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WEBINAR

PREVIEWING THE 2024 TAIWAN ELECTION

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HASS: Good afternoon. My name is Ryan Hass. I'm the director of the China Center and the Koo chair in Taiwan studies here at the Brookings Institution. And I'm delighted to welcome our audience from around the world to today's discussion previewing Taiwan's 2024 elections. The elections are now 30 days away. The contours of the debate for the election are beginning to come into focus, and to help us make sense of the election and its implications, we have an all-star panel today. I'm going to be deliberately brief in introducing them so that we can maximize the 60 minutes we have for substantive discussion. Shelley Rigger is the Brown professor of Asian studies and vice president for academic affairs and dean of faculty at Davidson College in North Carolina. Kharis Templeman is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution and the program manager of the Project on Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific at Stanford University. And Richard Bush is the unofficial dean of Taiwan-watching in the United States. He previously was the initial holder of the Koo chair at the Brookings Institution, where he is now a nonresident senior fellow. So we're going to dive straight in. I have a question to begin with for all of you. I'll ask Shelley to lead us off. We're roughly one month out. What do you see as the top one or two factors that are going to influence the outcome of Taiwan's election?

RIGGER: I'm glad I get to go first because I have a feeling everyone will have the same answers more or less. So I think turnout, especially the turnout of voters who are kind of disappointed in all of the candidates or or disappointed in some of the candidates that they might have voted for previously. So, you know, whether or not people kind of settle for their second favorite or just decide to sit it out, I think is going to make a difference. And very much related to that is strategic voting. So there's a strong tradition in Taiwan of abandoning candidate A in order to save candidate B. So when we have a multi-candidate race, there's always at the, in the latter stages of the campaign, this discussion of who's, who's our last choice, who do we need to give up on in order to throw our support behind our second choice? So I think turnout plus strategic voting, those are my two.

HASS: Kharis?

TEMPLEMAN: So I agree with what Shelley said, but let me go a bit more fundamental, if no less obvious. And I think voters' perspective on cross-strait relations, the China factor, is always central in Taiwan's national elections. And the choice that voters face is whether they want more of the same, what they've had the last eight years. If so, vote for the DPP. Or do you want something different? If so, vote for the KMT or Ko Wen-je. And the question is, of the kind of muddled middle, the swing voters in this race, do they prefer the current situation to kind of a stab in the dark, some some alternative to the current situation? That I don't know, and I think that will be decisive.

HASS: Richard, what do you think?

BUSH: Two or three things. First of all, the flip side of Shelley's first point on turnout is the capacity of each of the major parties to mobilize the voters and make sure that their strong supporters actually go to the polls on Election Day. Second, I think that disinformation is going to be an important tactic in the final days of the campaign. It's already a problem. On the one hand, it's disinformation from China, but there's also disinformation being propagated within Taiwan. So you have to watch that. As a follow on to Kharis' point, I would not be surprised if on January 11th, two days before the election, there were a major announcement from Beijing that said this is a choice between peace and war. And then elaborated on that. And that could shake things up a little bit as people are making their final decision on what to do.

HASS: Interesting. Well, we will come back to the China factor in a moment. But before we get there, Kharis, in addition to being a Taiwan expert, you're also a political scientist and you've spent a lot of time looking at comparative processes of electoral processes. What does your study of political patterns tell you about how Taiwan voters might react to the upcoming election? And how does it color your views on it?

TEMPLEMAN: Yeah. So let me start by saying something that may be controversial, which is I think Taiwan's a pretty normal democracy, actually. It's got a consolidated party system. It's got high party system institutionalization. We've got a clear ruling party and opposition camp. And those parties have been around a while. And voters, there's high partisanship in the electorate. There's a clear differentiation about cross-strait policies between the two major camps. And so voters in this kind of democracy actually have a clear alternative if they're unhappy with the ruling party for whatever reason. There's lots of other democracies out there that don't have quite a clear, as clear a divide, and it's harder to kind of send a signal of disapproval if you dislike the incumbent. So that's my starting point. And then I look at the popularity of the incumbent party in Taiwan. They've been in power eight years. The current president is term limited out. She's trying to hand power off to her vice presidents. And as we know from our own country, that's a difficult transition to do successfully, right? And so my prior going into this election cycle was, actually that the DPP was facing a bigger challenge, I think, than a lot of people realized in trying to win a third term. And then there are some flashing warning signs for the DPP as well. Tsai Ing-wen's approval ratings are under water now, the Taiwan economy slowed down significantly this year. The first two quarters Taiwan was technically in recession. Satisfaction with the DPP government in general is quite a bit lower than it has been. And there's, in terms of kind of feeling-thermometer measures, there's not much difference now between the KMT and DPP in terms of the average respondent to polls and their feelings towards the two parties. And so there's, I think, a lot of downside, there's a lot of downside risk for the DPP in this election and they have to actually run a pretty good campaign, I think, to ensure that they win. So I would push back against the narrative that this campaign is over, that Lai Ching does already wrapped up the election and I think we're going to see some real fireworks in the last months because it's actually a close competitive race.

