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The Shifting Dynamics of Taiwanese Politics: How Can the US Reassure in an Age of Pushback Against the Two-Party System?

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Summary

Commentators and analysts questioned whether the result of the 2024 Taiwanese presidential elections reflected a significant shift on the part of the Taiwanese voter electorate. Namely, the election results seemed to show that the Taiwanese public is more attentive than ever to domestic political issues and not merely cross-strait issues. The battering that the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) took in hanging onto the presidency but failing to maintain control of the Taiwanese legislature, as well as the rise of insurgent political forces such as the third party of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) and its presidential candidate of Ko Wen-je were seen as examples of this fact.

Nevertheless, the following study aims to show that the substantial dynamics of cross-strait politics remain. It proves a conceptual flaw to view cross-strait as separated from domestic issues. Likewise, the "China factor" has historically shaped the dynamics of domestic Taiwanese politics as an external factor, and this is true in the most recent election, as well. As such, international stakeholders such as the US engaging with Taiwan are advised to make the following policy recommendations:

1. Emphasise the strength of ties on the basis of shared values rather than purely economic or geopolitical interests. While this is already a key aspect of US messaging toward Taiwan, the public finds this unconvincing, and there is a need for more concrete examples of this.
2. Seek to provide ways of strengthening ties that relate Taiwan's (not just the US's) economic prosperity and security to such ties.

This proves a critical task at a time in which the pan-Blue camp increasingly calls into question the reliability of Taiwan's links with international allies and suggests that they could, in fact, endanger Taiwan. The term pan-Blue camp refers to the political forces in Taiwan largely aligned with the Chinese Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (KMT), and historically supportive of unification with China. By contrast, the term pan-Green camp largely refers to the political forces in Taiwan aligned with the DPP and historically

supportive of independence from China. That the TPP apparently has a similar appeal to opposed projects, such as the New Power Party (NPP) that emerged in the wake of the 2014 Sunflower Movement, can be traced to how “domestic” issues and cross-strait issues came to overlap in the Sunflower Movement, out which the rise of Ko, the NPP, and even Tsai Ing-wen’s DPP must be contextualised. Namely, scepticism of the US is on the rise in Taiwan, as linked to domestic economic dissatisfaction as well as cross-strait issues, and the rise of new political forces points to how faith in the US as an ally could perhaps be called into question in the future.

A Narrow Win for the DPP in 2024 Elections

The Taiwanese 2024 presidential elections largely played out according to predictions. In particular, the final polls, before the ten-day blackout period imposed ahead of voting, proved highly accurate.¹ These polls showed a narrow victory for DPP presidential candidate Lai Ching-te. On the other hand, though the pan-Blue camp could have potentially defeated Lai with a joint presidential ticket, this did not occur.

It is therefore not unexpected that Hou You-yi, the KMT's presidential candidate, secured the second position, while Ko Wen-je of the TPP claimed the third spot. There was no scenario in which Ko could surpass Hou for second place. This development would have significantly undermined the pan-Blue camp, especially during a period when the KMT was seen as weakening. Indeed, the KMT has been in a state of crisis for years, with the party reporting fewer than 9,000 members under the age of 40 as of 2020.

In many ways, the election outcome proves a repeat of the 2000 elections that originally put Chen Shui-bian in power for the first time as the first non-KMT president in Taiwanese history. Chen, too, won because of splits in the pan-Blue camp.

Similarly, the results of the legislative elections evoke memories of the Chen presidency. The DPP relinquished control of the legislature, suggesting that the pan-Blue camp could achieve a majority if Ko Wen-je's TPP and the KMT managed to collaborate. Like Lai, Chen served as a DPP president at a time when the DPP lacked legislative control. This situation persisted until 2016, marking the first occasion a non-KMT party secured a majority in the Taiwanese legislature. This situation prompts inquiries about whether the

¹ Betty Hou, “Last Taiwan Polls Show US-Friendly DPP Set for Election Win”, *Bloomberg*, January 2, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-02/last-taiwan-polls-show-us-friendly-dpp-set-for-election-victory>.

