

Indo-Pacific Security Program Memorandum

THE ROAD TO TAIWAN'S 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

By Larry Wortzel

BOTTOM LINE

Three major parties have candidates up for the presidency of Taiwan on January 13, 2024.

Two of the candidates from the Kuomintang and Taiwan People's Party favor improving relations with China. The Democratic Progressive party candidate is known as an advocate for Taiwan independence.

Regardless of the outcome, China's armed forces will still react to U.S. transits of the Taiwan Strait and around Taiwan.

On January 13, 2024, the Republic of China, also known as "Nationalist China" and Taiwan, will hold its next presidential election. This will be the eighth direct election of a president in Taiwan, the first having been held in 1996. It will also be a contest that showcases the island's changing identity politics, shifting political preferences, and potential security challenges.

Rupture and Evolution

The Kuomintang (KMT), or the Nationalist Party of China, lost its civil war with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on the mainland and retreated to Taiwan on December 7, 1949. This brought about 2 million KMT troops to the island of Formosa, or Taiwan, which had been ruled by Japan from 1895 through 1945, the end of World War II.¹ After that, Taiwan became the Republic of China (ROC).

The ROC's security was protected by the Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States of America and the Republic of China, which was signed in 1955. That treaty remained in effect until 1980, when it was terminated by President Jimmy Carter. In anticipation of the end of the treaty, Congress in 1979 passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which was designed to stabilize security across the Taiwan Strait.²

Dr. Larry Wortzel, a retired U.S. Army colonel, is Senior Fellow in Asian Security at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.



AMERICAN FOREIGN
POLICY COUNCIL

Issue 4 | December 2023

Before what has come to be known as the “Great Retreat (大撤退)” of the KMT in 1949, a civil war had raged in China between the KMT and the Communists. In the ensuing migration, hundreds of thousands of civilians and government officials relocated from China to Taiwan. By 1950, nearly 2.5 million mainlanders had moved to the island. The KMT imposed martial law throughout Taiwan in 1947, and that state of affairs lasted until 1987.³

Today, “identity politics,” or whether Taiwanese identify as Chinese or native Taiwanese, is one of the great issues on the island and in the current presidential race. The majority of Taiwan’s residents now identify as Taiwanese, affecting electoral politics and relations across the Taiwan Strait.⁴ But other issues also impact electoral choices on the island. There is, for instance, strong sentiment against nuclear power among some in Taiwan. Also, for decades, tariffs or import bans protecting different agricultural products have been major factors in Taiwanese electoral politics.

Lee Teng-hui, a KMT member, was president of Taiwan from 1988 to 2000. Constitutional reforms in Taiwan allowed for popular elections in 1996, making him the first popularly elected president. Lee, a former mayor of Taipei, was the first president to have been born on the island. He was a Ph.D. graduate of Cornell University.⁵ In 1995, he gave a 1995 speech at his alma mater which angered the PRC, leading the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to carry out a series of missile exercises off Taiwan. That, in turn, elicited a U.S. response.⁶ Subsequently, prior to the 1996 presidential election, the PLA again fired missiles around Taiwan, establishing maritime closure areas that simulated a blockade of the island. This elicited a stronger U.S. response, and two U.S. aircraft carrier battle groups were sent to the area.⁷

Since Lee’s popular election, Taiwan has had three popularly elected presidents, all of whom have hailed from either the KMT or the Democratic Progressive Party

(DPP). They are Chen Shui-bian (DPP), 2000-2008; Ma Ying-jeou (KMT), 2008-2016; and Tsai Ing-wen (DPP), 2016-2024. Like Lee Teng-hui, Chen Shui-bian and Ma Ying-jeou were charismatic politicians and former mayors of Taiwan’s capital, Taipei. Tsai, the incumbent president, is a lawyer and international trade expert who at one time was in charge of relations with the PRC. She was part of the Chen Shui-bian government.

In ideological terms, the KMT is generally identified as seeking a good relationship with the PRC and recognizing the island as part of a “greater China.” The DPP, on the other hand, tends to draw voters who identify as Taiwanese, not Chinese, and has a reputation for seeking independence from China, causing tensions with Beijing.

