

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

## China Threats and the Exploitation of China Threats: The 2024 Taiwan General Election

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### Election Overview

The presidential and legislative elections took place in Taiwan on January 13, 2024. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP or so-called the green camp) selected Vice President Lai Ching-te as their candidate, who also serves as the party chairman. The opposing Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang, KMT or so-called the blue camp) nominated the incumbent mayor of New Taipei, Hou Yu-ih, for the presidential candidacy. The Taiwan People's Party (TPP or so-called the white camp) chose its leader, former Taipei City mayor Ko Wen-je, as the presidential candidate. Despite initial plans for a joint campaign team between KMT and TPP, a final agreement was not reached. Lai's victory marked a historic moment, representing the first time since the introduction of direct elections in 1996 that a party has won more than two consecutive presidential terms. Lai secured the presidency with 40% of the votes, followed by Hou with 34%, and Ko with 26%.

Lai Ching-te and Hou Yu-yi are political figures within traditional political parties, lacking individual charisma, especially Hou Yu-yi, the former police-in-chief. Ko Wen-je, on the other hand, is a candidate with populist characteristics, appearing as a political outsider at the national level, free from the burden of past ruling records, providing an option beyond the blue-green divide. His interactive style sometimes resembles that of an internet celebrity, using straightforward language to comment on issues or point out social and political problems, in many cases without proposing feasible solutions to these problems. Young people prefer Ko's relaxed, somewhat sarcastic way of communication.

The other part of the general election is the legislative election. DPP gained 51 seats out of 113 seats and lose its majority in the parliament. KMT won 52 seats and become the largest party. TPP gained eight seats. The result makes the new DPP government a minority government.

### Nuanced Differences of Assurances and Identity Defenses between DPP and KMT

The issue of unification or independence is Taiwan's most significant political divide. On one end of the spectrum, there is a leaning towards pursuing Taiwan's independence, strengthening Taiwanese identity, and reducing economic and trade relations with China. On the other end, there is a leaning towards reunification, maintaining Greater China identity along with Taiwan identity, and strengthening economic and trade ties with China. Among the three main presidential

candidates, considering their stance on independence or reunification on a spectrum from left to the right, the DPP is on the left, the People First Party (PFP) is in the center, and the KMT is on the right. Despite the difference, all three parties fall within the central area of the political spectrum, favoring the status quo.

As a small country, Taiwan always has to consider the attitudes of larger nations. In past presidential elections, there have always been four assurances—two external and two internal. In this election, it is particularly evident. Firstly, the DPP assures the United States that if elected, they will not change the Republic of China’s official name and amend the constitution, meaning they will not pursue Taiwan independence. To some extent, this assurance is also directed towards the Beijing government, as advocating immediate constitutional reforms would escalate cross-strait tensions, which is not helping their election prospects. The DPP’s assurance is also aimed at reassuring the domestic center and light-blue voters, making them feel secure enough to vote for the party. On the other hand, the KMT assures the U.S. that if in power, Taiwan will still maintain close alliance with the U.S., will stand on the side of democracy camp, and will not engage in any political negotiations with China, including the issue of reunification. The KMT’s assurance is also targeted at the domestic center and light-green voters, reassuring them and gaining their support.

Alongside these assurances, the two major political parties also have two things to defend. The DPP advocates for the defense of Taiwan’s sovereignty and democracy, while the KMT seeks to defend the Republic of China. The two defenses are rooted in political identity. While the KMT also emphasizes a pro-American stance and strengthening defense, their advocacy for expanding economic and trade ties with China raises concerns among pro-DPP citizens. Although the DPP does not call for changes to the Republic of China’s constitution and the name of a country, it in the past few years push through some measures that de-Sinicize in history and culture terms, raising concerns among pan-blue supporters. To a large extent, these defense objectives are presented to mobilize voters from their respective electoral bases, as these core supporters are more sensitive to these issues.

## **China Threats and Election Interventions**

Over the past few years, China’s threats towards Taiwan have reached a new height, employing a combination of political influence and military intimidation. Diplomatically, China coerced and enticed several countries to sever official ties with Taiwan. Militarily, there have been frequent incidents of military aircraft crossing the median line of the Taiwan Strait. In two cases, China also deployed warships and aircraft to cruise around Taiwan, effectively imposing a blockade through military drills. Additionally, there has been a continuous increase in threatening rhetoric toward Taiwan. These actions have triggered a backlash among the majority of people in Taiwan.

