

Commentary



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China's attempt to interfere with Taiwan's January 2024 elections¹

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Once again, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has sought to influence the outcome of the January 13th presidential elections in Taiwan, China's neighbour of 23.5 million people over which it claims sovereignty and threatens war. While Beijing often tries to shape other countries' political environments in its favour ahead of general elections and has been accused of meddling in their democratic processes, its interference in Taiwan is much more direct; China overtly favours some candidates and political parties over others.

Ever since 1996 (except for the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012), when the Taiwanese people were given the chance to directly elect their president, the Taiwan-centric candidate has prevailed.² This was the case again with the 2024 election, in which voters did not choose the candidate who the Chinese leadership wanted to see get elected. William Lai of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), who is currently vice-president for the Tsai Ing-wen administration, won the presidency with 5,586,019 votes (40.05 percent) against the opposition KMT's 4,671,021 votes (33.49 percent) and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), with 3,690,466 votes (26.46 percent). Lai's

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victory gave the DPP an unprecedented third consecutive term, suggesting that maintaining Taiwan's de facto independence and the "status quo" in the Taiwan Strait remains the preferred option for the majority of Taiwan's people.

Beijing's "soft power" handicap

China's failed attempt to sway the elections in its favour, despite its multifaceted efforts to influence the outcome, exposes the limits of its influence. The PRC's principal shortcoming is that it has little if any "soft power" tools by which to influence the outcome of Taiwan's elections. It has been unable to find a narrative, or to make offers, that resonate with the majority of the Taiwanese people, whether they identify as "green" (DPP), "white" (TPP), and even "blue" (KMT). While Taiwanese voters take various factors into consideration when they cast their votes – including several issues that are unrelated to cross-Strait relations and identity – the China angle is an important element in their calculations, largely because of the external threat the PRC poses to Taiwan. Consequently, Beijing's interference inevitably compels Taiwanese voters to consider what the benefits of electing a more China-amenable administration would be for them.

The 2008 and 2012 KMT victories in the presidential elections came with promises that closer ties with China would lead to substantial economic benefits for Taiwan. By and large, those benefits failed to materialize or were limited to politically connected sectors of the Taiwanese economy. Additionally, although victory by the blue camp in those two elections resulted in ostensibly reduced tensions in the Taiwan Strait, most Taiwanese are aware that such reductions would likely only be temporary as the fundamentals of the dispute between the two countries – increasingly incompatible political systems and identities shaped by more than a century of different paths – remain unresolved and would encounter major hurdles if and when Beijing compelled Taipei to start negotiations on Taiwan's sovereignty. For the people of Taiwan, Hong Kong's experience underscores the costs of closer ties with China: an erosion of freedoms because Beijing is *always* transactional. The Taiwanese know that reduced tensions would come at a price.

With this "soft power" handicap – a handicap that, moreover, also undermines the appeal of any political party in Taiwan that makes closer ties with the PRC a major part of its campaign – Beijing is therefore left with little option but to resort to more coercive and/or co-optative measures in its attempt to influence electoral outcomes in Taiwan, to which we now turn.³

Cognitive warfare

Information manipulation, propaganda, and mis- and disinformation are all important components of Beijing's efforts to influence elections in Taiwan. In the lead-up to the January 2024 elections, the PRC promoted a number of narratives. Chief among them was the view that the DPP has been a disaster for Taiwan, despite all the evidence arguably to the contrary given the current state of its economy and how it handled the COVID-19 pandemic. This narrative also indicates that that Lai is working to support Taiwanese independence (he has vowed to continue President Tsai's careful balancing act on the matter), and that a vote for DPP equals war. (This latter scare tactic was accompanied by a number of influential politicians and retired military personnel from the opposition who encouraged the view that war with China cannot be won, that it would be disastrous, and therefore that Taiwan needs to capitulate).

“*China relied heavily on social media platforms such as TikTok and online influencers to provide a positive image of the PRC.*”

China relied heavily on social media platforms such as TikTok and online influencers to provide a positive image of the PRC. These influencers promoted unification and the so-called “1992 consensus” (Beijing's precondition for the resumption of communication between the two sides), while portraying the DPP as “corrupt” and incapable of governing, using issues such as egg shortages and the provision of COVID-19 vaccines as “examples.” Research by Taiwan AI Labs shows that 62 percent of the TikTok posts mentioning China were supportive of the PRC, favouring unification and praising China. Conversely, 95 percent of the posts mentioning Taiwan were negative: the two most common narratives were that the DPP has “destroyed Taiwan” and that Taiwan and China should be unified. Research by IORG, another civil society organization in Taiwan, also shows that influencers reinforced and spread PRC narratives. Those influencers included TV personalities, talking heads, politicians, and YouTubers. As with previous elections (and the periods between elections), analysts suspect that Beijing used various means to fund influencers, YouTube pages, Facebook fan pages, and content farms.

China has also made efforts to cast doubt on the integrity of the elections, with at least one popular YouTuber close to an opposition party using disinformation to support claims of ballot stuffing. An opposition presidential candidate also suggested that there were irregularities during the elections, without providing any evidence. Such incidents serve to delegitimize not just the outcome of the elections, but their process and integrity. These efforts are part of a longer game that is aiming to sow doubt about the Lai administration and prepare for the next elections.

