

Taiwan's 2012 Presidential Election and Cross-Strait Relations by Bonnie S. Glaser and Brittany Billingsley

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This is a summary of a newly-released report, "Title: Taiwan's 2012 Presidential Election and Cross-Strait Relations: Implications for the United States."

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Since Ma Ying-jeou assumed the presidency in Taiwan in May 2008, relations across the Taiwan Strait have improved dramatically. In the past three and a half years, 16 agreements have been signed on practical matters that have largely benefited the people on both sides of the strait. The presidential election in Taiwan is scheduled for Jan. 14, 2012, and the race is extremely tight. Regardless of the outcome, the election will have significant impact on the cross-Strait situation and on US interests.

With the election only 10 weeks away, polls show Ma in a dead heat with Tsai Ing-wen, the candidate from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). On Nov. 4, xFuture, a market operated by Taipei's National Chengchi University where users bet on future events similar to investors in a stock market, gave Tsai a 49.7 percent chance of victory and Ma a 45.2 percent chance. A poll conducted the following day by the pro-Blue *China Times* showed 44.3 percent would vote for Ma, while 41.0 percent would vote for Tsai, and 14.7 percent were undecided.

A third candidate, James Soong from the People First Party (PFP), announced Nov. 1 that he will enter the race after collecting the requisite number of signatures to add his name to the ballot. Most polls indicate that Soong can obtain approximately 10-14 percent of the total, drawing an equal number of votes from both of the other candidates. However, it is more likely that Soong will siphon votes from Ma and tip the results in favor of Tsai. In the 2000 elections, Soong ran as a third-party candidate, splitting the pan-Blue vote, which enabled Chen Shui-bian to win with only 39.3 percent.

If President Ma is reelected for a second term, Beijing may become impatient for faster progress toward reunification and pressure Taipei to launch talks aimed at settling political differences. Absent a domestic consensus on the island, cross-strait political talks could be extremely divisive with negative repercussions both within Taiwan and between the two sides of the strait.

A victory by Tsai Ing-wen would create different challenges. Tsai is unlikely to accept the two pillars on which Mainland China has based its willingness to engage with Taipei: the 1992 Consensus – the formula that made possible the historic Singapore talks between Taiwan and the Mainland in 1993 and represents an understanding that there is only one China, though disagreement persists on how to define it – and opposition to Taiwan's independence. In the event that Beijing and Taipei were unable to agree on a new formulation to guide their relationship, it is possible that cross-strait interaction would slow and negotiations would cease. In a worst-case scenario, tensions that characterized the era of the first DPP president, Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008), could reemerge.

Beijing is watching the presidential campaign in Taiwan with great concern, and China's leadership is pessimistic about the prospects for maintaining cross-strait stability and progress if the DPP returns to power. The Mainland is especially suspicious of Tsai, due in part to her role in former President Lee Teng-hui's administration as head of an advisory group that recommended in 1999 that a "special state-to-state" relationship existed between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. Some mainland Chinese scholars suggest that a DPP victory could embolden domestic critics of Hu Jintao's policy of pursuing "peaceful development" in cross-Strait relations to push for a tougher approach. Such a development on the eve of the leadership transition on the Mainland could influence personnel arrangements and policies of the new leadership. It is notable, however, that despite such warnings, there have been no hints in either public or private statements about consideration of taking military action against the island.

A Ma victory is Beijing's preferred outcome, although in private conversations, Chinese officials and scholars do not conceal their disappointment and frustration with Ma's cautious approach to Mainland China and his insistence that many cross-strait agreements yield greater benefits for Taiwan than for the Mainland. Even if no substantial progress toward reunification is achieved in a second term under Ma's rule, Mainland officials are confident that cross-strait relations will at least be stable and predictable, enabling Beijing to focus attention on other pressing matters. President Hu's "peaceful development" policy would also continue, allowing for increased cultural and educational exchanges alongside expanded economic cooperation. A Kuomintang (KMT) win would also raise questions about how hard to press for political talks and whether to respond positively to Ma's demands for greater international space, economic cooperation agreements with other countries, and reductions in Chinese military deployments opposite Taiwan.

Official discussion of cross-Strait military confidence-building measures (CBMs) is currently taboo in Taiwan due in part to the proximity of the election, but some officials suggest privately that CBMs could be on the agenda if Ma is reelected

to a second term. A decision by Taipei to pursue cross-strait military CBMs would receive US support, as would the opening of cross-strait political talks, assuming that such initiatives were backed by the majority of the people of Taiwan and were undertaken voluntarily rather than as a result of coercion.

President Ma has said that Taiwan could “cautiously consider” signing a peace agreement with Mainland China within the next decade if the pact meets three preconditions: it wins strong support from Taiwan’s people, whose views would be polled in a referendum; it meets the actual needs of the nation; and it is supervised by Taiwan’s legislature.

Much is at stake for the United States in Taiwan’s upcoming elections. The US has a strong interest in seeing Taiwan’s democracy continue to flourish and in the conduct of free and fair elections. Taiwan is a vibrant democracy that is widely viewed as a vanguard for political development in Asia and a role model for China in particular. People of Taiwan and the US share the same values of freedom and liberty, and they cherish their rights to choose their leaders and participate in the political process. At the same time, the US has an equally compelling interest in the preservation of cross-Strait stability. The tensions that prevailed in relations between Taipei and Beijing beginning in the mid-1990s until 2008 were profoundly contrary to US interests. Thus, Washington is ambivalent: it prefers to not interfere in Taiwan’s elections, but also insists that Taiwan’s leaders manage ties with Beijing in a way that minimizes friction and reduces the possibility of military conflict.

This ambivalence was apparent during the visit to Washington by Tsai Ing-wen in September 2011. Although Tsai told audiences she would be flexible in dealing with the Mainland and pledged to work closely with the United States if elected, US officials were worried by the absence of details. Keeping channels of communication open between both sides of the strait is deemed of the utmost importance. A suspension of dialogue could result in miscalculation and potentially war. It is likely that such concerns were at play when an unnamed senior Obama administration official told the *Financial Times* that Tsai’s visit to the US “left us with distinct doubts about whether she is both willing and able to continue the stability in cross-strait relations the region has enjoyed in recent years.” The official also stated that it was “far from clear...that she and her advisers fully appreciate the depth of mistrust of her motives and DPP aspirations” coming from the Mainland. At the same time, a State Department official, responding to an inquiry from the office of Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK), reiterated that “the administration does not take sides in Taiwan’s election. It’s up to the people of Taiwan to choose their own leaders in an election. Our interest is in a free, fair and open presidential election, not in supporting or criticizing any presidential candidate.”

Regardless of who is elected Taiwan’s president in January, the US will likely maintain its important unofficial relationship with the government and people of Taiwan and abide by commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act. Arms sales to Taiwan are also likely to continue, although advanced weapons requests from Taipei can be expected to be increasingly controversial as the cross-strait military balance

shifts more decisively in Beijing’s favor and as China’s national power grows.

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