HASS: That's interesting. You know, one of the things that I've taken away from listening to you in the past, Kharis, is the observation that power has alternated between political parties in Taiwan every eight years since the democratic transition. The DPP, as you just noted, has been in power for eight years. So if President Tsai is able to pass off power to her vice president, William Lai, that will break the pattern. Shelley, I want to ask you a question about preserving the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, because Taiwan voters, according to opinion polls, overwhelmingly support preserving the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. Each of Taiwan's presidential candidates has indicated that they would be the one that would be best positioned to preserve the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. But they have different theories of the case for how they would do so. So what differentiates the presidential candidates and their perspectives on the best way to preserve the status kuo.

RIGGER: So, you know, the starting point for talking about this has to be "not much." Right, there's not much that differentiates them. If we approach the question from the perspective that is pretty widespread outside of Taiwan, which is that we are that the two sides of the political spectrum in Taiwan are the unification side and the independence side. And if we are, you know, I hope that Brookings listeners by now are, have been disabused of the notion that there's really any significant piece of the Taiwanese electorate that's looking for unification or that independence now is a position that any serious political candidate, certainly a presidential candidate, would take. But I do think it's worth pointing that out, right, that the vast majority of the Taiwanese public, the political class and certainly the central tendency of any survey that you take is for the preservation of the status quo, by which people mean Taiwan as a self-governing democratic entity with a high level of personal freedoms. And yet not abandoning any connection to its history as a place populated by ethnically Chinese people, right. So the idea that, that, that China is part of Taiwan. Whatever you think about whether or not Taiwan is part of China today, the idea that China is part of Taiwan is embraced by a lot of people in Taiwan. So the the dispute is really over how to preserve the status quo, how to sustain Taiwan's position as a self-governing place. And here there is a difference between the KMT and the DPP. It's not always evident to me what what the third candidate, Ko Wen-je from the TPP, you know, where to place him on on this measure. But let's talk about the two leading candidates which who are Hou Yu-ih of the KMT and Lai Ching-te of the DPP. The difference is really over whether they prioritize trying to improve relations with Beijing as a way of stabilizing the status quo and reducing the level of threat that Beijing is trying to assert

against Taiwan in order to deter Taiwan from moving in a more independence direction. That would be Hou Yu-ih in the KMT, right? Sort of going directly to the PRC to try to and I don't mean that Hou Yu-ih himself would go, but, using better relations with the -- [coughing] -- Ask Richard, I'll come back.

HASS: Okay. Okay. Well, Richard, what do you think? What differentiates the two leading presidential candidates, the incumbent party, Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party, The opposition party, Hou Yu-ih of the Kuomintang, on what differentiates them and how of how they would preserve the status quo.

BUSH: To follow up on what Shelley said, the KMT believes there is value in engaging the mainland as a way of inducing restraint on China's part, and that's the promise they make. The DPP is much more skeptical about China's intentions and is disinclined to believe that engagement of the sort that was tried under President Ma Ying-jeou from 2008 to 2016 will really work. And so they rely more on trying to deter China from misbehavior. And as part of that, to rely more on the United States. In terms of social and economic policy, there are some basic realities here that don't lead to a lot of differences. The IT sector constitutes about half of the Taiwan economy, and no administration can ignore the needs of the IT sector. How it deals with the needs of the rest of the population is, is is a tough one because, you know, it's hard. Then, no administration can ignore the fact that Taiwan is an aged society and the retirees demand a lot in terms of health care and in terms of pensions. So that puts a constraint on budgetary resources.

HASS: Shelley agrees. Good. Yeah.

RIGGER: I can, I can talk about the DPP for just a second. So the contrasting approach to the KMT's approach would be the DPP's approach, which is to keep mainland China at arm's length as much as possible and to try to stabilize Taiwan's own deterrent defensive and diplomatic options so that the PRC is prevented from intruding on Taiwan's autonomy. Sorry about that.

HASS: Oh, no, I understand entirely. I have another question for the three of you. A lot of pundits like to refer to elections as watersheds or historical turning points or other histrionic features. And sometimes an election is just an election. And so I wanted to ask the three of you, where do you fall on the spectrum between viewing the 2024 election as another sort of step in in Taiwan's democratic consolidation versus a real sort of pivotal, historic turning point? Kharis, why don't we start with you, we'll go to Richard and then Shelley.

