Taiwan's Presidential Election Provokes Reactions in Asia

On January 16, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Tsai Ing-wen defeated the incumbent Kuomintang Party (KMT) to become the first female president of Taiwan. The DPP also won a majority in the Legislative Yuan and vowed to start a "new era" in Taiwan with an improved economy and a relationship with China based on "dignity and reciprocity." The United States congratulated Tsai on her victory and expressed its desire for continued peace and stability in the cross-strait. China - who pined for a KMT victory - and other powers responded to the news with a mix of cautious optimism and diplomatic tightrope walking. In this Policy Alert, we look at reactions in Taiwan, China, Japan, South Korea, and India on what the election holds for the region.

TAIWAN

While not entirely a surprise, the landslide victory for Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) transformed the balance of political power on the island. It has also forced the Kuomintang Party to do some soul searching when it votes in March for a new leader after its 2016 candidate and former chairman, Eric Chu, resigned. Furthermore, the new DPP majority promised new legislation to strip the KMT of its multi-billion assets through party finance and property reforms, which may make it more difficult for the KMT to mount an electoral comeback.

Taiwanese policymakers remained cautious in the handling of post-election cross-strait relations.

- After her victory, President Tsai pledged to "work toward maintaining the status quo for peace and stability across the Taiwan strait in order to bring the greatest benefits and well-being to the Taiwanese people," while emphasizing to Beijing that "any forms of suppression will harm the stability of cross-strait relations."
- DPP Secretary-General Joseph Wu stated "the results of this election should not be wrongly interpreted as a defeat for the mainland," while warning any attempt by China to block Taiwan's participation in the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) will damage cross-strait relations.
- Following the election, the incumbent President Ma publically emphasized the importance of cross-strait peace based on the 1992 Consensus - also known as the One China principle - and the principles of "no unification, no independence, and no use of force."

Taiwanese newspapers and commentators also focused on cross-strait relations.

- "Voters rejected Ma's pro-China policies. The DPP landslide is a victory for the Taiwanese identity, and the incoming government will change policy direction," declared the Taipei Times. The paper added that "cross-strait relations are unlikely to become too tense" under President Tsai's "cautious and reasonable" China policy. The former chairman of the Straits Exchange Foundation, Hung Chi-chang, concurred with the prediction.
**The China Post** supported President Tsai's approach to maintain the status-quo, calling for a moderate outreach to China based on "the spirit of peaceful compromise."

Chinese Culture University professor Chao Chien-min disagreed, predicting a "collapse" in cross-strait relations under the Tsai administration, because the new president has never recognized the 1992 Consensus.

Professor Huang Kuang-kuo of National Taiwan University argued Tsai should not simply maintain the status-quo but propose a framework of "One China with Two Constitutions" whereby Beijing and Taiwan sign a peace treaty to recognize the fact they are ruled by two governments. DPP legislator, Huang Wei-che, said such a proposal would not be possible unless Beijing makes a public statement of good will on the issue.

**CHINA**

Chinese officials insisted its policies toward Taiwan would remain the same despite the change of government in Taipei. The Chinese government agencies responsible for Taiwan affairs pressed Tsai to adhere to the 1992 Consensus and "resolutely oppose[d] any form of secessionist activities."

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei hoped "the international community will adhere to the One China principle, oppose Taiwan independence in any form and support peaceful development of cross-strait relations through concrete actions."

Several days after the election, the 31st Group Army of the Chinese military carried out amphibious landing drills, although China's defense ministry downplayed the exercise.

Several media outlets and analysts examined how China's preferred victor - the KMT - lost the election and what impact the results could have on China-Taiwan relations.

- Zhu Songling, professor in the Institute of Taiwan Studies at Beijing Union University, suggested the KMT's electoral defeat was due to reasons other than the "China factor," including economic failures, wage stagnation, and youth discontent. Several analysts in both China - such as the Global Times - and Taiwan held a similar assessment.

- While Tsai's election may usher in "short-term instability to cross-strait relations," China Daily still said the "positive momentum that has built up between the mainland and Taiwan over the past eight years" could be sustained. Citing the benefits of trade and diplomatic exchanges, the newspaper insisted Tsai "keep the peaceful development" on track and not be "hijacked by populism."

- Because the Taiwanese public still wanted positive economic and political ties with China, Xinhua said Tsai avoided precise debates about the One China policy during her campaign. The state-owned outlet cautioned if the new government moved toward independence or "acts as a troublemaker," then the country's "stability and development would be sheer empty talk and disappointed Taiwan voters would throw out such a scourge during the next election."

- A hawkish retired PLA major general, Luo Yuan, warned that war is possible if Taiwan's newly elected government "continue to press us" on independence. He cautioned "unification means peace and independence means war."

- Cross-Strait free trade discussions were suspended until the new leadership assumes office and makes a statement on the 1992 Consensus.

Other commentators suggested top priorities for the new government, including policies to promote economic growth and maintain the 1992 Consensus.

- Taiwan's economy would be able to take advantage of Beijing's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative if the Tsai administration accepted the 1992 Consensus, according to Zhu Songling. This view was echoed by Yang Kai-huang, director of the Cross-Strait Research Center at Ming Chuan University.

