



**STARK CHOICES FACE TAIWAN
VOTERS—AND THE FUTURE OF
CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS**

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*This article summarizes the authors' chapter in the latest issue of *Comparative Connections*, which can be read in its entirety [here](#).*

The May-August period saw four candidates join the race to be president of the Republic of China (Taiwan). Their sharply contrasting platforms and party postures toward China and cross-strait issues mean that the election on Jan. 13, 2024, will set Taiwan's approach for the next four years.

First out of the gate was incumbent Vice President William Lai Ching-te, designated successor of President Tsai Ing-wen, who was confirmed by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as its presidential candidate on April 12. All political commentators immediately focused on [Lai's description of himself](#) as “a politician who supports Taiwanese independence.” Would Lai take the step that divides Taiwan political opinion like no other? Would he declare Taiwan independence and risk a Chinese invasion? Lai sought to undercut this concern by saying that there was no reason to declare

independence because Taiwan, as the Republic of China, was already independent. In making this assertion, Lai was repeating Tsai's approach, [articulated](#) in her first inaugural address in May 2016—“I was elected President in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of China, thus it is my responsibility to safeguard the sovereignty and territory of the Republic of China.” [Lai set off alarm bells](#) when he told an audience in Taiwan in early July that his goal was an independent Taiwan formally recognized by others including the United States: “when a Taiwan president can walk into the White House, we have achieved the political goal that we are pursuing.” This language seemed to suggest that Lai might upend the cross-strait status quo and the balancing act that the US has maintained since 1979.

Lai's repeated emphasis on Taiwan independence worried officials in Beijing. [China's Taiwan Affairs Office said](#) that the DPP's talk of “Taiwan independence” was the real source of war anxiety among the Taiwan people, and it disqualifies them from talking of peace. Lai, despite occasional rhetorical flourishes, appears to be carefully using a formulation that President Tsai has made familiar, as had Taiwan presidents before her—that the Republic of China has never been subordinate to the People's Republic of China and is independent—but he is upending it. This formulation sounds very much like a one-China formulation that is secondarily an independence formulation. Lai has reversed the emphasis. Taiwan is independent, and secondarily it is called the Republic of China. Taiwan's independence is no longer tied to a one-China framework. While making this shift, Lai has insisted that he will adhere rigorously to Tsai's disciplined cross-strait approach, even retaining her national security team. By doing this he has signaled that he will seek to continue Tsai's policies that the US has welcomed as “responsible.”

On May 17, the KMT nominated Hou Yu-ih as its presidential candidate, citing poll data to support its assessment that Hou has a better chance of defeating Lai than Terry Gou, who had also sought the KMT nod. Even before the nomination was final, Hou found himself trying to articulate a sustainable cross-strait position that could bridge differences among KMT

factions. According to his campaign advisor, King Putsong, [Hou's policy boils down](#) to “three if’s”: support the 1992 Consensus *if* it accords with the ROC constitution; return military conscription to four months from the one-year period announced by President Tsai *if* the cross-Strait situation is stable; and finish the fourth nuclear power plant *if* it can be done safely. Hou’s attempt to present those highly qualified positions in a TV interview with KMT stalwart and television personality Jaw Shaw-kong left many feeling that Hou was muddled. During a trip to Japan at the beginning of August, Hou said he would [return to the “three no’s”](#) advocated by former President Ma Ying-jeou—“no unification, no independence, and no use of force.” Hou promised he would seek to be a “risk reducer” as president. Thus far, Hou has done little to clarify the confusion, and his standing in the polls has drifted lower.

Former Taipei City Mayor Ko Wen-je was also confirmed on May 17 as the presidential candidate of the Taiwan People’s Party he created. He promised that he would seek “harmony, reconciliation, and peace” as president although he has offered few details about how he would do that beyond insisting that he will bring the same pragmatism to cross-Strait relations that he applied during his two terms as Taipei mayor. He has promised to eschew the rhetorical posturing that he argues has characterized the DPP and KMT approaches toward China. The last to throw his hat into the ring, on Aug. 28, was Terry Gou (Guo Tai-ming), the founder of Foxconn, who had competed in the spring to win the KMT presidential nod, only to be told by KMT party chairman Eric Chu Li-lun that party polling indicated he was less likely to win than Hou Yu-ih. Gou had promised to support whomever the KMT selected, but he made no secret of his opinion that Chu’s choice of his protégé, whom Chu had groomed to replace him as mayor of Greater Taipei, was unfair. Announcing his independent candidacy for president on Aug. 28, [Gou promised](#) to make Taiwan a center of regional prosperity and saying that, like the youngest of the three little pigs, he would build Taiwan’s house of sturdy bricks that the (China) wolf could not blow down, although he has yet to give any indication of the bricks he might use.

The campaign sets the agenda

Between now and January, Taiwan’s presidential election campaign will likely dominate Taiwan-China relations. In mid-September, KMT candidate Hou Yu-ih [visited](#) the US for what has become an obligatory stop for presidential candidates. As President Tsai’s stops in Washington during her 2012 and 2016 campaigns demonstrated, any signal from the US—direct, indirect, or simply inferred—can have a real impact on a candidate’s prospects. Hou tread carefully, and US officials avoided any comments that might be misread by the Taiwan electorate. Whether US media and China watchers will be as cautious is less certain. As of early October, public opinion surveys [indicated](#) that DPP presidential hopeful Lai Ching-te maintains a double-digit lead over his opponents and that Lai’s lead has been strengthened by Terry Gou’s entry into the race.

At the same time, Lai faces headwinds as the campaign heads into the home stretch. Those same opinion surveys indicate that, although voters favor Lai, they may hesitate to give his party the same control over Taiwan’s executive branch and legislative Yuan that Tsai enjoyed. Does that indirectly reflect concerns about Lai or Tsai that may cost him votes in the presidential balloting? The KMT suggested that it may introduce its platform for Hou in October, perhaps enabling the candidate to offer a clearer vision of his campaign priorities. If Lai continues to hold his current lead as the election approaches, will Hou, Ko, and Gou regroup and combine their efforts? Since none of them have announced their vice presidential running mates, perhaps one of them will take the second slot to strengthen their challenge to the front runner, a move Beijing would likely welcome. Will voters blame the incumbent DPP for Taiwan’s flagging export economy, which is feeling the effects of the global slowdown? Lai’s final headwind, or perhaps a tailwind, may come from Beijing. The Communist Party has made clear its discomfort with the DPP candidate, and perhaps it will take overt or covert steps to weaken his campaign. If they do, will it backfire, as Xi’s Jan. 1, 2019 speech did so famously, resuscitating Tsai Ing-wen’s then-flagging reelection bid?

Looking beyond the election, is Beijing preparing to intensify its coercion of Taiwan should Lai win, as seems likely?

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