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REPORT

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Security Implications of the Taiwanese 2024 General Elections

This report is a summary of a roundtable discussion that took place on January 17, 2024.

On January 13, 2024, the Taiwan population elected a new president and a new legislature. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate, and former vice president, Lai Ching-te, won the presidency. However, the victory for the DPP was limited, as it lost seats in the legislative yuan to the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP). On February 1, 2024, parliament elected Han Kuo-yu, a former KMT presidential candidate, as Speaker.

This election season, rife with Chinese disinformation campaigns and attempts at foreign interference, should be considered a victory for Taiwan and the strength of democracy in the island. Although it is expected that the Lai presidency will offer continuity from the Tsai administration both domestically and internationally, there is significant amount of uncertainty surrounding Taiwan's security and the next steps for China's antagonism.

Indeed, one day after the elections, the Chinese government issued a statement that the elections do not necessarily reflect Taiwanese public opinion. Additionally, China forced the Asian Volleyball Association not to let Taiwan host the 2024 tournament. This reaction inserts itself in a larger pattern of China's attempt to portray Lai as an anti-People's Republic of China (PRC) candidate. However, Lai has repeatedly stated that, despite his own stance on Taiwanese independence, he will continue the Tsai's administration approach of having dialogues with the PRC while asserting Taiwan's right for self-determination. Experts agree that Taiwan should expect a ramp up of the PRC's pressure up until May 20th, 2024, the day Lai will be inaugurated as President.

A lesson for democracies across the world on how to preserve an electoral process being interfered with by a hostile actor, the Taiwanese elections should not inspire complacency from the Canadian government and other like-minded nations. Uncertainty in cross-strait relations remains the status quo, and the election of a vocally independentist President (who has, however, said he would pursue the same foreign policy as his predecessor) and of a Speaker of the legislative yuan from a pro-PRC party brings it new factors that will change the dynamics in cross-strait relations. The PRC's efforts to continue to isolate Taiwan from the rest of the international community is to be expected, and there is a need for Taiwan's ally to effectively counter them.

The elections represent an opportunity to re-energize the relationship with Taiwan. Particularly, Canada's chairmanship of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) represents a chance to bring Taiwan into the fold of one of the largest free trade agreements in the region.[1] The Taiwan-Canada 2023 Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Arrangement is also another measure through which Canada is able to support Taiwan and make it more resilient to Chinese wolf warrior diplomacy. Those measures serve to bring a

[1] See Kristen Hopewell's piece for our Taiwan series: "Canada's CPTPP Leadership in 2024: Managing the Rival Accession Bids of China and Taiwan," https://www.cgai.ca/canadas_cptpp_leadership_in_2024_managing_the_rival_accession_bids_of_china_and_taiwan

certain sense of stability for increased Canada-Taiwan exchanges and make Taiwan a more stable and certain market in which businesses can thrive. This creates a virtuous cycle through which Taiwan continues to be an attractive Asian market for Western countries.

However, it would be misguided to assume that the Taiwanese elections focused on cross-strait relations. Rather, these elections reflect an increasingly complex political landscape and domestic difficulties. Like most countries coming of the pandemic, Taiwan has been facing economic difficulties, including a job market expansion and then retraction, a housing market that is increasingly unaffordable for most of the population, as well as inflation in part related to supply chain instability. Turnout, despite being in the low 70 per cent, was the second lowest turnout in elections since 1988. Turnout can be explained by a plethora of factors, and only further research (especially of the youth vote) and time will able to really determine if it reflects on the 2024 elections or signal a new trend in Taiwan democratic processes. Furthermore, the elections marked a new era in Taiwanese politics, with a third party entering the balance. In fact, the TPP earned sufficient votes in the legislative yuan to hold significant political power. This will have a significant impact on how the Lai presidency unfolds, as Lai will have to manage an unfriendly legislature.

Those elections carry some lessons for Canada's future foreign policy in the future. It opens the door for a profound reflection the strategic future of its engagement with Taiwan, and the articulation of an approach that is consistent over time and that offers clarity. Canada ought to have a plan for its current and future relations with Taiwan, one that offers predictability. The latter can be of invaluable help for Taiwan, as it gauges cross-strait relations after Lai takes office in late May 2024.

About the Author

Charlotte Duval-Lantoine is the Ottawa Operations Manager and a Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, as well as Triple Helix's Executive Director and Gender Advisor. She is the author of ***The Ones We Let Down: Toxic Leadership Culture and Gender Integration in the Canadian Forces, 1989-1999*** (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022). This book, which looks into the toxic culture of leadership in the Canadian Armed Forces during the 1990s and its impact on gender integration, was named among The Hill Times' Best Books of 2022. Her research interests include questions of military leadership, culture change, and personnel policy, topics on which she regularly comments in the media. For this work, Charlotte was recognized as a 2022 Women in Defence and Security Emerging Leader. She regularly participates in consultation organized by the Department of National Defence and has given talks to West Point and RMC cadets, to the National Strategic Program at the Canadian Forces College, and to the Australian War College. She is currently working on projects on personnel management, civilian-military relations, the Somalia Affair, and organizational change in the Canadian military.

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