TEMPLEMAN: Sure, so the copout answer is, I'll tell you after the election. I kind of want to see the results before I interpret whether it's a historic turning point or more of the same. But more seriously, just about every election that I've been a part of in Taiwan has been referred to as a watershed moment or a historical turning point. And I think there's actually a lot more continuity than people give it credit for. The, the fact that we've had just two parties that have rotated in power now three times, the question is whether this will be the fourth or not. So I'm I guess my prior here, I'm skeptical that this will be a fundamental reordering of the political system in Taiwan, because we basically had a pretty institutionalized, pretty stable system for the last at least 20 years. 24, arguably. And, but let me throw out a couple of caveats. There is an open question about whether the KMT's support base, which is aging, will grow at all in the next 4 to 8 years, or whether they will continue to shrink and become a minor party. I think this election will go some way to determining whether they have a long-term future in Taiwan. And then second, Ko Win-je and the TPP have emerged as a significant player in the political system. There's an open question in this election whether they'll ultimately do as well as the polls were showing they might three or four months ago, or whether they, like every other third party that's popped up over the last 25 years, will be a blip on the radar and will fall into a kind of permanent third place. So another way to put this is the TPP is going to grow up to replace the KMT or are they going to go the way of James Song and the PFP? And we'll know a lot more about the answer to that question after January 13th.

HASS: Richard.

BUSH: As of right now, it appears that no party is going to win an absolute majority of the legislative Yuan. No presidential candidate is going to win with over 50 to 50% of the vote. This will be quite different from the last six years, the last four four terms. Ma Ying-jeou won with over 50% twice and had good control of the legislative ground. Tsai Ing-wen had the same during her eight years. So what I expect and fear a little bit is that we are seeing a fragmentation of power. And it's partly a function of Ko Wen-je; I think it's partly a function of stresses within the two large parties. This would not necessarily be a bad thing, except that the tasks of - facing the Taiwan political system are not trivial. Dealing with the issues before the Taiwan leadership, whether it's domestic or cross-strait or the United States, I think is going to require a lot of inter- and intra-party negotiation. So governing is going to be a little bit different and probably difficult than it has been in the past.

HASS: Shelley, what do you think?

RIGGER: Yeah, similar to Richard's point, I think Ko Wen-je really had the potential to seriously destabilize Taiwan politics by overthrowing a well-established two-party system in which the positions of the parties, while they are sometimes pretty subtle and hard to discern on their specifics, the broad preferences associated with the two parties have been clear to people for a couple of decades, and they offer a clear sort of policy choice to the voters, and the outcome of elections between those two parties say something, you know, they're pretty clear in the preferences that they are endorsing. Ko Wen-je is a much less - his positions are harder to discern and they are more flexible or fleeting. So the message to the electorate and the sort of political communication between the electorate and the leadership, and the electorate and leadership and the outside world are a lot harder to parse in a world with Ko Wen-je taking a leading position. And there is still, as Richard pointed out, the potential for Ko Wen-je or the TPP as a party to destabilize the two-party system through the Legislative Yuan. And if the TPP becomes the party that, whose coalition partnership forges a majority one way or the other, there's, there's, that does introduce a level of complexity and a necessity for negotiation beyond what what we're used to in Taiwan. But I think it if if Ko Wen-je had continued to be as strong of a force coming into the last month of the election as he was coming into the sort of early stages of exploration for this election, Taiwan's political future would be much more complicated and hard to predict. And so in that case, I think it would really have been a watershed.

HASS: Yeah, please, Kharis.

TEMPLEMAN: Can I just add something to Richard's point about, or maybe throw in a caveat here about the prospects of divided government? I think the conventional wisdom is that even if Lai Ching-te wins, he's not going to have a governing majority in the legislature. And if Hou Yu-ih wins, he's also unlikely to have a KMT majority at least. And so it's actually quite likely that no one party is going to control both branches of government. And that's concerning in part because of the precedent of the Chen Shui-bian era, where divided government meant just gridlock and inner branch warfare for for much of that era. But this may be the optimist in me speaking, but I would note that a majority of legislation that comes out of the Legislative Yuan actually passes via cross-party negotiation and consensus. And so it's surprisingly collaborative, quietly, in the Legislative Yuan, when there are issues that don't touch the third rail of Taiwan politics, which is cross-strait relations and the China factor, right? And so the issues that have gone to a roll call vote have generally been issues related to China, or secondly, the government wants to do something that's unpopular. Maybe it's the right thing to do, but it takes some political courage, for instance, to lift the ban on U.S. pork imports containing ractopamine, right? Tsai Ing-wen pushed that through the legislature; the opposition parties all opposed that. That's the kind of step that I think a president without a majority in the legislature wouldn't be able to take in the next administration that the current administration has been able to do.

