

# Taiwan After the 2020 Elections: Post-Election Scenarios

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## Abstract

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*On 21 January 2020, the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) hosted an international expert discussion and conference on the topic of Taiwan after the 2020 elections. President Tsai Ing-Wen of the Democratic People's Party (DPP) won a second term in office with an increased majority as voters again rejected the Kuomintang (KMT), this time under the leadership of Han Kuo-yu. Two separate panels of speakers discussed post-election scenarios, of which the first analysed the results and their impact on the island's domestic political landscape, while the second contemplated the election and its effects from a regional perspective.*

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The event kicked off with welcoming remarks from Dr Harry Tseng, Taipei Representative to the EU and Belgium. Dr Tseng portrayed Taiwan as a beacon of robust democracy in Asia. Despite there having been already 15 presidents, this was only the 7<sup>th</sup> time Taiwanese voters could directly elect their leader. Before 1996, Presidents were elected by a national assembly consisting of around 300 members. In the 2020 elections, 14 million of an eligible 19 million voters cast their votes in a record breaking landslide victory for incumbent President Tsai Ing-wen. Turnout was an impressive 74.9%, a significant increase on the 66% recorded in 2016. This is made more impressive by the fact that Taiwan does not have compulsory voting or absentee ballots, while polling stations are only open for eight hours, between 8am and 4pm. Dr Tseng also made note of the increased number of congratulatory messages received from other nations, majorly attributing this to the recent events in Hong Kong and the subsequent Chinese government's response.

The floor was then handed to the first speaker from the first panel titled: '*The Taiwan Election Results under the loop*'. Dr I-Chung Lai, President of the Prospect Foundation delivered a comprehensive summary of the election results and detailed some of the key motivations that drove the electorate's voting patterns. The most significant of these motivations according to Dr Lai was the voter's will to express a loud "no" to the Chinese position on Taiwan. "No" to 'One Country, Two Systems', "no" to the 'One China Principle' and "no" to becoming part of the People's Republic of China. The 1992 consensus speech delivered by Xi Jinping alarmed the Taiwanese people, who fear losing control of their own destiny. In particular, the Chinese response to the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong was a major factor and fears of a similar outcome in Taiwan resonated with voters, particularly among young people. Dr Lai argued that it was a strategic error on the part of the Kuomintang (KMT) to insist on fielding a retired pro-China military general in their party list. Failing to address the concerns and fears of the electorate undoubtedly drove voters from the KMT to the DPP. Another key factor behind the success of the DPP has been a change in popular thinking on the position of Taiwan between the USA and China. Dr Lai argued that economic slowdown in China, in combination with the ongoing US-China trade war, and revised US security doctrine, has created a culture whereby many Taiwanese people feel that they no longer need to be so careful in balancing relations between the two powers and that the Chinese economy is beginning to be perceived as a liability, rather than an opportunity.

Dr Lai then turned to the future of domestic politics in Taiwan arguing that the third force is real and that the DPP cannot assume that this victory can be repeated in 2024. While this election has been dominated by cross-strait issues, the power of domestic policy is not to be underestimated. Taiwan remains a rather conservative society and the DPP's stance on same-sex marriage, as well as earlier pension and labour reforms were a significant factor in their poor performance in local elections in 2018. When this is combined with a rise in vote share for new parties and Tsai Ing-wen entering her constitutionally mandated final term as President, there is potential for a radically different political landscape to emerge in Taiwan in the wake of elections in 2024.

The second speaker was Christopher Hughes, Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics. Professor Hughes addressed the strategic errors made by the Chinese government, which he argues directly led to this

election result in Taiwan. Principal of these were China's handling of ongoing protests in Hong Kong and Xi Jinping's 'One Country, Two Systems' speech in September 2019 at an event celebrating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China. Professor Hughes argued there is historical precedent for strategic blunders driving anti-China sentiment at the ballot box. Indeed, when former Chinese leader Hu Jintao dropped references to 'One Country, Two Systems' from official rhetoric, the KMT won the following Taiwanese election in 2012. Xi Jinping has considerably more power than Hu Jintao and could drop 'One Country, Two Systems' more easily. Yet he has continued to apply psychological pressure on the DPP and Taiwan. Provocative moves like using maps of Taiwan in televised war games have backfired and delivered an improved result for the DPP. Meanwhile, Professor Hughes argued that the KMT has not learned from their mistakes in the last election and essentially delivered the same campaign as before. Yet, they expected a different result, displaying a considerable lack of awareness and foresight.

