

Online Series

2024. 01. 15 | CO 24-07

After the Taiwan Election: Potential Taiwan Strait Crisis and South Korea's Response

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The Election of the Pro-American and Pro-independence-oriented Lai Ching-te

In the 16th Taiwan Presidential Election, held on January 13, Lai Ching-te, representing the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and espousing pro-American and pro-independence sentiments, secured victory over his contenders Hau Yu-ih from the Kuomintang (KMT), and Ko Wen-je from the Taiwan People's Party (TPP). With the DPP administration poised to maintain an anti-China stance while aligning closely with American interests, projections suggest a heightened level of pressure from China upon Taiwan. Tensions between the US and China over the Taiwan Strait are also expected to intensify.

The US 'Dual Strategy' After the Taiwan Election

Currently, the US is supporting 'two wars' taking place in Ukraine and Israel simultaneously. Moving forward, should the incoming president strongly advocate for the independence of Taiwan, it risks provoking China, potentially escalating tensions in the Taiwan Strait into a full-fledged war. This could place the US in the precarious

position of supporting three simultaneous conflicts. Consequently, the Biden administration is highly inclined to pursue a strategy of bolstering ties with the new DPP government while delicately sidestepping any overt endorsement of Taiwan's independence, thus avoiding direct antagonism towards China.

However, a variable in the Biden administration's China and Taiwan policies is the upcoming November US Presidential Election. Should Donald J. Trump, the former president known for his hardline approach towards China, be declared the Republican Party's presumptive presidential nominee, and if China intensifies pressure on Taiwan during the election period, President Biden may face challenges in maintaining the current policy of minimal provocation towards China. This scenario could potentially lead to an escalation of US pressure on China.

The 'Tug-of-War' between China and Taiwan after Taiwan's Election

To date, China has vehemently criticized the president-elect, Lai, whose stance is perceived as more hardline than the Taiwan independence extremist, the outgoing President Tsai Ing-wen, and even exerted military pressure leading up to the day of the Taiwan Presidential Election. It is anticipated that China will adopt a comprehensive strategy to increase pressure on the DPP, employing conciliatory measures toward pro-China forces and civilians in Taiwan. Primarily, in terms of military operations, there is a high probability that China will regularize and institutionalize its military activities near the median line of the Taiwan Strait. Economically, China is likely to persist in applying economic pressure while actively managing public sentiment in Taiwan, which remains divided related to economic exchanges.

In its defense of asserted red lines, China may strengthen its united front strategies targeting pro-China forces and civilians in Taiwan through policies of reconciliation and appeasement. This could involve presenting proposals for economic, social, and cultural exchanges with Taiwan to suppress pro-Taiwan independence sentiment.

Taiwan president-elect Lai Ching-te is expected to tread cautiously, avoiding unnecessary provocations towards China while strengthening political and military ties

with the US. At the same time, there may be efforts to reduce economic reliance on China and bolster alliances with democratic nations to counter China's united front efforts. Therefore, a nuanced power struggle between China and Taiwan is foreseen in the realm of cross-Strait relations, with both sides vying for political and strategic influence while navigating the complexities of domestic and international politics.

The Impact of Taiwan's Election on the Korean Peninsula and South Korea's Response

The escalating tensions surrounding the Taiwan Strait or the increased possibility of war present a new crisis for South Korea, encompassing both military and economy dimensions. Therefore, prudent measures must be taken to address these potential challenges.

Firstly, diligent preparations are imperative to mitigate the risks associated with a military crisis. In the event of a military crisis in the Taiwan Strait, South Korea will find itself entangled in a serious security vacuum and crisis. While the immediate likelihood of war in the Taiwan Strait may appear low, heightened military tensions between the US and China could lead to instability, potentially prompting North Korea to engage in provocative actions. Moreover, should China perceive a heightened threat from the US, it might adopt a more permissive stance towards North Korea's aggressive military activities. Given South Korea's need to regard North Korea as a primary foe, it is imperative to proactively strengthen its military alliance with the US to effectively address any contingencies arising from the Taiwan issue. Additionally, solidifying the trilateral security cooperation framework among the ROK, the US, and Japan is paramount.

Secondly, proactive measures are warranted to mitigate the potential economic fallout from a crisis in the Taiwan Strait. Over 90% of South Korea's oil imports pass through the Strait of Malacca and the waters of Eastern Taiwan. Approximately 33% of the total maritime trade volume passes through or around the Taiwan Strait. Consequently, any disruption in these maritime routes could severely impact the nation's economy. The South Korean government should enhance collaboration with relevant countries

such as the Philippines and Indonesia, which are located along the maritime shipping routes. Establishing a collaborative entity, tentatively termed the ‘Consultative Group for Korea–Japan Joint Maritime Shipping Routes,’ or a similar mechanism with Japan, would facilitate joint responses to the Taiwan Strait crisis and secure alternative maritime shipping pathways.

Thirdly, diplomatic channels must be utilized adeptly to navigate through the crisis. The government should actively pursue enhanced cooperation with the so-called international democratic allies, including Taiwan, and fortify the ROK–US alliance. Simultaneously, it should exercise strategic flexibility to potential diplomatic discord with China and alleviate associated risks.

The election of the pro-American and pro-independence-oriented candidate Lai Ching-te has exacerbated uncertainties, particularly regarding the escalation of cross-Strait relations and the Taiwan Strait crisis. Given the propensity for the Korean Peninsula, already susceptible to conflicts and uncertainties, to become embroiled in such geopolitical turmoil, proactive measures are imperative. Thus, South Korea must engage in robust collaboration with neighboring nations, the US, and the broader international community to preemptively address and prepare for potential crises.

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