HASS: Shelley.

RIGGER: Yeah, and I'll just point out that Ma Ying-jeou was president, a KMT president, KMT majority in the legislature, and he also experienced almost eight years of inter-branch warfare. So having your party in the majority doesn't necessarily mean you will have full cooperation. And I think this really gets to the the way the parties have - the central cleavage around which Taiwan's political parties have built themselves, this cross-strait relations and how do we how do we manage this very dangerous relationship so that we can maintain our freedom of action and self-governing status, means that on many other issues that are very important, there is no, the partisan divide is not particularly helpful to guiding politicians' decisions. So you need a strong party leader to, to pull his or her own party along on policy issues that really do not align well often with the interests of those legislators' own constituents. So that's hard whether you have the majority or not, because especially on economic and social issues, you can have a DPP representative who is very conservative and you can have a KMT representative who is much less so.

HASS: Richard, did you want to weigh in?

BUSH: No. I'll take a pass. I basically agree with what Kharis and Shelley said.

HASS: Okay. Well, and in that case, I'm going to turn to a question for Richard about the United States as a factor in the election. It's noteworthy that all of the major presidential candidates in Taiwan have traveled to the United States in the course of their presidential campaigns. What, why does the United States loom so large in Taiwan voters' decisions? And how is the United States trying to position itself, given this context, in the electoral process?

BUSH: I think there are several parts to the answer. The first part is that the Taiwan media thinks that the United States is a really big deal at the time that the presidential candidates come to the United States. I've had to brief Taiwan media after they, after a presidential candidate comes for a closed-door meeting at Brookings. And I'm surrounded by about 30 Taiwan journalists with all kinds of questions. But we could ask at this point, does anybody in Taiwan remember what the coverage was of of these trips? I'm not sure. Obviously, second, they, each of the parties wants to make the case to voters that it is better equipped for handling the U.S. relationship than its rival. And the, that argument will go on and and so it resonates within the campaign. Third, and probably more importantly, voters recognize that the United States actually is very important to Taiwan's prosperity because we're the major market for goods that Taiwan plays a big role in producing. And second, we're vitally important to Taiwan's security. And that is a sort of assumption on which Taiwan people operate. Those Taiwan voters who remember the late 1990ss and early 2000 remember a time when Taiwan presidents Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian got crosswise with the United States, and it wasn't a pleasant time, and it was not good for Taiwan's interests. And so, it does make a difference, I think, in their calculation of an array of issues where the U.S. issue stands. Now, the United States understands that it is an issue in Taiwan politics. And so for a number of cycles, it has taken a very clear-cut position, and that is, number one, that the United States respects Taiwan's democratic system. Number two, it believes that it's Taiwan voters who should pick Taiwan's leader and not the United States by signaling a preference for one candidate or another. Number three, we will do our best to work with whomever the Taiwan voters elect as their leader. And number four, what is really important to the United States is how Taiwan sees its interests and whether there is good overlap and convergence with Taiwan's definition of its interests and our definition of ours. And I think our diplomats have been working to engage with each of the candidates and to get as clear and understanding as they can of, of each candidate's policy positions and to make sure that they understand how the United States defines its interests. When you think about it, this approach that we take towards Taiwan's elections really is an approach that the United States has to take to elections in all friendly democratic systems, because we don't know in advance who's going to win, but we do have to work with whoever wins. And so it's not a good idea to get crosswise with one political party because the other guys might win. And then we've, we're starting off on our back foot.

HASS: So that's the America factor. Kharis, I want to ask you about the China factor. Whereas the United States has been trying to project neutrality, it seems that our counterparts have been less concerned about concealing their preferences for the outcome of the election. And so what is it that Beijing hopes the Taiwan voters will decide, and how do you see them trying to influence the outcome in their favor?