The 2024 election for president, however, will see other political parties and contenders for office. The KMT (usually represented as blue on electoral maps), and the DPP (represented by green) are the main parties on the island. But another former mayor of Taipei, Ko Wen-je, established a third faction known as the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) in 2019. The TPP is a centrist party that advocates a focus on Taiwan’s economic development and good relations with mainland China. There was also, for a time, a potential independent contender, billionaire businessman Terry Gou, but he dropped out of the race for president on November 24, 2023.⁸ Gou’s candidacy was nonetheless noteworthy because it threatened to split voters supporting the “blue” parties like the KMT and the TPP.

Today, “identity politics” is one of the great issues on the island and in the current presidential race.

There are other, smaller, political parties in Taiwan and represented in Taiwan’s legislature as well. The People’s First Party (PFP), like the KMT, seeks good cross-strait relations, participation in more international organizations, and economic and cultural interaction between



Taiwan and the mainland. The KMT, and PFP have been known as the “Pan-Blue alliance.” Blue generally representing the areas on the island and political parties of the center and right.

Another smaller “pan-Blue” party, the New Party (NP), was formed in 1993 when some KMT members split with that party and Lee Teng-hui, accusing him of moving the KMT and Taiwan future unification with the Chinese mainland. The NP opposes any form of Taiwan independence. It draws few votes in presidential elections and has had no legislative seats since 2008. (See electoral preference map, FIGURE 1).⁹

The Pre-November 24th Slate

Taiwan’s presidential candidates were required to register with the Central Election Commission (CEC) between November 20, 2023 and November 24, 2023 in order to be on the 2024 presidential ballot.¹⁰ The major candidates prior to registration with the CEC were:

“William” Lai Ching-te, vice president of Taiwan (DPP)

Lai Ching-te has pledged to follow the policies that were established by Tsai Ying-wen during her presidency regarding issues across the Taiwan Strait. Although in 2017 Lai said that “the two sides of the Taiwan Strait are independent of each other,”¹¹ he has since moderated his position. The PRC actively works to portray him as an advocate of independence, and therefore a danger to peace. Lai’s choice of running mate, Taiwan’s representative to the U.S., Hsiao Bi-khim, served in the Legislative Yuan from 2002 to 2008, and subsequently from 2012 to 2020. Since 2020, she has been serving as the Taiwanese representative to the United States. In November 2023, Democratic Progressive Party formally nominated her as its vice presidential candidate. Hsiao previously served as President Chen Shui-bian’s interpreter and advisor.

Hou You-yi, mayor of New Taipei City (KMT)

Hou You-yi has echoed KMT narratives that the DPP could provoke conflict with China, and suggested that a KMT administration will be able to maintain stable relations with China. He has emphasized the strong rela-

tionship between Taiwan and the U.S., and has opposed the PRC’s “one country, two systems” slogan as well as Taiwan independence.¹² On the subject of military conscription, Hou said that, if elected, he would reverse the Tsai administration’s policy which extends the military conscription period to one year¹³ – something that would appeal to younger, conscription eligible males in Taiwan. Hou’s running mate will be former KMT legislator Chao Shao-kang would be his running mate in the January polls. She once led the faction of the KMT that established the New Party, but later returned to the KMT.¹⁴

Ko Wen-je, mayor of Taipei from 2014 to 2022 (TPP)

Ko Wen-je is a physician who once practiced at the Taiwan National University Hospital and taught medicine. As an independent candidate for mayor of Taipei in 2014, he beat out the DPP candidate in that contest. Ko emphasizes the importance of cultural ties and dialogue between China and Taiwan while recognizing their political separation. Ko founded the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP), seeing to attract pragmatic and disaffected voters from both the KMT and DPP. He has been characterized as a potential spoiler in the 2024 election, and one who could draw votes away from the KMT and lead to a DPP victory.¹⁵ Ko has asked China to clarify the definition of the “1992 Consensus” between China and Taiwan.¹⁶ He advocates for Taiwan building military deterrent capacity while seeking practical relations with China, and avoiding being a pawn in relations between China and the U.S.¹⁷ Like William Lai and Hou You-yi, Ko chose a woman as his vice president: “Cynthia” Wu Xinying, who once worked for Merrill Lynch and whose family is a major shareholder of conglomerate Shin Kong Group.¹⁸

“Terry” Gou Tai-ming, founder of Foxconn Technology Group (Independent)

