

Taiwan's Election and the Future of the U.S.-Taiwan Relationship: No End to the Affair

By Daniel Twining

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For all the fear that Taiwan's January 14 presidential elections would precipitate a strategic crisis in Asia, what was striking about both election day and its aftermath was how normal Taiwan's democratic practice has become. The outcome was not entirely predictable—which democracy's elections are?—but the Taiwanese people's business-as-usual approach to the campaign suggests that Beijing and Washington should both have more confidence in the capacity of Taiwanese voters to judge the best course for their nation.

U.S. officials past and present were clearly concerned that a victory by Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) could upend the stability of cross-strait relations that has held since the Kuomintang's Ma Ying-jeou won the presidency in 2008.¹ Tsai won 45% of the vote, but she could not convince a majority of voters that she could protect what they apparently desire: a fruitful economic relationship with China coupled with a preservation of Taiwan's autonomy.²

¹ Anna Fifield, "U.S. Concerned about Taiwan Candidate," *Financial Times*, September 15, 2011; and Andrew Jacobs, "Former U.S. Diplomat Rattles Taiwan before Election," *New York Times*, January 13, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/14/world/asia/former-united-states-envoy-remarks-cause-uproar-in-taiwan.html>.

² Dan Blumenthal, "Five Thoughts on Taiwan's Elections," *Foreign Policy*, January 17, 2012, http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/01/17/five_thoughts_on_taiwans_elections.

Polling consistently shows that roughly nine in ten Taiwanese want to maintain their island's current international status. It therefore remains unclear why a DPP leader elected with the majority of the vote—unlike Taiwan's last DPP president, Chen Shui-bian, who was elected with a plurality of only 39% of the vote—would have put that at risk by pursuing aggressively pro-independence policies. DPP leaders have learned from the failures of Chen, who uniquely managed to alienate Beijing and Washington simultaneously, putting Taiwan's security in danger.

Ma Ying-Jeou's re-election last week should not be misunderstood as a victory for China. During the campaign, he had to reassure voters that his policy of economic engagement with China would not erode Taiwan's ability to determine its own future vis-à-vis the mainland. Any lingering suspicion that President Ma will put Taiwan on a path to reunification with China on Beijing's terms should compel him, in his second term, to continue to robustly defend Taiwan's autonomy, including through policies that may displease Beijing. He is no Manchurian candidate.

Indeed, it is China that finds itself in a conundrum following Taiwan's fourth free election. Chinese people have internalized their government's propaganda that Taiwan's citizens yearn for reunification with the mainland. But no Taiwanese leader today could win a referendum in Taiwan on that question. Most Taiwanese prefer what they have now: autonomy, individual rights guaranteed by law, an independent identity, and the chance to choose their own leaders.

As Taiwan's democracy has matured while delivering high rates of economic growth, the question citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC) must confront is which Chinese society is the pacesetter, and which is the outlier. Is the secretiveness of the selection process for China's fifth-generation leaders, culminating in this November's party plenum, superior in any way to Taiwan's free and open elections? Is the free-wheeling media coverage of a Taiwanese presidential campaign somehow less desirable than the controlled coverage of China's leadership transition in the PRC's state-directed media? Will China's new leadership ever be able to match Ma Ying-jeou's claim to be the people's choice, or to enjoy the legitimacy that flows from such accountability? Has Taiwan's economic growth somehow been constrained by the rule of law or civic

freedoms in ways that prevent Chinese leaders from upholding the equal rights of their people?

The answer to all of these questions is “no.” While Taiwan’s leaders must worry about the extraordinary military force China is permanently poised to deploy against Taiwan with no warning, it is rulers in Beijing who suffer the more acute insecurity posed by fear of their own citizens. Until China embraces genuine political reform, this will remain its strategic Achilles’ heel in relations with Taiwan and the world, irrespective of the balance of forces across the Taiwan Strait.

Yet despite the success of Taiwan’s democracy—and the peace it has helped reinforce in East Asia—a growing chorus in Washington nonetheless questions whether the United States can continue to support Taiwan in light of China’s ascendance and given the stakes for the United States in maintaining a stable relationship with the world’s second-largest economic and military power.³ Why should the United States risk its relationship with the rising superpower of 1.3 billion people over its ties to a small island nation of only 23 million, given the consequences for Washington of a conflicted relationship with Beijing? Why not remove the irritant of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in ways that enable a productive partnership between China and the United States unencumbered by the legacy of the Chinese civil war?

But arguments to let Taiwan go are neither realistic nor strategic. First, cutting off an old U.S. ally at a time of rising tensions with an assertive China might do less to appease Beijing than to encourage its hopes to bully the United States into a further retreat from commitments in East Asia. Second, it would transform the calculus of trusted U.S. allies, like Japan and South Korea, who might plausibly wonder whether the U.S. commitment to their security is as flexible as it was toward Taiwan.

³ Charles Glaser, “Will China’s Rise Lead to War?” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (2011): 80–91, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67479/charles-glaser/will-chinas-rise-lead-to-war>; Shyu-tu Lee, Douglas Paal, and Charles Glaser, “Disengaging from Taiwan,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 4 (2011), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67937/shyu-tu-lee-douglas-paal-and-charles-glaser/disengaging-from-taiwan>; Nancy Bernkopf Tucker and Bonnie Glaser, “Should the United States Abandon Taiwan?” *Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2011): 23–37, http://www.twq.com/11autumn/docs/11autumn_tucker_glaser.pdf; and “Why Taiwan Matters,” hearing before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Washington, D.C., June 16, 2011, http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing_notice.asp?id=1310.

Third, abandoning Taiwan would upend the calculations of new U.S. partners like India and Vietnam, whose leaders have made a bet on U.S. staying power and its associated benefits for their security. Fourth, such preemptive surrender would reinforce what remains more a psychological than a material reality of China emerging as a global superpower equal to the United States—which the PRC is not and may never be. Finally, and most importantly, it would resurrect the ghosts of Munich and Yalta, where great powers decided the fate of lesser nations without reference to their interests—or the human consequences of offering them up to satisfy the appetites of predatory great powers.

Fundamentally, China’s emergence as a peer competitor and the U.S. stake in managing a set of Asian alliances that sustains liberal order in a post-Western world make Taiwan more important to the United States, not less.⁴ Preemptively abandoning Taiwan to the mercies of the mainland would decisively signal the end of the American era in Asia, as well as the democracy and prosperity it has delivered for billions of people. It would mark that system’s replacement by a hierarchic-authoritarian order in which, as China’s foreign minister so memorably stated at an Asian summit in 2010, “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact.”⁵

President Obama was right to pledge that the United States would be “all-in” in a Pacific century.⁶ One of the fastest ways to undermine this “pivot” to Asia would be to pivot away from Taiwan before its people and China’s can freely chart a common future together.

⁴ I am grateful to Richard Bush for enlightening me on this point.

⁵ Yang Jiechi cited in Aileen S.P. Baviera, “Power Asymmetry in South China Sea,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 26, 2011, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/6896/power-asymmetry-in-south-china-sea>.

⁶ Matthew Franklin, “Future Belongs to the Free, Says Barack Obama,” *Australian*, November 18, 2011, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/obama-in-australia/future-belongs-to-the-free-barack-obama/story-fnb0o39u-1226198358039>.

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