TEMPLEMAN: Yeah, so they their preference is very clear and they're not shy about stating it. They, they don't trust the DPP, they have what I would call a pathological distrust of anybody from the DPP. And the KMT is their preferred partner. Whatever else you might say about the KMT, they do, the leadership of the KMT endorses a form of the one-China principle and to Beijing, that's the bottom line for any sort of cross-strait interaction. And so in this election, they clearly want the KMT to win. Their attitude towards Ko Wen-je I think is unclear. He seems to be, he has said and done things that probably move him towards the bluer end of the spectrum from the DPP, so they probably prefer Ko over Lai, and Lai is the worst possible outcome. I, I don't think I'm saying anything controversial in claiming that. Their efforts to infinity influence the election, I think there are covert efforts that I think are getting a lot of attention now, or at least there's a lot of worry about the use of disinformation or CCP operatives in Taiwan or the chartering of planes to bring voters over to Taiwan. I'm actually, while, while those things are important and we should be concerned about them in terms of the impact on the election, I actually think Beijing's overt activities towards Taiwan over the last eight years are much more important and potentially much more decisive in this election. Whatever else you can say about their approach, they have been very consistent that they will not work with Tsai Ing-wen, because she didn't say the magic words when she was inaugurated. And until and unless a DPP member does say the magic words which contain some form of the one-China principle, they will never work with the DPP president. And so the result is they're going to squeeze that administration, they're going to use diplomatic, economic, and even military tools to try to intimidate Taiwan until the Taiwan voters, in their view, come to their senses and elect somebody more amenable to Beijing. And I think, you know, we can criticize that approach, but it actually is a very credible, consistent approach. And it's we can say with a high level of certainty what a DPP victory in this election would produce from Beijing, and that's more of the same approach, maybe with the pressure ratcheted up a couple more notches, right? And so I actually think the the conversation about disinformation is perhaps distracting us from the more fundamental issue that Beijing is not shy about delivering its preferences or stating its preferences in this election and has a lot of tools to punish Taiwan if voters choose the wrong candidate in their view.

HASS: Richard?

BUSH: Kharis, I wonder how you would comment on an observation of mine that China probably prefers Hou Yu-ih's vice presidential nominee than they do Hou himself.

HASS: Right.

TEMPLEMAN: Yeah, I think that's broadly correct, simply because Jaw Shaw-kong has voiced positions that are much closer to Beijing's preferred rhetoric about cross-strait relations. Hou has been coy, to say the least, about how he views cross-strait relations. And he's, to put it simply, he's he's vaguely defined, his positions on cross-strait relations are unclear. And I think Beijing's preference for him over the other two candidates is rooted in the fact that he's a KMT nominee, and most of the people around him are known quantities, in many cases participated in the last KMT administration and are likely to pursue a, from the KMT perspective, a more conventional approach to cross-strait issues. So I suspect there's some concern about Hou's background or his unwillingness to voice, you know, to give a kind of full-throated endorsement of the one-China principle. But given the alternatives, I'm still confident that Beijing would prefer him to Ko or Lai.

HASS: In the initial discussion that we had, Richard suggested the possibility of Beijing trying to sharpen the distinction as we get closer to the election of this being a war versus peace choice for

the Taiwan voters. Shelley, how how effective do you think such efforts would be in influencing voter attitudes?

RIGGER: I think most people in Taiwan still cannot get their minds around the possibility that Beijing would actually launch a war of choice against Taiwan now. And part of that is a very long-standing conviction among Taiwanese civilians that there's nothing to be gained for Beijing in such a, such a conflict and so much to be lost all the way around that surely, you know, it just doesn't make sense. At the same time, though, Beijing, while it certainly does try to put a lot of pressure on Taiwan, including military pressure, you have PRC leaders making statements that sound like they're trying to be reassuring. So, for example, recently Xi Jinping rejecting the idea that there's a set timeline for action against Taiwan. So, you know, the relatively skeptical view that Taiwanese bring to the possibility that that war could really happen in the immediate term finds reinforcement, as well as undermining, from the PRC's actions. And that's partially because Beijing is talking to multiple audiences all at once and its messages do not necessarily align. So on the one hand, I don't think many people would say, Oh my gosh, if they say they're coming over here if we elect the wrong person, we'd better go ahead and vote the way they want us to. But - and this goes back to your earlier question, which I had to had to bail out of momentarily about the differentiation between the DPP and the KMT - it is not totally under the control of either party or any party in Taiwan how they deal with Beijing going forward, because Beijing will have its own position and will have its own thing to say about whether or not Hou Yu-ih's efforts to improve relations in the strait is acceptable and somehow enough and warranting a positive response from the PRC. And they also have their, Beijing has its own response to whether or not it's realistic for the DPP to be able to say we can stabilize, we can hold this tension longer through partnering with the United States, enlarging our international economic and diplomatic footprint and maintaining a strong military deterrence. So the way that Beijing leans in or does not lean in may not directly affect people's electoral choices in the moment, but it certainly shapes the environment within which those choices are being made.

HASS: Shelley, I'd love to -- Kharis, did you want to jump in?