Dr Gudrun Wacker, a senior fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin expressed her agreement with many of the sentiments of the first two speakers but sought to provide a more balanced picture of the reality. In contrast with Dr Lai's claims about the weakening of China's position in the minds of Taiwanese voters, Dr Wacker reiterated that China continues to strengthen its military power, rendering any Taiwanese escape from China quite impossible. In the same vein, China's 31 measures programme which encourages and incentivises study and work on the Chinese mainland for Taiwanese people has proved popular and suggests that fear of China is not a clear cut or universal phenomenon in the territory. As such, calling the DPP's victory a landslide could be problematic as according to Dr Wacker the election can also be interpreted as presenting a choice to voters between two weakened candidates, in the form of DPP President Tsai and Han Kuo-yu of the KMT. The KMT had been leading the polls and the DPP had lost around 10% of their support by backing same-sex marriage. However, bringing up the 1992 consensus proved to be worse decision making on the part of the KMT, seriously damaging their polling and subsequent election result.

Dr Wacker also mentioned some important issues with the Taiwanese electoral process likely to have had some effect on the result. Chief of these is the requirement for voters to cast their ballots in Taiwan itself and more specifically, their home county in Taiwan. For many voters this was not a viable option logistically or economically, especially with Chinese New Year beginning just two weeks after the election when many people would be travelling home by default, forcing many to make a choice between both options. By the same token, Taiwan does not allow overseas voting, thus excluding this section of society from making their voice heard unless they were prepared to travel back to Taiwan for the election. Dr Wacker also spoke of a prevalence of tactical voting, with votes based on differing regional and party political dynamics in the respective lists. This tied in to the assertion that this election was not 'all about China' with domestic issues being just as important in influencing voter decisions.

The first panel concluded with a question and answer session which queried whether blaming China's strategic mistakes for the election result was 'intellectually complacent' and why western governments did not congratulate the victors, to which evidence to the contrary was provided by the speakers.

The second panel: *'Regional balances in East Asia after the 2020 elections'* examined the election results in a wider, regional context. Dr Julie Yu-Wen Chen, Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Helsinki was the first to take the floor and sought to inject a sense of realism into the debate. As powerful as the fear of a Chinese military intervention or invasion is, the likelihood of this actually happening is remote unless Taiwan formally declares independence. President Tsai has proven herself to be a responsible leader and is unlikely to say or do anything that would threaten the security of Taiwan. Dr Chen did however add the caveat that President Tsai could be emboldened by this election victory and this being her final Presidential term, potentially hardening Taiwan's stance and causing more friction with the mainland. Relations between China and Taiwan have been strained in the last four years with China trying to squeeze Taiwan's international space by applying pressure on big companies and brands to refer to Taiwan as a province of the mainland. Companies that have referred to Taiwan as a separate entity have faced boycotts and punitive measures from China, which, given the size of the Chinese market, can prove disastrous for business and perpetually tarnish brand image. China's economic strength and market size allows it to wield a great deal of power over the narrative where Hong Kong and Taiwan are concerned.

Though this pressure and strain has not had the desired effect on the Taiwanese people, Dr Chen believes that Xi Jinping is, at least for now, 'locked' into the 'One Country, Two Systems' strategy and cannot change course, particularly while Hong Kong proves troublesome for the central government. In the long term, the relationship could become more strained as young people in Taiwan are unwilling to compromise with the People's Republic of China, particularly on any of their current freedoms, whereas the young people on the mainland are becoming more nationalist than previous generations and as such, less willing to compromise on complete reunification. Dr Chen argued that this could bring the situation to a head in the future, in a post-Xi Jinping era. Meanwhile, the EU has to be careful in its use of language on the subject as the terms 'One China Principle' and 'One China Policy' are being used interchangeably when in fact they carry different meanings. The former declares that there is only one China, of which Taiwan is an inalienable part, while the latter defines the policy response of many foreign governments whereby it is acknowledged that there is only one Chinese government but unofficial relations with Taipei are maintained.

