



**Tough times ahead if the DPP returns to power?** by Bonnie S. Glaser and Jacqueline Vitello

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Taiwan's presidential election is six months away, but it seems increasingly likely that the DPP's Tsai Ing-wen will win. In a July 7 TVBS public opinion poll, Tsai leads the KMT's Hung Hsiu-chu 54.2 percent to 24.6 percent. Among those closely watching the possible return of the DPP to power is China, which worries that if elected, Tsai will deny that the two sides of the Strait belong to one China and pursue *de jure* independence. This fear derives from Tsai's history as the creator of the "two states theory" in the Lee Teng-hui era as well as her unwillingness to accept the existence of "one China" even as she pledges to maintain the status quo across the Taiwan Strait. Beijing could react harshly if Tsai is elected president of Taiwan, including by taking punitive economic measures, suspending communication and cooperation mechanisms, stealing away some of Taiwan's diplomatic allies, or even using military coercion or force.

Xi Jinping's reaction to a Tsai Ing-wen victory should not be underestimated. When it comes to sovereignty issues, the Chinese leader has shown little willingness to compromise. Since becoming General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, Xi has sent tough signals to Taiwan, and these warnings have intensified in the run up to the presidential elections. As he deepens the anti-corruption campaign and maneuvers to put supporters on the Standing Committee of the Politburo at the 19<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress in 2017, Xi must protect his flank. Appearing soft toward Taiwan could create a vulnerability for his opponents to exploit.

Early in his presidency, Xi met with Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou's official representative, former Vice President of Taiwan Vincent Siew, on the sidelines of the 2013 APEC summit in Bali, Indonesia. According to China's official *Xinhua* news agency, Xi told Siew that "the issue of political disagreements that exist between the two sides must reach a final resolution, step by step, and these issues cannot be passed on from generation to generation." He insisted that Beijing was "willing to have equal consultations with Taiwan on cross-Strait issues within the framework of one-China," and would "make reasonable and fair arrangements for this." Xi's expression of impatience with the status quo echoed former Chinese President Jiang Zemin's July 2004 statement that the "solution of the Taiwan question cannot be delayed indefinitely." Still, unlike Jiang, there is no evidence that Xi has set a deadline for reunification.

Xi's pressure tactics did not work. President Ma, who proposed a cross-Strait peace accord as recently as December 2011, said that there was no consensus in Taiwan on holding political talks with the Mainland and instead pushed for expanding cooperation on more practical issues. Progress in cross-Strait relations stalled unexpectedly in early 2014, when the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement (CSSTA) failed to pass Taiwan's Legislative Yuan due to massive protests later dubbed the "Sunflower Movement." The protesters, initially a group of students who stormed the chambers of the Legislative Yuan, among other things called for more public oversight on trade deals with Mainland China.

Another round of protests began in Hong Kong in late September 2014. The Occupy Central movement and other opposition groups demanded that Beijing allow a fully democratic electoral system instead of the proposed plan under which an election committee vets candidates before voters choose. Taiwan's government and its citizens followed these events closely for indications of Beijing's willingness to permit a truly separate system of government under "one country, two systems," an arrangement originally crafted for Taiwan's future relations with Mainland China. In a surprisingly brash move, Xi Jinping met with the heads of pro-unification groups from Taiwan in the midst of the Hong Kong protests and proposed realizing national reunification under the "one country, two systems" framework. With widespread aversion to the plan among Taiwanese, President Ma publicly dismissed Xi's idea, saying that Taiwan—as the Republic of China—had been a sovereign country for 103 years and his government would continue to adhere to the "1992 consensus" that allows the two sides to have a separate interpretation of "one China."

In late November 2014, the KMT suffered massive losses in local elections held throughout Taiwan. While won principally on the basis of domestic rather than cross-Strait or international issues, the DPP's stunning victory was still an unwelcome turn of events in Beijing. Despite the DPP's pursuit of an increasingly moderate posture toward China, the Mainland still harbored serious concerns about the party's refusal to renounce independence and its unwillingness to accept the "1992 consensus."

In the aftermath of the Sunflower and Occupy Central movements, with both Ma and the KMT's popularity ratings dwindling ahead of the upcoming presidential elections, Xi spoke on the "Taiwan question" again in March 2015. Addressing a panel discussion with members of the 12<sup>th</sup> National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Xi expressed his strong distaste for "the separatist forces of 'Taiwan independence' and their activities," which he claimed "threat(en) national sovereignty and territorial integrity." He charged that Taiwan's independence forces "are the biggest hindrance for

the peaceful development of the cross-Strait ties, biggest threat of the cross-Strait stability and therefore should be resolutely opposed." Xi called on the National Committee members to be vigilant against "Taiwan independence" forces: "We should unswervingly pursue peaceful development, unswervingly adhere to the common political basis, unswervingly bring benefits to the people across the Strait and unswervingly join hands to realize the national revitalization." Xi then looked up from his prepared text and made a remark that experts later confided were not included in the document. "As the old saying goes, without a solid foundation, the earth and mountain will tremble. We must adhere to the 1992 Consensus, which [the] Chinese mainland has been regarding as the basis and precondition for conducting exchanges with authorities on Taiwan and its political parties," he warned.

