

Taiwanese presidential transitions need less turbulence by Harry Krejsa

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Tsai Ing-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) historic victory last month was largely driven by domestic political and economic concerns, but brings with it significant geopolitical implications. Though Tsai has stated her commitment to continuity in Taiwan's foreign policy, many (not least of which China) are nervously awaiting next moves by the traditionally independence-minded opposition party. Tsai and her team will need an exceptionally smooth transition in the months between now and her May inauguration. Yet she will require specific tools to do so – including a desperately-needed modern presidential transition law modeled after the United States, a politically inclusive Cabinet, and, crucially, the support of those Ma Ing-jeou administration officials who helped stabilize cross-strait relations.

The DPP and President-elect Tsai should feel proud of their victory. Not only did the autonomously-governed island elect its first female president and unified DPP government, but it also initiated only its second transfer of power away from the traditional ruling party, the Kuomintang (KMT). The outgoing Ma administration's unpopularity, combined with a widespread sense of economic malaise, drove a substantial political realignment. The opposition capitalized on this and now stands as the newly emboldened center of political power for Taiwan.

But the DPP and its allies should also be cautious when assessing how far their mandate for change actually extends. While traditionally relations with China have defined much of the divide between the KMT and DPP, [there is substantial evidence](#) that the economy animated most voters in this year's election. Though campaign ammunition included cross-strait relations, this discontent likely only went as far as Ma's rapprochement policies appeared to be harming the economic standing of everyday Taiwanese while excluding the island's various and diverse voices from the process. Issue polls have [consistently found](#) that Taiwan's voters [broadly prefer](#) KMT's approach to China – economic and cultural engagement writ large, regular diplomatic engagement, and an overarching goal to maintain the status quo. During her campaign, Tsai focused on that malaise and sense of exclusion while acknowledging that a DPP foreign policy would work to largely preserve that cross-strait status quo.

The president-elect's electoral mandate is consequently a nuanced one: bring significant change and inclusion to Taiwan's politics and economy, and bring significant

continuity to its foreign policy. This is all the more important because of the regional context in which Tsai and her party are assuming power. There is no love lost between the DPP and China, and countries across the Asia-Pacific are holding their breath to see how each handles the other in the months ahead.

Luckily, there is a model for this kind of presidential transition, and it was executed par excellence by George W. Bush and Barack Obama. While President Obama assumed office promising distinct changes to specific foreign policy priorities, the fragile geopolitical environment of the time called for substantial continuity in the management of national security affairs. This was achieved through a robust, Congressionally-authorized presidential transition environment and the willingness of key Bush administration staff – namely Defense Secretary Robert Gates – to remain on board and help set the tone of a collaborative and smooth transfer of power.

The United States' Presidential Transition Act – an analogue for which Taiwan lacks – was designed to ensure orderly transfers of power in a tense Cold War environment, but remains useful today. The law provides the president-elect and his or her transition team the resources to prepare for taking office between the election and inauguration. The federal government not only provides a large budget and office space to the incoming administration, but also a framework for expedited security clearances for the president-elect's most important national security advisors and staff. In Taiwan, the current process remains an ad-hoc, [last-minute task force](#). Tsai might be able to access classified national security briefings herself, but her advisors are legally left out in the cold. Despite having four months between her election and inauguration, the incoming administration does not have the benefit of such a framework to prepare for assuming office, to begin assessing intelligence, and to learn from their predecessors in real time. The region can scarcely afford learning-on-the-job when the stakes include peace in the Strait of Taiwan.

That cross-strait stability was hard-won over the last eight years, built painstakingly by the Ma administration and the Mainland Affairs Council with their Chinese counterparts. Though China has been expecting Tsai's victory for months, they still eye her independence-leaning party with deep skepticism. The president-elect and her team will by right be able to chart their own course in cross-strait relations, but they would benefit from temporarily retaining familiar faces in their Mainland Affairs team.

Obama won his 2008 election by a margin similar to that of Tsai and with a similarly anti-incumbent campaign, but his decision to retain his predecessor's secretary of Defense was seen as one of strength and shrewdness. President-elect Obama benefitted from the national security credibility that Gates and his staff carried over from one administration to the next, and

the “known quantity” that Gates represented improved defense-diplomacy efforts around the globe. Tsai can bring bold new policy directions to her administration while also ensuring that institutional memory – and institutional relationships – do not have to start back at square one when dealing with China.

Luckily, there is time to ensure that the transition goes smoothly. If Tsai quickly puts away the knives of the campaign season and leads the DPP to be humble in victory, she may be able to secure early buy-in from Mainland Affairs staff from the Ma administration – a gesture that could send powerful signals to China and the world. Further, Tsai should bring her political rivals on the left, like the young New Power Party, into her Cabinet to signal her commitment to the more inclusive politics she called for in her campaign. (And, like Hillary Clinton’s selection as secretary of State, consolidate her administration’s support among those rivals.)

But most importantly, Taiwan must swiftly adopt a new law expanding and streamlining the presidential transition process – including allowing the incoming administration access to classified intelligence briefings. The Taiwanese legislature, the Legislative Yuan (LY), has already convened, months before the presidential inauguration. The new LY should pass modern presidential transition legislation, using the United States law as a model and consulting with US policymakers as necessary. The legislation should give Tsai and her staff the budget, resources, and clearances necessary to hit the ground running upon inauguration.

The DPP’s resounding victory was a testament to the strength of Taiwan’s democracy – but now has many around the world sitting a bit more on edge. President-elect Tsai and her administration could easily miss this opportunity, entering office flat-footed and in the midst of regional uncertainty over her transition. Or, with the right tools, a spirit of humility, and bipartisan collaboration, the Ma-Tsai transition could set up Taiwan – and the DPP – for a new era with the geopolitical winds at their backs.

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