in the future, to 25.7 percent.<sup>32</sup> Any additional attraction the PRC might have developed via policy concessions has been overwhelmed by the developments in Hong Kong. By continuing to squeeze Taiwan's international space and monkeying in its democratic processes, Beijing risks deepening this backlash, heightening awareness in Taiwan to the threat it poses, and triggering a sense of urgency about countering it.

In addition, Beijing's actions to "punish" Tsai for not accepting the OCP have already used up a lot of the arrows in its policy quiver and weakened its ability to deter future moves toward independence. If this treatment is what Taiwan's leader gets for explicitly pledging to support the status quo, then why should she, or any leader to follow, bother to do so any longer? The pressure on Tsai to meet the aspirations of her pro-independence supporters is not going to go away any time soon, and they do have a point—Beijing has shown that it will make politically impossible demands of Tsai no matter how reasonable she tries to be, so why not simply drop the pretense and move on to long-cherished goals, like changing the flag, the constitution, and the name of the country? The PRC's pointed lack of sympathy for the constraints that Taiwan's democratic system imposes on Taiwan's leaders has made the possibility of cooperative cross-strait relations seem ever more remote. And it has also eliminated many of the remaining incentives for any *future* DPP president to heed Beijing's concerns. Instead, those incentives will have to come increasingly from Washington—and given the recent trajectory of U.S.-PRC relations, that hardly seems like a policy win for Beijing.

Finally, the current strategy does have a clear end point, one that does not leave Taiwan any closer to unification with the PRC. The pressure campaign, if it continues through Tsai's second term, will eventually lose much of its impact: there will be few remaining international venues for Taiwan to be kicked out of, few diplomatic allies left to poach, few foreign companies left to coerce into changing policies to conform with Beijing's version of the OCP, and few rungs in the military exercise ladder to climb up before the situation in the Taiwan Strait becomes truly dangerous. In return, public opinion in Taiwan is likely to become even more suspicious of the CCP's motives for offering "soft" benefits, and the Chinese mainland's negative image will only grow worse. Perhaps most consequential of all, U.S. sympathy for and cooperation with Taiwan will likely continue to increase, as it has over the past four years with increased arms sales, pressure on Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies not to switch, congressional visits and resolutions of support, and relaxed restrictions on Tsai's transit stops in the United States. If Beijing has pursued a pressure campaign for four years without succeeding in changing Tsai's rhetoric or behavior, or shifting Taiwanese public opinion in favor of unification, and has only helped Taiwan's leadership draw closer to the United States, then it is hard to see the point of doing it for four more years and sacrificing any remaining organic attraction to the mainland that Beijing has built up slowly and at great effort in Taiwan over the last 15 years.

Given these problems, there is a second possibility. Beijing could decide to recalibrate but not dismantle its dual-track policy, recognizing the need to keep a few policy arrows in reserve. If Tsai barely wins, or if she is denied a DPP majority in the legislature, that could be read (possibly incorrectly) as a shift in public opinion away from support for independence. In that scenario, the need to punish Tsai and deter the DPP from taking pro-independence actions abates somewhat, and the pressure campaign could be safely dialed back. Beijing might infer that a KMT or at least non-DPP Taiwan leader

is possible in the not-too-distant future, and it needs only to be patient, stay the course, and continue to woo Taiwanese with targeted benefits and selective engagement until that day comes. Or, it could turn its attention to the 2024 election, and actively try to affect who Tsai's successor will be—looking for ways to undermine more openly pro-independence candidates from the DPP, such as William Lai, and to bolster the chances of a centrist like Ko Wen-je, in addition to the KMT.