Two months later, in May 2015, Xi met with the new KMT Chairman Eric Chu, and again delivered a tough message. According to *Xinhua*, Xi insisted that opposition to Taiwan independence, along with firm adherence to the 1992 Consensus, forms the "political foundation for cross-Strait relations." Then, in a shot across the bow at DPP Chairperson and presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen, he called for vigilance against positions like "one country on each side (of the Strait)," a formulation used by former President Chen Shui-bian when Tsai was head of the Mainland Affairs Council, and "one China, one Taiwan." Xi said such policies would result in "no possibility of peace or development."

There have been other signals of Xi's uncompromising stance toward the island. For example, the national security law enacted by China on July 1 included a clause that says that preserving "national sovereignty and territorial integrity is a shared obligation of all the Chinese people, including patriots from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan." Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council reacted angrily to the law, which it claimed did not "respect [the] Taiwan people's insistence on maintaining the status quo in the Strait."

Complementing Xi's stern cross-Strait messaging, the PLA has conducted military exercises near Taiwan. The most recent drills took place in late May and early June, which coincided with Tsai's May 29-June 3 visit to the US. Navy vessels and military aircraft passed through the eastern portion of the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and the Philippines, practicing long-range precision strikes and aerial combat. The *PLA Daily* reported another naval drill involving a 20,000-ton civilian roll-on/roll-off ferry that included an officer giving a briefing with a map of Taiwan. The article stated that China might be capable of moving eight to 12 divisions to Taiwan in the event of war. Last January, the PLA also announced that it will double the number of its Amphibious Mechanized Infantry Divisions from two to four, a decision likely taken to bolster the military's capability to invade Taiwan.

Since assuming power, Xi Jinping's approach to Taiwan has been consistently hardline and at times, remarkably out of step with the sentiment of the majority of Taiwanese people. There are several possible explanations. It may be that Xi's target audience is not Taiwan but the Mainland. He may be determined to not appear weak on Taiwan lest it undermine his power and ability to implement his larger agenda of achieving the Chinese Dream. Alternatively, Xi may not understand

Taiwan as well as many observers say he does. As party head in Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, Xi had frequent contact with Taiwan businessmen and may believe that he has a deep understanding of Taiwanese society based on this experience. Chinese scholars say that Xi does not seek out the advice of experts or officials in the Taiwan Affairs Office in developing policy toward Taiwan; rather he relies on his own counsel. A third possibility is that Xi has concluded it is time to draw a line in the sand to prevent cross-Strait ties from regressing and, potentially, to compel reunification if a new Taiwanese president crosses Beijing's bottom line.

There is a significant possibility that if Tsai Ing-wen is elected president of Taiwan, a cross-Strait crisis could ensue, even though Tsai has made a concerted effort to articulate a strategy aimed at maintaining the status quo. In a speech during her US trip, Tsai defined the "status quo" as including "the accumulated outcomes of more than 20 years of negotiations and exchanges" between the two sides of the Strait. This timeline deliberately encompasses the 1992 talks between Beijing and Taipei. While she has not directly endorsed the 1992 consensus, Tsai has also not rejected it. Tsai has also emphasized her desire to "push for the peaceful and stable development of cross-strait relations," and stipulates that this should be done "in accordance with the will of the Taiwan people and the existing ROC constitutional order." Moreover, Tsai has attempted to convince the US that under her leadership, Taiwan will be "a reliable partner . . . in ensuring peace and stability in the region." All her statements indicate that she is unlikely to pursue provocative policies such as Chen Shui-bian attempted to carry out when he was in power. Nevertheless, Mainland China deeply distrusts Tsai. A common saying among Mainland experts on Taiwan is that whereas Chen was an opportunist, Tsai is ideologically pro-independence and therefore, more dangerous.

Responsibility for maintaining a stable and cooperative cross-Strait relationship must be shouldered by both Beijing and Taipei. If Tsai is elected president, the two sides will need to agree on a new formulation that provides a basis for managing cross-Strait ties. The interests of both Taiwan and Mainland China will be best served by a pragmatic approach that takes into account prevailing realities. Outright rejection by Tsai of the framework—including the 1992 consensus—that has enabled more than seven years of peace and cooperation across the Strait would be damaging and counterproductive. Chinese unwillingness to find a compromise that preserves cross-Strait stability while protecting Beijing's bottom line of avoiding the risk of Taiwan independence would be similarly destructive and unwise.

The US has deep and enduring interests in the preservation of stability across the Taiwan Strait and has an important role to play in shaping the policies of both Beijing and Taipei. If the DPP returns to power, Washington can help prod both sides to find a *modus vivendi* that ensures cross-Strait communication channels remain open and pragmatic cooperation continues. US efforts need to be stepped up now, before Xi Jinping's positions harden further.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*