In terms of election interference, China has employed both direct and indirect methods to influence Taiwan’s elections in recent years. Apart from official intimidation, China spreads misinformation through various channels. False news is disseminated on social media, often shared by Taiwanese netizens, aiming to discredit political parties critical of China and Taiwan’s democratic allies. Even after the elections, there are rumors of election frauds originated from abroad. While mainstream media is less prone to disseminating fake news, it proliferates extensively on social media platforms.

External forces also interfere in elections by inviting neighborhood representatives and residents and civil organization staffs to travel to China, often with different degree of local treatments (*Central Broadcasting Station* 2023-12-04). Another method is attempting to buy Taiwan's journalists off and publishing fake opinion polls, which lack clear information of conducting organization, sampling processes, and demographic information. China money also flow to a legislative candidate, a source of Political donations forbidden by law.

### **The Exploitation of China Threats**

In recent years, candidates often elevated the stakes of the general elections to choices involving the survival of democracy, sovereignty, or the country. Against the backdrop of China's rising threat of force over Taiwan, it provided an opportunity for the ruling party to exploit the threat. During the election campaign, DPP candidate cast himself as the defender of Taiwan's sovereignty and claimed that if the opposition candidate was elected, Taiwan would surrender to China, democracy would collapse, and Taiwan's sovereignty would be weakened. In fact, the DPP responds to numerous criticisms of its domestic policies by diverting them to the interference of China such as the spread of fake news. The victory of the DPP in this election is undoubtedly influenced by the ongoing threat from China, coupled with the ruling party's exploitation of the existential threats. However, the DPP received only 40% of the vote, indicating that the rhetoric of existential threat may not resonate strongly with the majority of Taiwanese voters. Some voters may prefer more dialogues with China, reducing the miscalculation and risk of military confrontation.

In this election, young people did not support the DPP as strongly as in previous elections. This time, the absence of events like the reviewing of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement and the protest against Hong Kong extradition bill, which intensified anti-China sentiments in previous elections, contributed to a reduced emphasis on cross-strait issues. The relatively calm atmosphere in the few months leading up to the election diminished the incentive to prioritize cross-strait issues. More importantly, young people in general did not want further deterioration of cross-strait relations, especially considering the potential military conflict and the mandatory military service requirement for young males, posing a threat to their lives and property. Many of them shift their votes from DPP to TPP this time (Wang 2024).

On the other side, KMT also exploited the China threat by presenting the election as a choice between war and peace. They claimed the DPP-nominated candidate Lai Ching-te's pro-Taiwan independence stance and confrontational approach is conducive to escalating conflict and the young people under this condition are forced to go to the battlefield. Lai Ching-te has clarified several times that he will not change the Republic of China's official name and amend the constitution.

The second type of exploiting threat concerns instructing supposedly neutral government agencies to intervene for political gain. By strategically elevating the significance of the election, the government provides itself with a justification for its actions. This situation can undermine the level playing field and erode public trust. For example, several days before the election, China launched a satellite that passed high above the sky of Taiwan. The Defense Ministry issued an air raid alert, stating that it was a Chinese missile test (*Central News Agency* 2024-01-09). This misinformation contributed to a heightened sense of national security threat and potentially boosted support for the ruling party. The more frequent government interventions involve instructing law enforcement

agencies to investigate and prosecute political opponents and citizens for spreading fake news and aiding China's infiltration before the election.

In the past few years, Taiwan has passed the Social Order Maintenance Act to tackle fake news and the Anti-Infiltration Act to counter Chinese influence in elections and politics. While China is known for engaging in cognitive warfare and infiltration, DPP also exploited this threat. Regarding fake news, criticizing the government or commenting on government policies may be deemed as cognitive warfare, leading to potential legal consequences and creating a chilling effect (Wu 2023). Regarding the infiltration, the DPP government instructed the law-enforcement agencies before the election to investigate dozens of neighborhood representatives who recruit residents to visit China and received some local treatments. Many neighborhood representatives utilize subsidized travel to garner electoral support from residents (Kung 2019). Additionally, the Ministry of Justice proposed enhanced scrutiny of new immigrants from China to counter foreign influence, sparking controversy due to its targeted focus on a specific group.

