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‘Beijing’s attempts at intimidation are not working’

East Asia expert Stephan Thome on the outcome of the presidential election in Taiwan, the country’s expectations of the West and China’s influence

The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which is critical of Beijing, has won the Taiwanese presidential elections for the third time in a row, and its candidate William Lai Ching-te will be the next president. But the party was unable to defend its majority in parliament. How did the population react to the result after a very emotional election campaign?

> Depending on their own preferences, there was relief and jubilation in the winning camp, but more lamentation in the losing camp. However, no one should be surprised, as the result is in line with the latest polls, which in Taiwan can be published up to 10 days before the election. There is naturally a certain amount of tension as people are expecting a reaction from Beijing, but this may not materialise until the new president is inaugurated in May.

While large sections of the older population in Taiwan still feel a close connection to China, many younger people, in particular, see themselves as Taiwanese. Just how is identity being fought over?

> I’m not sure whether the question of identity really has so much to do with age. After all, apart from the very old, all Taiwanese were born on the island. In this election, the majority of young voters voted in favour of the third party, the Taiwan People’s Party, which does not place much emphasis on the issue of identity but wants to score points with answers to factual questions. This is also where the disappointment is greatest, as their candidate was only able to garner a good quarter of the votes.

Internationally, the relationship with China dominates the media coverage. What other issues were decisive in the election?

Rent prices, especially in the capital Taipei, energy security, the very low birth rate and medical care are issues that concern the population. However, it is the case in Taiwan that, particularly in the final phase of the election campaign, attempts are being made to emotionally mobilise the electorate around the issue of China — which is a little surprising as there is actually a broad pragmatic consensus here that neither formal independence nor unification with the People's Republic is being sought. However, the parties are arguing fervently about how best to avoid both.

In recent months, China has increased the pressure on Taiwan through countless military manoeuvres, among other things. What role has Beijing's behaviour played in the Taiwanese people's decision to vote?

Beijing's attempts at intimidation are not working; they may even be counterproductive for the regime. Four years ago, Xi Jinping was essentially the best campaigner for President Tsai Ing-wen, who is now out of office. The influence of Chinese disinformation campaigns and fake news is a problem, however, as it undermines people's trust in political institutions. This was not decisive for the election this time, but it certainly worries me.

In European debates, Taiwan's semiconductor industry is seen as a kind of life insurance in the great power conflict between China and the US. How does Taipei view the escalating technology conflict?

There is no question that the country wants to remain the world's leading producer and rightly sees itself as well-positioned. However, it is far less clear whether this really is a life insurance policy for the island — the 'Silicon Shield' being the operative word here. Should the conflict between China and the US escalate further, it could become important for both sides to deny the other access to Taiwan's semiconductors — which would perhaps even increase the island's vulnerability.

What expectations do Taiwanese politicians and people have of Europe and Germany?

In Taiwan, Germany is generally considered to be too China-friendly or too dependent on the Chinese market. However, when it comes to deterring China from invading, Germany and the EU could play an important role — not in the military component of deterrence but in the economic and political component. This would require clear statements to be made to Beijing, and this is what Taiwan would like to see. These occasionally come from the EU Parliament but rarely

from German politicians and never at all from the Chancellery.

This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele.



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