The third possibility is a fundamental re-evaluation of Taiwan policy that takes into account some hard truths about Taiwan's political system and trends in public opinion. If Tsai comfortably wins re-election and the DPP retains or even adds to its legislative majority, they will have successfully defied four years of Beijing's pressure campaign and covert influence operations and come out on the other side politically no worse off for it. Majority public opinion is still behind them, rather than the more China-friendly KMT or a third-party alternative. That cannot be interpreted in Beijing as anything other than a set-back, even if only a temporary one, and it could lead to a more comprehensive policy review. There is a precedent for this: after Chen Shui-bian won re-election in 2004, defying expectations that he would lose to a reunified KMT ticket, the PRC's Taiwan policy underwent a significant reevaluation, leading to the rollout of the original dual-track strategy in 2005.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, if one breaks down Taiwanese national identity and support for unification by generation, the long-term public opinion trends do not look favorable for Beijing. While there was a modest reversal toward greater dual Chinese-Taiwanese identity overall between 2014 and 2018, this shift was driven mostly by respondents in their 40s and 50s, not younger generations. And it has now ended: overall exclusive Taiwanese identity is now rising again, and among Taiwanese under 40 it is over 80 percent. In addition, the choice of national identity of this younger generation appears increasingly unaffected by the package of threats and benefits put forward by the PRC.<sup>34</sup> Thus, another DPP landslide might lead to a policy pause in Beijing and generate a debate about what else might be done to try to reverse these trends over the longer term.

Finally, what if the improbable happens and Han Kuo-yu pulls off the upset? The answer there is not simple, either: it is not self-evident that a KMT return to Ma-era positions will elicit the same pragmatic response from Beijing as it did in 2008. For one, Xi has hinted that the 1992 Consensus formula, as the KMT defines it, might no longer be satisfactory for cross-strait engagement, and he could insist that the next Taiwan leader go further than Ma Ying-jeou ever did, perhaps by committing to political talks on Taiwan's future. No one in the KMT wants to consider this possibility, but it is a very real worry. As with the PRC's relationships with much of the rest of the world, Taiwan policy under Xi Jinping has become more rigid in defense of its principles, more willing to assert PRC privilege in determining the terms of engagement, and less interested in making new concessions to advance relations than it was under Hu Jintao. Xi's January 2 speech, for instance, directly linked the 1992 Consensus to working toward national reunification under a OC2S model—an interpretation that the KMT quickly shot down, and that Tsai Ing-wen responded to by flatly rejecting both the 1992 Consensus and OC2S. An inexperienced leader like Han, who may well be viewed by Beijing as more pliable than other KMT politicians, could face considerable pressure to go further—to start to negotiate a peace treaty, or, like the previous chair Hung Hsiu-chu did in her meeting with Xi in November 2016, agree to redefine the 1992 Consensus as opposing Taiwanese independence and seeking unification.

It is true that Taiwanese public opinion would act as a powerful constraint on any Taiwanese leader who wanted to work more closely with the PRC. But recent history gives little reason to believe Beijing would be especially sympathetic now to a leader, even one it favored, who pointed to popular attitudes in Taiwan as a reason not to take some meaningful steps in its preferred direction. Given the growing power imbalance across the Strait, Chinese leaders may now feel they will have the ability sooner or later to force the Taiwan side to capitulate, no matter how strong public opposition to unification might be.

## THE U.S. APPROACH TO TAIWAN AFTER JANUARY 2020

The United States has traditionally played a stabilizing role in the cross-Strait relationship. It has followed what Richard Bush has termed “dual deterrence,” aiming to prevent either side from unilaterally changing the status quo.<sup>35</sup> This approach has largely succeeded in preserving the peace and furthering U.S. interests in the region: the United States has enjoyed robust unofficial ties with Taiwan while not allowing them to interfere with its broad and complicated relationship with the PRC, and while helping to deter coercive actions that would upset the peace across the Strait.

Under the Trump administration, however, the U.S. role as stabilizer has weakened somewhat. President-elect Donald Trump’s decision to accept a congratulatory phone call from Tsai Ing-wen in December 2016, and particularly to publicize this call almost immediately, threw a jolt into the trilateral relationship, and raised questions about whether fundamental tenets of America’s Taiwan policy no longer would apply in a Trump administration. But at other points in the following months and years, President Trump has acknowledged a need to defer to Xi’s concerns on Taiwan, and his crudely transactional approach to international relationships and general skepticism about the value of alliances and partnerships is well-known. Taiwan is fortunate so far not to have found itself the subject of his wandering gaze.