### **No Substantial Policy Differences on Economy**

This election has focused primarily on issues related to national defense, security, and sovereignty, with limited discussion on other public policy issues. The issue of sovereignty is largely rooted in political identity and can consolidate support from core supporters effectively. Meanwhile, many urgent socio-economic issues in Taiwan, such as the potential bankruptcy of labor pension scheme, severe demographic challenges, global warming, labor shortages, and fiscal costs of energy subsidy, have not received sufficient attention and discussion. Instead, the three candidates and the media have primarily focused on attacking opponents about their minor flaws in real estate holdings.

The three candidates did have proposed some policies dealing with these critical issues, but there has been a lack of in-depth discussion and sufficient public attentions. Moreover, the three candidates often avoid addressing the root cause of the problems by proposing measures that could harm the interests of certain groups. For example, concerning the mounting deficits in the labor pension scheme, all three candidates shy away from discussing the possibility of increasing payments by laborers. Instead, they promise to continue to use government budget to cover deficits.

In terms of actual policies, the three sets of candidates show no significant differences in the areas of industrial, labor, education, housing, and health policies. On the energy issue, the KMT and TPP favor the continued use of nuclear energy, while the DPP aims to phase out nuclear energy as soon as possible. The most significant divergence in political positions among candidates lies in cross-strait relationship.

Regarding cross-strait relations, candidates all advocate for a close Taiwan-American alliance, increasing Taiwan's defense deterrence, and engaging in dialogue with the mainland on the basis of equality and dignity. The U.S. academic and media do not expect to see any significant changes in U.S.-China-Taiwan relations if any of the three candidates is elected. All candidates have visited the U.S., met with scholars from universities and think tanks, and held discussions with American officials, ensuring a clear understanding of their positions on the relationships.

The concept of "equality and dignity", however, is interpreted differently by the three parties. Hou You-yi accepts a "One China with different interpretations (Republic of China and People's Republic of China)" framework. He also rejects Taiwan independence and warn against the risk of

war. Like his predecessors, Lai Ching-te does not accept “One China,” stating that it is equivalent to “one country, two systems.” The KMT accused Lai Ching-te’s position of pro-Taiwan independence of inducing military conflicts, while Lai Ching-te saw the KMT’s policy as surrender. Ko Wen-je’s stance is more ambiguous. Additionally, in terms of cross-strait economic relations, Lai Ching-te emphasizes the strong linkage between economic and national security, and that Taiwan should reduce reliance on Chinese while strengthen economic ties with its democratic allies. The KMT, on the other hand, favor building stronger economic ties with mainland China. Overall, compared with KMT’s past presidential candidates, the new KMT candidate moves towards a stronger emphasis on democratic institutions and Taiwan’s sovereignty, expressing distrust towards the Beijing government.

## **Conclusion**

The main theme of the general election is about the China threat and the exploitation of the threat. The former concerns the survival of the democracy and the latter concerns the potential degradation of democracy. With all candidates endorsing a strong Taiwan-American alliance, emphasizing Taiwan’s defense capabilities, and advocating for the maintenance of the status quo, there should be less concern regarding the survival of democracy. However, it remains crucial to carefully monitor interferences and maintain close collaboration with allies. On the other hand, the exploitation of the existential threat, through dominating the election with threats and influencing ostensibly neutral government agencies for political gains, raises concerns about the functioning of democracy. Balancing national security needs with the preservation of democratic principles is an essential task the new government has to face.

For the future executive and legislative relationship, the new president will face a situation of minority government. The new government can choose to cooperate selectively with different parties to secure a majority, but compromises on policies will be inevitable. It will be challenging to pursue significant pro-independence policies, as both blue and white camps are ideologically less inclined towards independence, let alone constitutional amendments which would require approval from over three-quarters of legislators. However, on bills related to socioeconomic issues, with the exception of cross-strait relationships, collaboration between different parties is still possible. This pattern can be seen from past experiences during the DPP president Chen Shui-bian administration (2000-2008), which is also a divided government. ■

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The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

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979-11-6617-707-1 95340

Date of Issue: 31 January 2024

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