It is important to note that not all of this cognitive warfare originates in the PRC: similar content was generated and spread domestically for political advantage, but it dovetailed with PRC influence efforts. This does not mean that the locals producing such content necessarily agree ideologically with the PRC, but nevertheless, their behaviour inadvertently supports PRC narratives and can be damaging to Taiwan's democracy.

Psychological warfare and “grey zone” operations

China has deployed People's Liberation Army (PLA) navy vessels around Taiwan, across the tacit median line in the Taiwan Strait, and had its aircraft fly into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) as a threat against Taiwan. The actions are intended to reinforce the view that Beijing has the means to take military action should the Taiwanese public make “wrong” decisions. Due to weather conditions in the Taiwan Strait, PLA Air Force and PLA Navy activity was relatively subdued in the days leading up to the recent 2024 elections. However, this activity can be considered subdued only when compared to the high threshold set following the August 2022 visit by then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan and which China has sustained ever since. As such, China's military coercion is more a tool used over an extended period to shape the environment in the Taiwan Strait than a means to directly influence elections. (As the results of the 1996 elections showed, military intimidation that is directly linked to elections tends to backfire.)

Nevertheless, in the weeks leading up to voting day the PLA escalated its presence by deploying several surveillance balloons, many of which intruded into Taiwan's airspace and transited over the island. Less threatening than military aircraft (though ostensibly posing a threat to civil aviation), the devices nevertheless put Taipei in a difficult position by demonstrating that Beijing was continuing its efforts to erode Taiwan's sovereignty. Furthermore,

the fly-over from the surveillance balloons forced the Taiwanese government to make a difficult choice: it could shoot down the intruding device and risk escalation, or allow the balloons to transit which would reinforce the view that a DPP administration is incapable of defending the nation's sovereignty. The balloons were part of Beijing's incrementalist "grey zone" approach to eroding Taiwan's sovereignty, suggesting that the next step might be flights over Taiwan of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV).

A little more than two weeks after the elections, the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) announced unilateral adjustments, effective February 1, 2024, to the north-south M503 flight corridor in the Taiwan Strait, abandoning a 6 nautical miles (nm) "offset" that Taipei and Beijing had negotiated in 2015. The flight corridor now comes within 4.2 nm of the median line in the Taiwan Strait, and Taipei argues that this endangers civil aviation over the outlying islands of Kinmen and Matsu. At the same time, the CAAC also announced it would begin allowing eastbound flights on flight path W122 between Fuzhou and M503 and W123 between Xiamen and M503. The move reinforced the signal that concessions made when the KMT was in power in 2015 no longer applied. The overall effect of this assault on Taiwan's sovereignty has been to increase the risks of accidents and miscommunication, and therefore the likelihood of escalation.

Like other, more direct military activity, the threats from the CAAC are intended to shape perceptions, and create a sense of embattlement and inevitability among the Taiwanese public. China's hope is that, in the aggregate, this will eventually compel the Taiwanese to elect candidates who are more open to what would amount to a negotiated surrender to the PRC.

Co-optation

In the weeks leading up to the elections, the State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office sponsored all-expenses-paid or highly discounted trips for local Taiwanese politicians to various parts of China. Once there, the politicians met Chinese officials and were encouraged to facilitate "bloc" voting for opposition politicians favoured by Beijing. The co-optation of local politicians is particularly important for Beijing when the DPP is in power as doing so makes it easier for China to bypass Taiwan's central government, deal directly with potential proxies at the local level, and thereby erode the central authority's ability to govern.

Illicit funding from the PRC to opposition parties also featured in this election, with the PRC using cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin to send money to amenable opposition candidates. Taiwanese authorities have also been investigating the role of pro-Beijing crime syndicates (“triads”) as well as underground banking channels that the PRC has used to provide illegal funding to opposition or pro-unification parties. Stopping such activities altogether is a major challenge for Taiwanese law enforcement.

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Overtly pro-Beijing candidates and political parties, such as the China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP) and New Party, played a marginal role in the 2024 elections. In fact, the CUPP did not field a single candidate in the legislative elections. Analysts suspect that the CUPP and the Bamboo Union triad, with which it has a symbiotic relationship, went underground and may have provided assistance to opposition parties instead. This suggests that Beijing may have realized that platforms that openly support unification (under the “one country, two systems” formula) are bound to alienate Taiwanese voters and can therefore be counterproductive.

Punitive measures

The final element of Beijing’s approach to Taiwan’s elections is, like military coercion, intended more as a punitive measure whose hoped-for psychological effects may, in the long term, shape Taiwanese voting decisions.