KMT—or a unified pan-Blue camp—might resort to scorched earth strategies to block any legislative actions by the DPP, mirroring the tactics used during the Chen administration.

The gap between the candidates was large enough that Lai does, in fact, have a clear mandate. That is, though this was not a large popular mandate, all three parties accepted the result of the election as fair and legitimate.

Nevertheless, despite coming in last of the three major candidates, the rise of TPP presidential candidate Ko Wen-je has perhaps attracted the most attention. In particular, the rise of Ko as a third-party candidate has raised questions about whether the familiar two-party dynamics of Taiwanese electoral politics—in which the major difference between the two political parties is on the basis of their cross-strait stance—still persist. This has led to the interpretation that these dynamics have perhaps passed.

While this is not the first time such questions have been raised in Taiwanese politics in the past decade, with the rise of pan-Green third parties such as the NPP in the wake of the 2014 Sunflower Movement, this was the first time in the past decade that a third party fielded a presidential candidate who was able to win votes on the level of Ko. The demand for third-party alternatives thus reflects longer-term shifts in the dynamics of Taiwanese politics that have been ongoing for over a decade.

Still, a closer examination of the dynamics of the 2024 presidential election reveals that the familiar two-party dynamics of Taiwanese politics, as well as the orientation of Taiwanese electoral politics vis-a-vis cross-strait relations, still holds. Moreover, to interpret these dynamics as past is, in many ways, a misreading of how domestic policy has always interfaced with cross-strait relations in Taiwanese politics.

The Rise of Ko as an Insurgent Candidate

In many ways, Ko was read as the candidate of the youth in the 2024 elections. Specifically, Ko's rise as a third-party presidential candidate was linked to his voicing of the socioeconomic dissatisfaction of Taiwanese young people and because he was read as an anti-establishment candidate.

Indeed, what was notable about the 2024 election cycle was to what extent the candidates of the three major political parties agreed on the major social ills facing Taiwan when it came to domestic policy, although the assigning of blame differed. All parties agreed that there were issues regarding low salaries, unaffordable housing, as well as long-term demographic issues regarding the ageing population and declining birthrate.

And though political parties may have offered various proposals to solve these social ills, no party offered dramatically different solutions—Lai acknowledged in his victory speech that useful policies advanced by other parties could potentially be incorporated into a future DPP political program if he became president. Though other candidates were not necessarily as candid as Lai, this could also be the case with the two pan-Blue parties.

What Ko's TPP could offer that the KMT and DPP could not, however, was its anti-establishment ethos. The DPP may have swept to power under Tsai Ing-wen's tenure in the wake of the 2014 Sunflower Movement, but it was then an opposition party, which was in tatters after the end of the Chen administration. But after eight years in power, the DPP is now read as the incumbent. This is particularly the case for those newly able to vote at the age of 20 who have experienced the DPP in power for their entire adult political lifetimes.

Compared to the older generations who experienced the Sunflower Movement and may have a broader sense of threat regarding the KMT, the younger ones have no comparable experiences. Even the 2019 Hong Kong protests were five years ago for newer voters.

Yet this does not mean that the KMT would appeal to such youth either. Rather, the KMT, along with the DPP are both perceived as parties of the status quo. Enter Ko Wen-je's TPP, then. Apart from that, Ko has successfully positioned himself as an alternative, with his appeal helped by his strong social media engagement on platforms that the DPP and KMT have had more difficulty with, such as short-form video platforms such as TikTok or Instagram.

Shifting Dynamics in Taiwanese Politics?: Ko's Support Among Youth

Part of what proves surprising about the rise of Ko and his popularity among Taiwanese young people is to what extent he breaks from the views of Taiwanese young people. Ko, after all, is frequently known for misogynistic gaffes, despite the fact that Taiwan saw a wave of #MeToo cases earlier last year that called attention to sexual discrimination, harassment, and assault against women entrenched within Taiwanese political culture.²

² Chang Yueh-han, "Ko and the proliferation of misogyny", *Taipei Times*, July 26, 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/07/26/2003803741>. *The Economist*, "A TV drama about Taiwanese politics has sparked a social reckoning", June 22, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/culture/2023/06/22/a-tv-drama-about-taiwanese-politics-has-sparked-a-social-reckoning>.