TEMPLEMAN: Yeah, I actually wanted to react to something that Richard said earlier, which was the prospect of Beijing giving a very sharp statement about the stakes in the election right before election day. I wouldn't put it past the, but I think that would be a very bad move on their part. Generally, when Beijing tries to explicitly tell Taiwan voters what to do, it backfires on them. So their, I think, best strategy is to shut up and do nothing for the next month and only to weigh in after the election results are known. Second, I think the message, even if it is one that they want to be salient and clear, that this election is a choice between peace and better relations or potentially war and worse relations, that Beijing is the wrong messenger for that. I think the KMT is in a much better place if they can make that message organically and not look like they're parroting Beijing's talking points. And then third, the KMT's best argument in this election, I think, is that they can deliver a stabilization of the cross-strait relationship. And Beijing can signal that if they're focused on the economic benefits that might return in the relationship. But if they're emphasizing the military threats, that I think may undercut the KMT message a little bit, that the KMT is going to be in a position where they have to capitulate. And if Beijing is emphasizing the carrots more than the sticks, that's a better environment for the KMT. So if I were advising Beijing right now, I would say don't do what Richard just said. Do the opposite.

BUSH: Now, I would just note that Beijing's record for doing smart things over the past year isn't terribly great.

HASS: Yeah.

BUSH: So we'll wait and see.

HASS: So with that as a caveat, let's think a little bit about the period right after the election. The United States has sought to be neutral in the election, but the United States is not indifferent about

the election outcome or what comes next. Shelley, as you sort of look at the day after January 13 on to the inauguration. What do you think America's top priorities for that period should be?

RIGGER: I think the U.S. fundamental need for the Taiwan Strait is stability. No crisis, no big surprises, no major development that is going to undermine the kind of architecture of U.S. foreign policy and economic relations in the Asia-Pacific. So stability and then predictability. So the U.S. has always said from the very beginning a rapprochement with mainland China in the early 1970s. We are not, we do not have a preference for the ultimate outcome or resolution of the cross-strait disagreement. But we want it to be peaceful and we want to have whatever process unfolds to unfold in an orderly way. And so stability and predictability are really important. So whether it's Lai Ching-te or Hou Yu-ih or even Ko Wen-je, what the U.S. needs for its own interests is for the new government in in Taipei to move forward in a in an orderly, deliberate, thoughtful way in communication with American partners. So I think the biggest thing that people in the U.S., that policymakers worry about is that Taiwan will flip suddenly and we will find ourselves looking at Taiwan, which has either been enticed into a much closer relationship with the PRC, within which our position, the position of the United States is impossible to predict or discern, or it will be coerced into a much closer relationship with Beijing. And whether whether it's inducements or coercion, that that sudden flip is the thing that that we really worry about a lot. And I think the the factors that are most likely to produce such an outcome are PRC pressure, especially military pressure, but also this kind of political pressure that is potentially undermining social cohesion in Taiwan and creating scenarios in which things are much harder to predict because people are detached, voters are detached from the longstanding political choices that they have been facing and are more volatile and willing to sort of grasp at something new, whether they know what that new thing is going to end up really being or not. And that's part of why the Ko Wen-je phenomenon is a little disconcerting, because it does feel like people are grasping at an unknown and rejecting two well-established and up to now, you know, like, keeping-it-going kind of options. So the the other factor that I think could potentially drive Taiwan toward a surprising or relatively precipitous shift in its position is the perception or conviction or conclusion that the U.S. is on the verge of abandoning Taiwan. That isolationism in the United States has reached such a point that Taiwan has to make a separate peace because the U.S. is just not reliable anymore. So, you know, I think the U.S. also has a role to play actually, in enabling the kind of stability and predictability. That's what we really need in the Taiwan Strait.

HASS: Well, on Shelley's last point, Richard, I want to turn to you ask the question, because in the United States right now, we're having a debate about whether to continue supporting Ukraine. And there are strong isolationist tendencies that are influencing that that debate. How is that going to affect the election in Taiwan and how are the presidential candidates going to deal with it?

BUSH: I'm going to give a Kharis Templeman response or cop-out response and say that we're not going to know the answer to that question until after the election when we can, when good polling organizations in Taiwan can ask people, what were the most important issues for you? Obviously, it's some wings of the Taiwan political system will try to make the argument that the United States is not reliable and its support for Taiwan is actually in question and others will argue against that in. In this case, I'm not sure that Taiwan has a choice. It does have to depend on the United States and the support it gets from the United States is probably a lot stronger now than it's been at any time in the past. We don't always agree amongst ourselves what the best way to support Taiwan is, and that's a, that's a problem. But I think that abandonment is probably not a worry that is justified. Being hugged too close may be sort of more worrisome.

