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Taiwan's presidential elections were held on 13 January, an event that will influence the dynamics of relations between Taipei and the People's Republic of China (PRC) for the next four years. At a time of uncertainty surrounding the development of Sino-US. relations and the expansion of China's assertive policy, the elections in Taiwan are a key point for regional and global peace and stability. This analysis aims to clarify what the election of Lai Ching-te as president means for Taiwan-PRC relations and how Beijing's relations Taipei's main ally – the United States – will be moulded. Lai Ching-te, the candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), won the presidential election with almost 40% of the vote, while Hou Yu-ih, the candidate of the main opposition Kuomintang Party, who favoured reconciliation with Beijing, won 33% of the vote, followed by Ko Wen-je of the People's Party with 23% ([Li, Ting-Fang, Kawase, Chau 2024](#)).

IMPLICATIONS

Unlike Hou Yu-ih's (KMT) conservative approach, which suggests a rapprochement with Beijing to ensure peace and stability in the region, as well as encouraging Taiwanese industry, Lai Ching-te takes the opposite approach, described by Beijing as "separatist". Lai Ching-te's election by popular vote indicates the electorate's support for the continuation of the policy launched by former president Tsai Ing-wen (DPP), whose two terms in office were marked by increasingly strained relations with Beijing. Tsai Ing-wen has been accused by Beijing of seeking recognition of Taiwan's independence, to which Tsai repeatedly stated she wants to maintain the status quo. However, the PRC's assertiveness has been maintained starting from 2016, when the DPP was elected to power, until now. This has been shown both by breaking off dialogue with Taipei and by conducting military operations near the island ([Blanchard 2024](#)).

Shortly after Lai Ching-te's win, Beijing reacted with a statement issued by Chen Binhua, spokesperson for the State Council Taiwan Affairs Office, who claims that "the DPP cannot represent the majority of public opinion on the island" ([Kawase 2024](#)). The statement came after the results of Taiwan's parliamentary elections in which no party managed to win the majority; the DPP won 51 seats, the KMT 52, and the TPP 8 seats. DPP's loss of the majority will be an obstacle for Lai to implement his policies ([NHK World Japan 2024](#)), providing a justification for Beijing government to question his legitimacy as leader. This likely scenario is expected to bring even more tension to local and regional politics.

Washington's reaction to the election results was swift. President Biden stated that the US does not support Taiwan's independence. Joe Biden reaffirmed Washington's "One China" policy, despite his statement in 2022 confirming the possibility of the US military intervention in the case of a Chinese invasion. Unlike Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken wrote on X (formerly Twitter) that the election shows the strength of "Taiwan's democratic system", arguing that the US is one of Taiwan's most important allies ([Sink 2024](#)). Blinken's statement drew a negative reaction from Beijing, which accused Washington of breaking its promise to maintain an informal relationship with Taipei. Sino-US relations can be described as fragile, especially after the Chinese spy balloon downing incident in February 2023, but Xi Jinping's visit to San Francisco appears to have de-strained relations between the two major players. Likewise, Lai Ching-te's success is also an opportunity for Japan to expand its influence in the region. Since 2010, Lai has maintained a close relationship with Tokyo, having initiated several development projects with Japanese partners during his time as mayor of Taipei ([Office of the President Republic of China 2024](#)). In the context of China's growing assertiveness, strengthening relations with Taiwan is a major stake for Japan, which is also joining other regional players in their efforts to counter Beijing's influence.

Reunification with Taiwan is the core of Xi Jinping's political agenda, a point reiterated in his New Year message calling it "inevitable" ([Jack 2023](#)). Reunification has been a constant in Xi's narrative from 2012 to this day, using the term 'national rejuvenation' often linked to 'national reunification', which is supposed to be achieved by 2049, the centenary year of the RPC ([Blanchette, Boland, McElwee 2023](#)). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has thus adopted several strategies for

achieving its national goal. The most important are those related to the development of military capabilities, ranging from ballistic missiles, fighter jets, around 500 nuclear warheads, and a fleet of 370 ships and submarines, including the world's largest cargo ship ([Ali, Martina 2023](#)). Given the striking developments in upgrading warfare equipment, as well as drills conducted by the Chinese air forces in the Taiwan Strait, the international community has become more aware of Beijing's tactics. Thus, the increasing usage of the People's Liberation Army as a tool to achieve foreign policy objectives could culminate in a possible invasion of Taiwan ([Robertson 2023](#)).

Military operations in the Taiwan Strait have intensified since August 2022, following the visit of Nancy Pelosi – former spokesperson of the US House of Representatives – whose presence was perceived by Beijing as Washington's intervention in its domestic affairs. Hence, these military operations can be seen as an attempt to intimidate Taiwan and to discourage its ruling party. China has often resorted to instruments of coercion, especially economic ones (known as 'grey zone' tactics) to influence Taiwan's presidential elections ([Feng 2024](#)). The issue of Taiwan's approach towards mainland China has been the key element in election speeches. In this regard, another issue also addressed was that of building a bridge between Kinmen – an island governed by Taiwan since the withdrawal of the Kuomintang in 1949 – and the city of Xiamen in the southeast of Fujian province. Beijing has brought up the argument of the island's economic development, especially in sectors such as transport and energy. However, DPP candidate Lai Ching-te expressed concerns over the security issues that could be created through this infrastructure project ([Wu 2024](#)).

CONCLUSIONS

The Democratic Progressive Party's achievement of winning a third consecutive presidential term reflects Taiwanese opposition to Beijing's demands on reunification. Given that infrastructure project proposals are viewed with scepticism by Taiwan, China will turn to even more coercive methods, including military measures, to achieve its primary goal set by Xi Jinping. Lai Ching-te will face several impediments, both externally – such as Beijing's threats and intimidation - and internally – the division of Taiwan's political system. Therefore, a more effective coordination with the Kuomintang and the People's Party would lead to increased stability in Taipei's politics, but also in the whole region. Taiwan is a key point of friction between Beijing and Washington and a crucial factor in the relations between the two actors. In this context, the US will continue to act

as Taiwan's main military ally in defending its interests in the region. Nevertheless, the current government in Taipei also induces leverage in Japan's support, an important player that opposes China's assertive policy.

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