Terry Gou, founder and former Chief Executive Officer of Hon Hai Technology Group (Foxconn), a global technology manufacturing giant, qualified for the presidential race as an independent on November 15, 2023.¹⁹ Gou had sought the KMT nomination for president in 2019 and 2023. Foxconn has strong ties and corporate assets in China. It manufactures the BlackBerry; Apple products



Indo-Pacific Security Program
Memorandum

Figure 1: Electoral Preference Map



like the iPad, iPhone, and iPod; Nintendo gaming systems; Nokia devices; Cisco products; PlayStation gaming consoles; and devices for Google and China's Xiaomi Electronics.²⁰ Gou has strong ties to manufacturing in the PRC and favors good relations across the Taiwan Strait and economic development for Taiwan. He was once a KMT member, and is critical of the DPP. Subsequently, however, Gou dropped out of the presidential race and did not register with Taiwan's Central Election Commission as a candidate.²¹

Controversy Over a "Pan-Blue" Ticket

For weeks, principals in the TPP and KMT had negotiated over the formation of a joint "Pan-Blue" presidential ticket, seeking to unify voters opposed to the DPP.²² Initially, the KMT and TPP seemed to have an agreement to unite in a coalition ticket for president. The goal was to seek friendlier ties with the PRC, an approach that had the potential to attract fresh voters in Taiwan.²³

The respective candidates, however, failed to get along and traded public insults. Ultimately, KMT candidate Hou You-yi and TPP's Ko Wen-je registered separately with Taiwan's Central Election Commission. Any hope of a combined "Pan-Blue" ticket was dead, and some observers feel this strengthens the DPP's chances in the 2024 election by splitting the "Pan-Blue" vote, but ultimately throws the outcome of the election up in the air.²⁴

As of this writing, the ultimate outcome of the Taiwan presidential election remains up in the air. The "Pan-Blue" split will likely give a boost to the DPP, but presidential elections in Taiwan often turn on other issues,

The deteriorating state of U.S.-China relations is likely to influence Beijing's behavior.

like a candidate's charisma, or a party's position on some hot-button local issue. For instance, the KMT advocacy of nuclear power for Taiwan will probably cost it votes. Ko Wen-je and the TPP make an attractive option for voters skeptical of the KMT and of William Lai's earlier reputation as a strong advocate for Taiwan independence.

How China Fits In

Should China attempt to influence election results with military exercises and threats around Taiwan, as the PLA did in 1995 and 1996, it will probably drive Taiwan's voters to support the DPP. While exercises may continue at a reduced pace, China will use economic incentives and promises of better cross-Strait ties to attempt to draw voters to the KMT or TPP. However, Taiwan's think tanks and free press are aware of how China's influence activities on Taiwan work, and are actively warning voters about them.


For its part, there can be no doubt that CCP Chairman Xi Jinping and the Party leadership would prefer to see a KMT or TPP president in Taiwan, or alternatively a "Pan-Blue" ticket. Both parties have argued for better relations with the PRC and emphasized Taiwan's economic development over a separate Taiwan identity. That probably would have reduced tensions across the Taiwan Strait, but it would not necessarily change a lot of Beijing's threatening and coercive behavior toward Taiwan, or the PLA's reactions to U.S. arms sales or activities in the Taiwan Strait.

The deteriorating state of U.S.-China relations, meanwhile, is likely to influence Beijing's behavior. The PLA will probably not be forthcoming in any talks with the Pentagon that were agreed to by President Biden and Communist Party Chairman Xi at the San Francisco APEC Summit in November 2023. Although the U.S. wants military exchanges, the PRC and PLA usually hold such contacts "hostage" to U.S. behavior toward Taiwan and Freedom of Navigation activities by U.S. aircraft or ships in the Taiwan Strait.

Moreover, "hot lines" to the PLA have consistently failed during crises, primarily because the Chinese military officers that answer them historically have had to wait for Central Military Commission and Politburo Standing Committee agreement on how to respond in times of tension or even floods and earthquakes. Even if some new form of hotline or emergency communications channel is established between the Pentagon and



the PLA, or between the White House and Zhongnanhai, where the CCP headquarters is housed, it is likely to be sub-optimal. The CCP's strict top-down management system (as well as fears of angering Xi) will mean that, even if someone answers the phone, that interlocutor will not be in a position to make rapid decisions to defuse a crisis.