HASS: Great. Well, we have questions that have come to us from the audience, and I'm going to pose a few of them to you. The first question comes from Dave Brown, a long-time Taiwan-watcher based in Washington, D.C.. He asked if the election results in a president in Taiwan with a weak mandate and a divided government, what steps could Taiwan leaders or parties take to minimize the ability of Beijing to play on those weaknesses and divisions and to deepen fissures within Taiwan? Shelley, do you have a thought?

RIGGER: Yeah. My thought was, go, Kharris.

HASS: All right, Kharis, over to you.

TEMPLEMAN: Oh, what could they do to minimize divisions? Well, the scenario you're suggesting is, let's say Lai Ching-te wins by a couple percent. There's a joint TPP-KMT majority in the legislature. So we've got the most fragmented possible outcome here. I guess the worry here is that Beijing might engage with the TPP and the KMT and try to separate them and encourage them to be especially hostile to the DPP government. I'm not, I guess I'm struggling a little bit with what the danger is here. That sounds a lot to me like, you know, the Chen Shui-bian era, where we had similar kind of approach. And Beijing was, I mean, Beijing has always had a kind of two-track approach to Taiwan issues, at least since the early Chen era. And on the one track there's engagement with all of the non-Taiwan independence groups in Taiwan and on the other track, its punishment for the people who do express support for Taiwan independence. And so I think they would pursue that strategy again in that kind of environment. So and I don't think that would be, it certainly wouldn't be a new thing for Taiwan politics, and I don't see that it would be deeply destructive of the Taiwan political institutions or the kind of values and norms of the system either.

BUSH: If I could present what may be an overly optimistic and even illusory suggestion. And that was, that would be that Taiwan's new president would convene a meeting with the leaders of the two other parties and make a pitch as follows: that it is very important for we political parties, in order to preserve and enhance public confidence in governance, to come to some degree of agreement on how we address the challenge that is posed by China. Can we sit down and come up with a list of things on which we all agree? Reserving differences on more tactical or implementation issues. I don't know if the parties that didn't win the presidency would go along with that, but I think it would be a sort of a significant demonstration, if it were successful, of a sense of responsibility to preserving Taiwan's interests and its very democratic system.

HASS: We have another question from Kelly Yu, who is a reporter with Voice of America. She, Kelly, you asked how will Taiwan's election affect the US-China relationship? I know it's sort of to be determined based upon the outcome of of the election. But if you could help us understand if the KMT, the opposition party wins, what effect would that have, if any? If the DPP, the current ruling party wins, what effect would that have, if any, on the US-China relationship. Shelley?

RIGGER: Well, this might be an overly cynical response, but my expectation would be that if the KMT wins, the PRC will perceive that to have happened in spite of the United States. And if the DPP wins, the PRC will perceive that to have happened with the connivance of the United States. So either way, the U.S. is somehow in the doghouse, whatever the outcome may be. On the other hand, this, the very existence of this election is itself a source of tension in U.S.-PRC relations, with a lot of people in the PRC being tasked with the job of both predicting and ideally controlling the outcome of the election in Taiwan. They feel that the U.S. has influence. They believe this to be true. I doubt it, actually, but they believe it's true. So they are also then complicating their interactions with the United States government with this other agenda, which is you guys got to get us what we want in the Taiwan election, or at a minimum, you have to not give aid and comfort to the bad guys over there. So just, you know, being able to take the whole thing off the table probably will be marginally beneficial for U.S.-PRC relations.

HASS: Kharis. Richard, anything to add? Or we can go on to the next question.

BUSH: I think it's good.

TEMPLEMAN: Yeah, I think Shelley put it well.

HASS: Richard Kagan, a professor emeritus, asked how has Chen Shui-bian influenced Vice President Lai? There's a bit of a debate in some circles about whether the Vice President, Lai Ching-te, is more influenced by Chen Shui-bian or Tsai Ing-wen, the current president of Taiwan,

and which which of the former presidents he would have more attributes that he would associate with. Do you do you guys have a view on this question?