The next speaker, Dr Philip Saunders, Director of the Centre for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs at the Institute for National Strategic Studies in Washington D.C., focused more on the military dimension, analysing the region from a geostrategic perspective. Dr Saunders pointed out that the People's Liberation Army has been developing various battle plans for a blockade or total conquest of Taiwan since 1995. As such the Chinese government will always have multiple up-to-date options ready should it ever decide to go down that path. Dr Saunders argued that Taiwan does not take its defence seriously enough and advocated for greater spending from the incumbent government in this sector, suggesting that President Tsai should also investigate the feasibility of a form of conscription based national service and other associated defence policies. Taiwan could not be expected to triumph in battle with China but could invest in measures that would make any military action by China very costly, prompting Beijing to act more cautiously. That said, at present, Taiwan is not a priority for Xi Jinping and the government in Beijing which has more pressing issues of domestic stability, economic slowdown and difficulties in US relations to focus on. As such, China is

not actively concentrating its efforts on furthering unification or looking for an armed conflict. These options would presumably constitute a negative impact on China's standing and international relations. Instead, China is maintaining its diplomatic efforts to keep Taiwan isolated in the international community.

Taiwan is somewhat caught in the middle between China and the US but has been quite successful in balancing its trade and upholding its economic independence. That could be set to change with China applying increasing pressure on Taiwan's traditional partners in an effort to stop Taiwan and China being treated as separate economies. In the same vein, China's ongoing endeavour has been to block increased economic cooperation between Taiwan and its international partners. China's technology giants have caught up and Taiwan is no longer ahead of the curve in the tech industry. Ultimately, the significance of the election was downplayed by Dr Saunders who argued that the result would not have a fundamental effect on the economic or strategic situation in which Taiwan finds itself and that at least while President Trump is in power, it would have no direct influence on US policy.

The final speaker, Dr Maaïke Okano-Heijmans, a Senior Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute in The Hague focused more specifically on the role of Taiwan in relations between the EU and China. Dr Okano-Heijmans reminded the audience that the EU labelled China a 'systemic rival' in the EU-China Strategic Outlook that was published in March 2019. In the context of 'normative disarmament' the EU sees China to be promoting alternative systems of government and does not want to be perceived as endorsing these methods, particularly in light of recent troubles in Hong Kong. As such, Europe, or at least voices in Europe and certain Member States have been less inclined to walk on eggshells when it comes to discussing Taiwan, openly congratulating the victors of this election. Indeed, Members of the European Parliament have been calling for Taiwan to have its own representation at major international organisations such as the World Health Organisation for some time. Taiwan has become a test case for Europe as to whether it can deliver on some of the points made in the strategic outlook and as a gauge of the effectiveness of the EU's values based diplomatic approach. Dr Okano-Heijmans also argued that Europe has become a global rule-maker in certain fields, referencing the introduction of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as an example. Treating Taiwan as a serious like-minded partner creates multiple avenues of opportunity in furthering the uptake of European standards and values in Asia and beyond.

Dr Okano-Heijmans challenged the idea of preserving the status quo between Taiwan and China as she argued that the status quo is by default a situation where power is continually shifting to China, both in military and economic terms. Thus, to maintain a true sense of balance, proactive measures and new policies have to be put in place, Taiwan cannot reuse old policies and expect to achieve the same results. Taiwan has to cultivate a paradigm of 'strategic resilience' to maintain its preferred position. The EU is inclined to assist in this project which is purported to be mutually beneficial, not least in the field of foreign actors attempting to subvert the democratic process, a risk that Taiwan has so far been successful at insulating itself from. The liberal globalised system that Europe has come to cherish is under threat from not only China but now also the US under the leadership of Donald Trump. As a result, the EU should step up to defend and promote this liberal world

view by engaging with Taiwan and other like-minded actors across the globe. Especially since relying on the US is no longer a viable course of action.

The event closed with a second question and answer session where audience members posed a series of questions on a diverse range of topics not explicitly covered by the speakers. It was confirmed that quiet Japanese scepticism of China has created economic and political opportunities for Taiwan which could prove to be very important in the future. Meanwhile, it was stressed that personal, cultural and artistic exchanges between Taiwan and Europe must be continued and increased as they are of vital importance in raising awareness and comprehension of the situation in a continent which has long lacked a nuanced understanding of the region.

European Institute for Asian Studies – EIAS a.s.b.l.

26 Rue de la Loi, 10<sup>th</sup> Floor  
B-1040 Brussels

Tel.: +32 2 230 81 22  
E-mail: [eias@eias.org](mailto:eias@eias.org)  
Website: [www.eias.org](http://www.eias.org)