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'Tsai wants to continue her balancing act'

Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-wen has been re-elected in a landslide. Jürgen Kahl on what it means for the dispute with China

Read this interview in German.

The incumbent Tsai Ing-wen and her Democratic Progress Party (DPP) have won a clear victory in the presidential and parliamentary elections for the second time in a row. What does this mean for Taiwan's future and the conflict between the island republic and the People's Republic of China?

Two striking messages emerge from the twin election in Taiwan, which has also met with great interest internationally.

On the one hand, Taiwan's democracy, which only developed 30 years ago and which is constantly contested because of the ongoing conflict with Beijing, has once again proved to be remarkably stable and functional. This makes Taiwan an exceptional case in a region where — apart from Japan and South Korea — democracy is on the retreat.

Secondly, the voters have given the DPP and President Tsai Ing-wen, who was confirmed by an overwhelming majority for a second term in office, a clear mandate to continue the fight for the right to self-determination, the preservation of Taiwan's state autonomy and its liberal social order and liberal lifestyle. When the Chinese leadership speaks of the island's reunification with the People's Republic as an "irreversible historical trend", the Taiwanese apparently see it differently, at least under the current political conditions.

In Taiwan's regional elections at the end of 2018, the national conservative Kuomintang (KMT), which now lost out, had inflicted a heavy defeat on the DPP even in its strongholds. Tsai had to resign as party leader at that time. What explains the change in political mood and the amazing comeback?

The unrest in Hong Kong. The rebellion, especially of the young population in the Chinese Special Administrative Region, against the creeping erosion of the contractually guaranteed autonomy status and the associated rights of freedom and co-determination have paved the ground.

Seeing the failure of the "one country, two systems" unification formula in Hong Kong, which was originally conceived for Taiwan, Tsai and the leading pro-Taiwan party had the opportunity to turn the elections into a kind of plebiscite under the motto "self-determination or creeping self-abandonment". In this existential question, the voters felt better off with Tsai than with the KMT, which was lurching between rapprochement and distancing from China, all the while its top candidate was favoured by Beijing.

Did the election results confirm the differences between the generations that had been heavily debated in the run-up?

Only to a limited extent. Of the total of 19.3 million Taiwanese voters, around three million are younger than 30, including 1.8 million new voters. These are the millennials, also known as "born independent", who only know Taiwan's autocratic past under KMT rule from history books and have never experienced the island other than democratically and pluralistically. In contrast to the older generation, some of whom were born on the Chinese mainland — the classic constituency of the KMT oriented towards China — they feel far more connected with Japan and South Korea than with the People's Republic.

But they were not decisive for the election outcome?

At least not alone. How far Taiwan's population as a whole has mentally distanced itself from the mainland Chinese can be seen in the trend of opinion polls. According to the polls, the vast majority now profess their Taiwanese rather than Chinese identity.

Incidentally, this is a development to which the KMT, which fled to Taiwan after the civil war against Mao's troops, has not yet found an answer. Their fundamental adherence to the unity of the Chinese nation has little or nothing to do with the perceived and actual reality of life in Taiwan.

How does Beijing react to the re-election of Tsai Ing-wen? In the aftermath of her first election victory in 2016, the People's Republic had frozen official contact and meetings at government level and has also worked with some success to isolate Taiwan internationally as much as possible.

As expected, the first reactions disseminated by the official Chinese media were confrontational. They talk about fraud and vote buying and, as in the case of Hong Kong, the influence of anti-Chinese puppet masters in the West. This refers mainly to the US. Moreover, they warn the rest of the world to stick to the "One China policy" in dealing with Taiwan.

For state and party leader Xi Jinping, the re-election of the president is already the second defeat after the continued uprising in Hong Kong. According to his own statements, he doesn't want to see the solution of the so-called Taiwan question — as a core concern of his Chinese dream policy —postponed by another generation. Because Xi himself has raised such high expectations with regards to his power to get things done, taking a pause for reflection would also weaken him domestically. This suggests that Beijing will increase pressure on Taiwan at all levels, even if the use of military force remains an unlikely scenario.

What's the line Tsai will take with regard to China after her re-election? And what role will the US play in this as Taiwan's most important partner?

Strengthened by the voters' decision, Tsai wants to continue her balancing act. This means that she will do everything in her power to cement the de facto independence of the island republic in the name of the right to self-determination, but without crossing the red line towards a formal declaration of independence. That would be the casus belli for China. Taiwan will therefore continue to officially trade as the Republic of China, even though this name and the associated constitution of 1947 have long been a schizophrenic anachronism.

The project is threatened from two sides. Taiwan's highly developed economy and prosperity are largely dependent on China, on the one hand from unhindered access to the Chinese market, but also in terms of economic policy. Hardly any country is prepared to conclude a free trade agreement with Taiwan without the tacit blessing of Beijing.

Potentially even more disastrous may be the Tsai government's tendency to have Taiwan incorporated into the Indo-Pacific alliance aimed at containing China, which is being pushed by the Trump administration. If the island state allows itself to be mistreated by the US as a bargaining chip in the global political power struggle with China, it will itself create the best conditions for being crushed between the fronts.

In the end, since a constructive compromise acceptable to both sides on the Taiwan Strait is out of sight, the space for miscalculated

actions is growing.

This interview was conducted by Stefan Pantekoek.



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