TEMPLEMAN: Wow. I can take a stab at it. I've never heard that question before. That's really interesting. I'll have to give that some thought. But my immediate reaction is, the, so the parallels with the Chen Shui-bian era here are that DPP intraparty factions have become more important again, or at least they're more, more visible, more salient. Lai is from the New Tide faction of the DPP. Chen Shui-bian was not. And, yeah, I'm. I'm kind of making this up as I go along here. But I think the importance of the fact that Lai is part of New Tide means that we're going to see a little bit more tension within the DPP become public. That and in that sense we are looking a bit more like, you know, a Chen Shui-bian 2.0 kind of intra party environment in the DPP than Tsai Ing-wen 2.0 party environment. And I'll just flag one data point here. Tsai Ing-wen was very good in both 2016 and 2020 as the DPP party chair in overseeing the nomination procedure for the legislature and DPP aspirants who did not get the nomination, did not generally quit the party and then run as independents. Tsai was very good at promising them side some kind of office or side payment to keep them onsides. And so in both 2016 and 2020, the DPP, I would say maximized their seat share relative to their vote share in the district elections. In 2024, there are several instances where a DPP member was not renominated or there's a DPP aspirant who wanted the nomination, didn't get it, and then has left the party and is running as a renegade candidate against the official DPP nominee. That was quite unusual four and eight years ago. Now it's it appears to be more common and I'm just speculating here, I have no concrete evidence on this, but I suspect it may have something to do with intra party factional struggles. And so that to me is a kind of warning sign that the DPP may be less unified in a Lai Ching-te era than it has been on the surface, at least under Tsai Ing-wen's leadership.

BUSH: Um, if I could make a couple of points. First of all, Richard Kagan knows a lot about Taiwan politics, so I take his question very seriously. Point number one, Chen Shui-bian in 1999 was instrumental in redefining the DPP's position on Taiwan's legal status, through the resolution on Taiwan's future. Lai Ching-te's statements about Taiwan's legal status are grounded very much in that resolution. And so to that extent, over this long period of time, Chen Shui-bian has had an influence. But thinking about this in two other ways: the first has to do with sort of general policy approach and I think it's fair to say that Chen Shui-bian's, where Chen Shui-bian ended up is very different from where Tsai Ing-wen has been and where she's ended up. Lai Ching-te, wherever he was in the past, he's moved to a point that is virtually identical to where Tsai Ing-wen is now. You know, he basically uses her her basic slogan, don't bow to pressure from the PRC, don't provoke the PRC just because we have American support. Third, there's the issue of tactics. Chen Shui-bian was very good at pushing the envelope in trying to change something, whether it was U.S.-Taiwan relations or cross-strait relations. He knew he would not be able to get everything he wanted, but he expected that he would get something once he backed off a little bit, that does not strike me as Lai Ching-te's style. I think he's more collegial and consensus and understands better the need for good communication with whomever will listen.

HASS: And it should be noted that Vice President Lai for the past four years has been the vice president to Tsai Ing-wen and has had ample interaction with American officials. We are nearing the end of our time. I want to give each of you a chance for a parting shot or final word before we wrap up. We'll start with Kharis and then Richard, and Shelley, will save the last word for you.

TEMPLEMAN: I'll be very brief. Bottom line, stay tuned. I don't think this election campaign is over. There's a lot that could change in the last month. There's already a lot that's changed in the previous months. And so if you are measuring the drapes for Lai Ching-te in the presidential hall, I think it's premature. And it's still quite possible that one of the other two candidates, most likely Hou Yu-ih, could pull off an upset. Second point I'll say is, if that happens, please don't frame this as China has won this election. This is not about China versus America. This is about two long-time ruling parties who are fully committed to the democratic process, competing on how best to manage relations with both countries and whether the KMT or the DPP nominee wins this election, the democratic process in Taiwan, I think remains strong and we have an interest in seeing this

process play out and that the winner be recognized as the legitimate leader of Taiwan with the consent of the Taiwan people.

HASS: Thank you. Richard.

BUSH: I was involved in the 2000 transition, and I can attest that the United States was not fully prepared for the election of Chen Shui-bian. I would say that we were better prepared than anybody else, but that wasn't saying much. I think this time the United States is well prepared for whatever happens, and we've positioned ourselves extremely well.

HASS: Shelley.

RIGGER: Yeah. I would just add reinforcing something Richard said earlier. Whether the U.S. abandoned, whether the, whether the challenge for, the risk for Taiwan is being abandoned by the U.S. or being loved to death by the U.S., you know, both are very real dangers for Taiwan. And exactly the same individual can be squeezing too hard today and just giving up tomorrow. And the, that's the thing that I fear the most in U.S. politics is the way that when our projects don't go the way we want them to, you know, we've developed this very unbecoming habit in some quarters of our political life of just kind of washing our hands of commitments tha we had appeared to make in the strongest possible terms. And so I would really hope that Americans don't get attached to any particular candidate and decide that if Taiwan picks "the wrong one," that therefore, you know, either democracy doesn't work or democracy doesn't work in Taiwan or Taiwanese people are stupid, so let's just forget it. Because I see that as an actual possibility for some of the people whose blogs I read.

HASS: Well, the Taiwan voters will have their say on January 13th. Stay tuned. Thank you for providing such valuable context and insight into the election and its implications. With that, our event is adjourned.