Meanwhile, statements by Chinese officials that talks with the U.S. can take place only “under conditions of “mutual respect” will likely translate to demands that the U.S. respect the PRC's territorial claims in the South China Sea and control over the Taiwan Strait. Meanwhile, China continues to pursue expansive maritime territorial claims in international waters of the South China Sea and East China Sea, which the U.S. will consistently challenge. Around Taiwan, depending on which Party winds up winning the election, PLA military exercises and threats around Taiwan can be expected to continue in reaction to any U.S. arms sales, or to high level U.S. congressional visits to the island. 

ENDNOTES

1. Han Cheung, “Taiwan in Time: The Great Retreat,” *Taipei Times*, December 4, 2016, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2016/12/04/2003660529>.
2. Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang, “The United States and Taiwan's Defense Transformation,” Brookings Institution, February 16, 2010, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-united-states-and-taiwans-defense-transformation/>; the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 is available at <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title22/chapter48&edition=prelim>.
3. Caroline Gluck, “Remembering Taiwan's martial law,” *BBC News*, July 13, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6294902.stm>.
4. Mercy A. Kuo, “Cross-strait Crisis and Taiwan's National Identity,” *The Diplomat*, September 12, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/cross-strait-crisis-and-taiwans-national-identity/>.
5. Kathryn Stamm, “Former Taiwanese President and ‘Father of Democracy’ Lee Teng-hui Ph.D. ‘68 Dies at 97,” *The Cornell Daily Sun*, July 31, 2020, <https://cornellsun.com/2020/07/31/former-taiwanese-president-and-father-of-democracy-lee-teng-hui-ph-d-68-dies-at-97/>.
6. Richard R. Wertz, “Politics Conflict and War-Taiwan,” *Exploring Chinese History*, Ibiblio.org, 1988-2023 <https://www.ibiblio.org/chinesehistory/contents/03pol/c04s06.html>.
7. Ibid.
8. Huiling Tan, “Terry Gou, the founder of iPhone maker Foxconn, drops out of Taiwan's presidential election race,” *Business Insider*, November 24, 2023, <https://www.businessinsider.com/taiwan-foxconn-terry-gou-apple-iphone-withdraw-presidential-election-2023-11>.
9. The author thanks Christopher Ong, of New York, for his help with this map and Calista Huang of John's Hopkins University for her research assistance on this paper and map. The original map source is the U.S. Government CIA Taiwan Administrative Map, which was modified by Christopher Ong. https://www.cia.gov/static/3dcd5d59cc94bfeda9f87a5271d33d61/Taiwan_Administrative.pdf.
10. Kemi Adewalure, Rosie Levine, Jennifer Staats, and Alex Stephenson, “What You Need to Know About Taiwan's Pivotal Presidential Elections,” United States Institute of Peace, November 8, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/11/what-you-need-know-about-taiwans-pivotal-presidential-elections>; see also Central Election Commission, Taiwan, n.d., <https://web.cec.gov.tw/english/cms/aboutCec>.
11. Sean Lin, “Lai reaffirms support for independence,” *Taipei Times*, September 17, 2017, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2017/09/27/2003679217>.
12. See “US Taiwan's ‘sincerest ally and friend,’ Hou says,” *Taipei Times*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/09/19/2003806470#:~:text=New%20Taipei%20City%20Mayor%20Hou%20You-yi%20%28E4BEAF%28E58F%28E5AE%29%2C%20the.if%20he%20is%20elected%20in%20January%20next%20year>.
13. Hou You-yi favors shorter army service,” *Taipei Times*, July 5, 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/07/05/2003802701>.
14. Christopher Bodeen, “Vice presidential candidate as hopes for alliance fracture,” *Washington Post*, November 24, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/23/taiwan-politics-china-kmt-dpp/bcf9758-8a82-11ee-a36e-fdb-7be9bd43d_story.html.
15. Seamus Boyle, “For Taiwan's DPP, an Unprecedented ‘3-peat’ Depends on a Third Party,” *The Diplomat*, June 8, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/for-taiwans-dpp-an-unprecedented-3-peat-depends-on-a-third-party/>.
16. On the 1992 Consensus, see Yu-Jie Chen and Jerome A. Cohen, “China-Taiwan Relations Re-examined: The ‘1992 Consensus’ and Cross-Strait Agreements,” *University of Pennsylvania Asian Law Review* 14, Iss. 2, 2019, 1-40, <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1039&context=alr>.
17. Yimou Lee, “China should propose new framework for Taiwan engagement, opposition presidential candidate says,” *Reuters*, October 24, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/>



Indo-Pacific Security Program

Memorandum

[asia-pacific/china-should-propose-new-framework-taiwan-engagement-opposition-presidential-2023-10-24/](https://www.asia-pacific/china-should-propose-new-framework-taiwan-engagement-opposition-presidential-2023-10-24/).

