

**Response to PacNet #41 “Tough times ahead if the DPP returns to power?”** by Joseph A. Bosco

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Bonnie Glaser and Jacqueline Vitello sound the alarm for US policymakers regarding the stakes in Taiwan's presidential election next January. (*PacNet* #41 “Tough times ahead if the DPP returns to power?”)

The clock started running on this particular scenario on Election Day 2012 since President Ma Ying-jeou by law could not run for a third term. With no assurance of another KMT victory in 2016, Beijing strived to make the most of the four years it could count on a Ma administration being more receptive than what might follow.

It bet heavily on economic integration as the path to forging significant and irreversible political bonds. Ma was initially favorably inclined, but as Glaser/Vitello note, he faced strong domestic resistance, culminating in the Sunflower Movement and the electorate's repudiation in the 2014 municipal and legislative elections.

Persuasion having failed to sway the Taiwanese to see things their way, China's Communist leaders reverted to their default position – coercion and threats.

Glaser/Vitello warn that “Beijing could react harshly if Tsai is elected president of Taiwan...even using military coercion or force...It worries that if elected, Tsai will deny that the two sides of the Strait belong to one China and pursue *de jure* independence.” This, despite the fact that, as the authors accurately report, “All her statements indicate that she is unlikely to pursue provocative policies...She has made a concerted effort to articulate a strategy aimed at maintaining the status quo.”

“Nevertheless,” write Glaser/Vitello, “Mainland China deeply distrusts Tsai.” But who in the DPP does Beijing not distrust? A common saying among Mainland experts on Taiwan is that “whereas Chen was an opportunist, Tsai is ideologically pro-independence and therefore more dangerous.” Those Mainland experts sound a lot like Mainland *supporters* who doubtless found former President Chen Shui-bian “dangerous” enough when he was in office.

The authors theorize that Xi Jinping “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.*” My italics are meant to observe that unification *is* Beijing's bottom

line. So, the issue is not whether a President Tsai will do something rash and provoke a crisis – that seems extremely unlikely given her calm, lawyerly, almost scholarly temperament – and her commitments to the United States.

No, the problem for Beijing is what she will *not* do – i.e., accept unification against the clear will of the Taiwanese people. And that would be true of any DPP leader – as it was even true of the KMT's Ma. That is Taiwan's bottom line and Xi and his colleagues need to accept that reality or risk losing more than Taiwan.

That is where Washington comes in. Glaser/Vitello write: “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...US efforts need to be stepped up now, before Xi Jinping's positions harden further.”

The US faced a similar challenge in 2012 when Beijing made unmistakably clear its preference for Ma's reelection. Washington chose then to put its thumb on the scale and throw unprecedented diplomatic support to the Ma administration. This time Washington seems prepared to let democracy work its will on Taiwan.

The authors recommend that if Tsai wins as expected, the US should “prod both sides to find a modus vivendi that ensures cross-Strait communication channels remain open and pragmatic cooperation continues.” That is a worthy goal – though difficult considering the irreconcilability of China's and Taiwan's bottom lines on unification.

But it is not sufficient. Now, more than ever, the United States needs to declare, openly and unequivocally, that it will defend Taiwan against any Chinese coercion or aggression. Washington needs to harden its position before Xi does. Peace in the region, even a tense peace, no longer allows the lethal luxury of strategic ambiguity, which only tempts China into dangerous adventurism.

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