

Opinion – Why Tsai Ing-wen’s Victory is a Blessing for the Taiwan Strait

Written by Yu-Hua Chen

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YU-HUA CHEN, MAR 6 2020

As the coronavirus situation inside China appears to stabilize, it is time to look back to the future of China-Taiwan relations. In the 2020 presidential election of Taiwan, the incumbent president of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen, was re-elected by an overwhelming majority. Since Tsai assumed office in 2016, China has intensified its pressure on the self-ruled island nation by a series of efforts. The primary purpose behind all these efforts is to force Tsai, who adamantly refuses to compromise on Taiwan’s sovereignty, to accept a unification proposal on Beijing’s terms. Despite the pressure from Beijing, she still defeated Mayor Han Kuo-Yu, a candidate Beijing prefers, by a significant margin. (2.6 million votes). While Tsai’s success should not be over exaggerated, the message the Taiwanese would like to send to Beijing in this election seems loud and clear — intimidation and coercion are not effective and even counter-productive. The more pressure Beijing puts on Taiwan, the stronger the Taiwanese resolve to defend their freedom and democracy becomes.

After the election, however, many experts on China shared the concern that Tsai’s victory may worsen the stability of the Taiwan Strait due to the likely response from Beijing. Lev Nachman argued, ‘The CCP is likely to respond in terms of doubling down on their current strategy of trying to punish Taiwan as much as possible.’ Bonnie Glaser warned that, ‘I expect they (Chinese) will double down on their use of military, diplomatic, and economic measures that they have already been taking.’ James Palmer also predicted before the election that, ‘Military options may even start to look more palatable.’ Certainly, the possibility that China will increase its pressure on Taiwan in the following months cannot be easily ruled out. However, according to the *deterrence model of thinking*, Tsai’s victory may stabilize this dangerous strait.

In the past, when considering how to maintain the stability of the Taiwan Strait, experts usually provided their analysis based on the *spiral* model of thinking. This essentially suggests that the fewer provocations from Taiwan, the less political imperative China would feel to address this thorny issue, which ultimately helps the US and its allies avoid a situation in which they have to respond accordingly. Remedies to maintain the stability of the Taiwan Strait given by this model include: “Taiwan should not officially announce its independence,” “Taiwanese should not revise the name, national flag, or national constitution of their country,” “Taiwan should not pursue a larger international space,” or “Taiwan should not acquire offensive weapons.” As long as Taiwan does not cross several red lines drawn by China, the stability of the strait can be upheld, and by doing so a vicious spiral of action-reaction can be avoided. From this perspective, the victory of Tsai bodes ill for the future of the stability of the Taiwan Strait as it offers China more reasons to pre-emptively use non-peaceful means to pressure Taiwan not to cross the red lines set by Beijing.

However, the spiral model does not seem to be working very well over the past four years. Operating by this model of thinking, Tsai spent a great deal of effort to carefully and indirectly continue a “*de facto* 92 Consensus” of the Ma Ying-jou government to manage Taiwan’s relations with China before mid-2018, which alienated many pro-independence supporters of the DPP. Instead of appeasing Beijing, however, Tai’s reconciliatory gesture was only met with a series of aggressive responses of China, such as poaching diplomatic allies of Taiwan, forcing international organizations to change the way they refer to Taiwan, weaponizing its trade and tourism relations with Taiwan, detaining overseas Taiwanese, dispatching military vessels and aircraft around the island, and engaging in

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information warfare. In 2019, Chinese president Xi Jinping further announced his wishes to unify Taiwan by a Taiwanese version of “One Country, Two Systems.”

So, what went wrong? The answer is miscalculation. The spiral model of thinking only works when both sides have no intention of destroying the existing stability. The model helps the two sides in a potential conflict avoid unintended results. If either side has revisionism vision in mind, the spiral model of thinking becomes a liability. Miscalculating the real intention of an aggressor only encourages it to ask for more. Xi, moreover, has proven to the world that he is not as interested in the status quo as his predecessors. Against an aggressor with ambition, *the deterrence model of thinking* has more value. The best way to characterize this model of thinking is by the Roman general Vegetius’ phrase, “if you want peace, prepare for war.” The higher the price an aggressor needs to pay for disrupting the status quo, the higher the chance it chooses to stay with the status quo.

Under this model of thinking, the victory of Tsai is a blessing for the stability of the Taiwan Strait. During her previous term, Tsai invested in Taiwan’s defense capability to decelerate the growing disparity in power across the strait. Building a more practical military doctrine against China (multi-domain deterrence), developing a self-reliant defense industry, working on offensive military weapons, and improving the image of military personnel in the Taiwanese society are all efforts through which Tsai has strengthened the defense capability of Taiwan. Most importantly, the US has viewed Tsai as a reliable and restrained partner that it can comfortably work with in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. As these internal and external balancing strategies of Taiwan are likely to continue for the next four years, plus the strong mandate from the Taiwanese, the level of deterrence against China is much higher compared to a hypothetical scenario in which Tsai lost.

As a pro-Beijing candidate, Han Kuo-Yu intentionally toned down the China threat and rarely spoke about his vision for Taiwan’s national defense policies during the campaign. He refused to name China as a country posing an existential military threat to Taiwan during a presidential debate, and criticized Tsai’s submarine development program as a fantasy. Also, breaking a tradition for every Taiwanese presidential candidate, he showed indifference towards communicating his China policy with Washington. From the perspective of the deterrence model, his presidency would likely have led to China demanding more of Taiwan, which would ultimately lead to a disastrous geopolitical change in East Asia.

On February 2 1981, Chiang Ching-guo, the former leader of Taiwan, spoke to George Shultz, who then became the Secretary of State during the Reagan Administration, ‘The ROC has been fighting against the Chinese communists over fifty years...The only lesson we learn from it is—if you are not afraid of the CCP, it would be afraid of you; if you are afraid of the CCP, it would not be afraid of you.’ Over the decades, the answer to the question of why China has not unified Taiwan by force is less that China does not want to, but more that China is unable to, which is proven in the First, Second, and Third Taiwan Strait Crises. The role deterrence plays in maintaining the stability over the Taiwan Strait cannot be underestimated. When China’s military capability grows, the level of deterrence against China needs to grow as well.

About the author:

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