18. Christopher Bodeen, “Taiwan’s main opposition party announces vice presidential candidate as hopes for alliance fracture,” Associated Press, November 24, 2023, <https://ap-news.com/article/taiwan-politics-china-kmt-dpp-7b1b76a9d-1ed91eca4b318d6fd18fe34>.
19. “Hon Hai founder Terry Gou qualifies to run for president,” *Taipei Times*, November 15, 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/11/15/2003809201>.
20. “Overview of Hon Hai Technology Group (Foxconn®),” n.d., <https://www.foxconn.com/en-us/about/group-profile>.
21. Hou, Ko to run separately, as Gou quits,” *Taipei Times*, November 25, 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2023/11/25/2003809674>.
22. “315 legislative candidates have registered,” *Taipei Times*, November 26, 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/11/26/2003809728>.
23. Joyu Wang, “China’s Best Hope for the Taiwan Presidential Election Just Fell Apart,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 24, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/chinas-best-hope-for-the-taiwan-presidential-election-just-fell-apart-80338f8f>.
24. “EDITORIAL: Lai victory is not guaranteed,” *Taipei Times*, November 28, 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/11/26/2003809707>.



Indo-Pacific Security Program

Memorandum

Issue 4 | December 2023

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

For the United States, the Indo-Pacific represents a region of significant security challenges and enormous political and economic opportunity. AFPC's Indo-Pacific Security Program seeks to provide policymakers and the general public with the analysis, insights and recommendations necessary to properly understand and navigate this vital region.

For more information about the program, please contact Michael Sobolik, Fellow in Indo-Pacific Studies, at sobolik@afpc.org.

ABOUT AFPC

For four decades, AFPC has played an essential role in the U.S. foreign policy debate. Founded in 1982, AFPC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to bringing information to those who make or influence the foreign policy of the United States and to assisting world leaders with building democracies and market economies.

AFPC is widely recognized as a source of timely, insightful analysis on issues of foreign policy, and works closely with members of Congress, the Executive Branch and the policymaking community. It is staffed by noted specialists in foreign and defense policy, and serves as a valuable resource to officials in the highest levels of government.

AFPC MISSION STATEMENT

The American Foreign Policy Council seeks to advance the security and prosperity of the United States by:

- providing primary source information, as well as policy options, to persons and organizations who make or influence the national security and foreign policies of the United States;
- arranging meetings and facilitating dialogue between American Statesmen and their counterparts in other countries; and
- fostering the acceptance and development of representative institutions and free market economies throughout the world in a manner consistent with the Constitution, the national interest, and the values of the United States.

AFPC STAFF

Mr. Herman Pirchner, Jr.
President

Mr. Ilan Berman
Senior Vice President

Mr. Richard M. Harrison
*Vice President of Operations and
Director of Defense Technology Programs*

Mrs. Annie Swingen
Director for External Relations

Dr. S. Frederick Starr
*Distinguished Fellow for Eurasia and
Chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus
Institute*

Dr. Svante E. Cornell
*Senior Fellow for Eurasia and
Director of the Central
Asia-Caucasus Institute*

Mr. Alexander B. Gray
Senior Fellow in National Security Affairs

Mr. Michael Sobolik
Senior Fellow in Indo-Pacific Studies

Ms. Rehna Sheth
Research Fellow and Program Officer

Ms. Alexa Davis
Program Officer

BOARD OF ADVISORS

Amb. Paula J. Dobriansky
Amb. James S. Gilmore, III

Hon. Newt Gingrich
Sen. Robert Kasten, Jr.

Amb. Richard McCormack
Gov. Tom Ridge

Dr. William Schneider, Jr.
Hon. Manisha Singh

Hon. Dov Zakheim
Hon. Michelle S. Guida



AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

509 C Street NE, Washington, D.C. 20002 | Telephone: 202.543.1006 | Fax: 202.543.1007 | www.afpc.org