Days after the elections, the pacific island-nation of Nauru, one of Taiwan’s four official diplomatic allies in the region, announced it was establishing official diplomatic relations with the PRC and embracing the “one China” principle. Over the years, and especially since 2016, Beijing has poached Taiwan’s official diplomatic allies to punish Taiwan and underscore its international isolation. Following on the heels of Lai’s election, Nauru’s announcement suggested that other countries could follow suit between now and Lai’s inauguration on May 20, or after he has assumed office. (To a large degree, this retaliatory policy has

been offset by Taiwan’s ability to establish constructive relations with a growing number of countries around the world, albeit at the unofficial level and within the ambit of those partners’ “one China” policy.) Beijing has also used pressure and misinformation to compel countries to refer to its “one China” *principle* – a clear recognition of Taiwan as a province of China – rather than the “one China” *policy* that most countries use. The “one China” policy merely states that a country “acknowledges” or “takes note of” Beijing’s claim that Taiwan is a part of China, which by no means prevents those countries from having close relations with Taiwan at various levels.

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Weeks before the election, Beijing had also vowed economic retaliation against Taiwan should Lai be elected. Besides further sectoral sanctions, which are meant to hurt export-dependent sectors of Taiwan’s economy (e.g., its agricultural sector) and potentially use them as leverage against the central government, Beijing has also threatened to suspend the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), a free-trade-lite agreement that the two sides signed in 2009 when the KMT was in power. With this move, Beijing sought to imply that a DPP victory would have dire economic consequences for the Taiwanese economy, or at least certain sectors within it. (In response to Beijing’s weaponization of trade as a political tool, the Tsai administration has redoubled its efforts to diversify its export markets and reduce the country’s economic dependence on China, a policy that has been relatively successful. The Lai administration is expected to follow a similar policy. As with other coercive measures, punitive action can either break the will of the targeted public or, conversely, backfire and end up alienating the population while giving them the incentive to explore alternative markets for their goods or services.)

Conclusion

All in all, it is difficult to quantify the extent to which Beijing’s policy influenced the electoral outcomes in Taiwan. We can certainly ponder whether Lai would have won by a larger margin had it not been for external interference, or whether the TPP or the KMT would have done as well as they did without the narratives advanced by Beijing. The DPP did lose its majority of seats in the Legislative Yuan on January 13; it now holds 51 seats against the KMT’s 52,⁴ with eight for the TPP⁵ and two KMT-leaning independents. For a third party that was only created four years ago, the TPP’s surprisingly high number of votes conceivably had more to do with young voter disillusionment with mainstream politicians and leader Ko Wen-je’s populist style, although there is reason to suspect that Beijing’s cognitive warfare depicting the DPP as “corrupt” may have had some effect on young people’s views of the ruling party. Still, the great majority of people who voted for the TPP are also firmly opposed to unification.⁶

Whatever role Chinese interference played in the 2024 elections, it was insufficient to yield an administration that Beijing will be willing to work with – a situation that has held for three presidential elections in a row. Unless it revises its approach to influencing Taiwan and begins to offer real incentives for rapprochement that are not transactional and not simply attempts to erode Taiwan’s freedoms and democracy, it is unlikely that future elections will be any different. The resilience of the Taiwanese people, added to the highly incompatible systems across the Taiwan Strait and clear examples of the costs of giving in to Beijing, all ensure that coercion alone is insufficient to give Beijing the control it wants over Taiwan’s democracy. [MLI](#)

About the author



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Endnotes

- 1 This paper is adapted from a talk the author gave during the 2024 Election and its Implications for the Defence of Democracy conference hosted by the European Parliament on January 31, 2024.
- 2 In the 1996 elections, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) bracketed Taiwan with ballistic missiles and launched large-scale military exercises as part of an attempt to deter the Taiwanese from electing Lee Teng-hui of the KMT, whom Beijing (rightly) suspected of being supportive of Taiwan's independence. The DPP's Chen Shui-bian was elected in 2000 and re-elected, by a slim margin, in 2004; Tsai Ing-wen was elected in 2016 and re-elected in 2020 with a record-breaking number of votes.
- 3 This section is intended as a general discussion about, rather than a detailed analysis of, the main instruments Beijing used to try to influence the outcome of the 2024 elections.
- 4 The KMT has a well-oiled political machine at the local level and focused heavily on making gains in the legislative elections. The role of China in this outcome is arguably limited.
- 5 All eight seats were from the party vote; the TPP did not win a single legislative seat in the competitive elections.
- 6 Attitudes within the KMT are more complex. While the party and its supporters are generally more open to closer ties with Beijing, it is a misconception to believe that this directly translates to support for unification. Many KMT voters identify with the Republic of China (ROC) rather than the People's Republic of China, and among those who support eventual unification most nevertheless insist that the PRC would first have to democratize. Thus, if we add up the votes for Lai and Ko, and assuming that most are opposed to unification, nearly 66 percent of voters cast a vote against the PRC's preferred outcome, nearly 9 percent more than President Tsai obtained in her 2020 re-election. The views of the remainder of the voters, the 33.49 percent the KMT garnered, is slightly more complex, though most either support the "status quo" (de facto independence) or identify with the ROC, meaning that while they may oppose Taiwan independence (taidu) and hope for reduced tensions with Beijing, their attachment to the ROC nevertheless makes them opposed to unification with the PRC (huadu) on terms that inevitably would be set by Beijing.

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