- Ni Yongjie, deputy director of the Shanghai Institute of Taiwan Studies, praised the DPP's victory but noted severe economic challenges await the new government.

- China Daily called on President-Elect Tsai to "make people in Taiwan feel safe, instead of creating anxieties with her ambiguous mainland policy." The paper warned "any attempt to steer the island closer to independence will be a fool's errand."

- Chao Chun-shan, president of the Foundation on Asia-Pacific Peace Studies, warned about unrest should cross-strait issues adequately be mishandled.
In the lead up to the election, *Global Times* advised mainland China to lead the effort to build closer ties with Taiwan, but to also "make some preparations" in case the DPP refuses to endorse the 1992 Consensus. *Xinhua* concurred and was confident Beijing had the "resolution and capability to foil any secessionist attempts."

**JAPAN**
The Japanese government congratulated President Tsai's victory, calling Taiwan "an important partner" that shares basic values and pleading to "further deepen cooperation and exchange."

Japanese newspapers discussed the election's implications for cross-strait relations and Japanese foreign policy.

- The *Mainichi Shimbun* attributed the election outcome to the deepening of cross-strait relations under the outgoing Ma administration, which created public apprehensions about China's increased influence in Taiwan. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* agreed, adding there was "deep resentment" among the Taiwanese that closer economic ties with Beijing have benefited only the wealthy.
- The *Nikkei Shimbun* suggested the challenge for President Tsai "will be finding the best strategy" for maintaining stable relations with the mainland while being sensitive to the public's apprehension about the leadership in Beijing.
- The *Yomiuri Shimbun* warned if the Tsai administration continues to refuse to accept the 1992 Consensus, Beijing "is likely to apply pressure by restricting cross-strait economic exchanges," including curbs on cross-strait direct flights and Chinese tourists to Taiwan.
- Beijing must take the election outcome as "a cue that either political and military pressures or economic interests alone would not sway popular sentiments in Taiwan," argued *The Japan Times*. The paper further argued China must "keep up its dialogue with Taiwan" and not resort to the kind of use of force seen in the 1996 Taiwan Crisis. The *Asahi Shimbun* shared a similar view, calling for "co-existence and co-prosperity" across the strait.
- The *Sankei Shimbun* claimed if Beijing pressures the Tsai administration, Japan and the United States should counter by strengthening their relations with Taipei via its participation in the TPP and the shared values of democracy and the rule of law.

**SOUTH KOREA**
South Korean President Park Geun-hye, in keeping with past practice as not formally recognizing Taiwan as an independent country, did not congratulate President Tsai on her victory.

Commentators in Seoul debated the muted official response and the election's impact on the region.

- The *JoongAng Ilbo* questioned this decision, saying that the Korean government "could have made a diplomatic message" to congratulate President Tsai to pressure Beijing to be more cooperative on the North Korean nuclear issue.
- The newspaper also warned that any push for independence in Taiwan will "add to instability in Northeast Asia," calling on the Korean government to be alert to future developments in cross-strait relations.

Meanwhile, Korean media covered the controversy over a Taiwanese member of the Korean pop (K-pop) teenage group TWICE - who was forced to publically apologize for waving a Taiwanese flag in a TV show - after receiving criticisms from Chinese netizens.

- *The Korea Times* criticized the public humiliation of the teenage pop singer as "Chinese cyber lynching" and a sign that "freedom of expression is still an alien idea in China." The newspaper criticized JYP, the Korean agency representing the K-pop group, for failing its "duty" to protect its entertainers' human rights from such public humiliation.
- "China's presence is significant not just in international politics but also in popular culture," wrote the *JoongAng Ilbo*. A Korean analyst echoed this view, saying that popular culture can become a diplomatic issue, as the K-pop industry is heavily dependent on the Chinese market.

**INDIA**
President-Elect Tsai specifically cited India as a partner to further engage once she takes office. Since India does not formally recognize Taiwan as an independent state, embassy functions are carried out through the India-Taipai Association in Taipei and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Centre in New Delhi.

Several India-based commentators highlighted the historical significance of Tsai's election while at the same time recommending leaders in Taiwan and India seize the opportunity for enhanced trade and relations.

- Rudroneel Ghosh, a journalist with Times of India, pinpointed Taiwanese stagnant economy as the reason for Tsai's victory. To best engage India while avoiding the turmoil of Chen Shui-bian's presidency, he urged the new leader to be "pragmatic" and recognize the "reality" of the One China policy.
- Madhav Nalapat, UNESCO Peace Chair and senior associate of the National Institute of Advanced Studies in India, rejected the notion Tsai would follow a provocative similar to former president Chen Shui-bian, a claim made by China Daily. Though Nalapat hoped for more engagement between Taiwan and India, he doubted her election would translate into closer ties since India's bureaucracy has a "paralyzing fear of China."
- Times of India said Tsai's campaign platform of "rejuvenating the Taiwanese identity and unfettering Taiwan from China" will complement India's Act East strategy with Taiwanese companies such as Foxconn and Wistron pledging more investments in India. The paper concluded "there's no reason why New Delhi and Taipei can't enhance institutional cooperation."
- India Today noted Tsai Ing-wen's victory as the first female president of Taiwan and compared her to female leaders in India such as Mother Teresa, Indira Gandhi, and Pratibha Patil.

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