Nevertheless, President Trump’s personnel appointments at the State Department and Pentagon have put in place one of the most Taiwan-friendly administrations in recent memory, and actual U.S. policy has shifted gradually in a direction that favors Taiwan’s interests. Among the significant developments are:

- The approval of three arms sales, including a large one of 66 F-16V fighter jets in August 2019, and an apparent commitment to the “regularization” of the Taiwan arms procurement process.
- Relaxed restrictions on high-level diplomatic exchanges between Taiwan and the United States. During trips to allies in Central America and the Caribbean, for instance, Tsai Ing-wen was permitted extended transit stops in Los Angeles and Houston in August 2018, and New York and Denver in July 2019. During the Los Angeles visit, she held a press conference at the airport, visited the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Los Angeles, and gave a public speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library—all firsts for a sitting Taiwanese president.
- Apparent coordination between the U.S. State Department and Taiwanese representatives to stave off diplomatic switches from some of Taiwan’s remaining allies, including recalling U.S. ambassadors in El Salvador, Panama, and the Dominican Republic in September 2018, after those countries had recognized the PRC.

If Tsai wins, the best outcome for the United States would be for Beijing to re-evaluate its Taiwan policy and extend an olive branch to Tsai following her re-election. This possibility seems unlikely at the moment. More plausible is that Beijing either continues the pressure campaign without pausing or recalibrates it but without reevaluating the fundamental assumptions that underlie its current approach.

A recalibration of the PRC's Taiwan policy should also be welcomed by Washington, and it would offer the opportunity to return to a more familiar pattern of cooperative management of cross-Strait issues. A pause to the pressure campaign, in particular, would halt a major source of irritation in Congress and parts of the Trump administration.

However, the most likely outcome is a Tsai victory followed by Beijing's continuation without pause of the dual-track approach, with its emphasis on punishment of Tsai until and unless she offers additional rhetorical concessions. From the U.S. perspective, Tsai has been a responsible steward of cross-Strait relations and a reliable partner with Washington, and her re-election would ensure the continuation of a stable hand at the Taiwan corner of the U.S.-PRC-Taiwan triangular relationship. Nevertheless, if Beijing doubles down on the pressure campaign in response to her re-election, it could compel the United States to attempt to respond more directly to reinforce Taiwan's position and preserve the cross-Strait status quo. The problem in this scenario is that Washington does not have a particularly sophisticated toolkit of its own to counter PRC moves against Taiwan, many of which occur in a kind of diplomatic and economic "grey zone" between open hostility and peaceful friction in the inter-state system.

The Trump administration's unprecedented coordination with Taiwan over the last six months to try to prevent the switch of Pacific Island countries diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing is a good example of the challenges inherent in trying to deter calculated, subtle changes to the cross-Strait status quo. The coordination with Taiwan may have been unprecedented, but so far it has registered as a policy failure: both the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched recognition shortly after public warnings from the United States not to, and subsequently announced major investment deals with PRC enterprises. The recall of U.S. ambassadors from Central America in September 2018 occurred well after the switches in all three cases and has not prevented other Taiwan allies from flirting with recognition of Beijing. And though Congress has threatened sanctions on countries that do switch, nothing that has made it to the American president's desk has yet been binding on the administration.

In sum, Washington's increasing coordination with Taiwan during Tsai Ing-wen's first term has served mostly to highlight weakening U.S. influence in the Pacific relative to the People's Republic of China, and it has not measurably helped Taiwan's own interests, at least in the short run. If Chinese pressure on Taiwan continues even after Tsai Ing-wen wins re-election, then the United States will need to commit to a stronger set of diplomatic and economic tools to effectively respond. In the next four years, Taiwan could then emerge as an important test case for whether the United States can develop a more robust set of diplomatic and economic tools to counter the PRC's rising influence across the Indo-Pacific.



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