Likewise, though young people overwhelmingly support gay marriage, Ko has himself expressed his personal opposition to gay marriage.³ Other comments by Ko made shortly before LGBTQ advocacy groups interpreted the elections as suggesting that LGBTQ sexual identities are a form of mental illness.⁴ This has made Ko's popularity among young people some of an enigma to researchers.

Since emerging as a political figure in 2014 following the Sunflower Movement, Ko has often been viewed as resonating with the public precisely because he diverges from the typical image of smooth, well-rehearsed establishment politicians. This distinctiveness has led some critics to describe Ko as a populist. However, Ko's approach might be considered as setting a precedent for several other politicians similarly branded as populists over the past decade, including KMT presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu, by deviating from conventional political frameworks.

To this extent, Ko's political views have shifted dramatically since his initial emergence in 2014.⁵ Polls continually show that Taiwanese young people identify overwhelmingly as Taiwanese and not Chinese. Hence in consideration of his support base, it proves surprising that during the 2024 campaign season, Ko called for the revival of the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement (CSSTA) that provoked the 2014 Sunflower Movement, openly contemplated a political alliance with the KMT and FoxConn founder Terry Gou, and even suggested building a bridge between Kinmen and Xiamen. Ko likewise frequently referred to Taiwan and China as "one family on both sides of the Taiwan Straits that share a common destiny" as part of cross-strait exchanges conducted with China during his tenure as Taipei mayor.

Ko's pivot from the pan-Green to pan-blue camp in the past decade has been well-documented. Nevertheless, it still surprises that young people who otherwise are generally not perceived as being in favour of closer relations with China have come to back him. Ko later pivoted away from overtly pro-China stances. After all, he claimed late

³ Mia Ping-Chieh Chen, "Ko Wen-je Reveals Personal Opposition to Gay Marriage During Boston Visit", *New Bloom*, March 25, 2019, <https://newbloommag.net/2019/03/25/ko-boston-visit/>.

⁴ 李采薇, 柯文哲稱「LGBTI+學生送心理輔導」! 網對比賴清德回答 嘆: 倒退50年, *SET News*, November 16, 2023, <https://tw.news.yahoo.com/%E6%9F%AF%E6%96%87%E5%93%B2%E7%A8%B1-lgbti-%E5%AD%B8%E7%94%9F%E9%80%81%E5%BF%83%E7%90%86%E8%BC%94%E5%B0%8E-%E7%B6%B2%E5%B0%8D%E6%AF%94%E8%B3%B4%E6%B8%85%E5%BE%B7%E5%9B%9E%E7%AD%94-%E5%98%86-043507636.html>.

⁵ Lev Nachman and Brian Hioe, "From Green to Blue: The Political History of Ko Wen-je", *The Diplomat*, November 28, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/from-green-to-blue-the-political-history-of-ko-wen-je/>.

in the campaign season that he would mostly continue the foreign policy of the Tsai administration.⁶

Thus, employing ambiguous rhetoric could enhance his attractiveness to swing voters, particularly among young people who do not strongly align with either the DPP or KMT and whose votes are crucial in elections. This strategy aligns with characteristics often associated with populist support, where Ko's appeal is primarily rooted in his charisma as an anti-establishment figure rather than specific policies or the makeup of his political party.

After all, if voters examined the basis of his TPP more closely, it would have been clear from the onset that its politicians were mostly drawn from the pan-Blue camp instead of its claim to be beyond traditional pan-Blue and pan-Green distinctions. This occurred despite the fact that the TPP had a unique provision in its party charter that would have allowed for party members to simultaneously be members of other political parties.

Demands for Alternatives to Two-Party Dominance in the 2010s, the Rise of US and Ally-Sceptic Discourse

The TPP, with its eight seats, has now surpassed the NPP, the major third party that emerged in the aftermath of the Sunflower Movement. The NPP, at the peak of its power, held five seats in the Taiwanese legislature. However, the NPP ultimately disintegrated in the lead-up to the 2020 elections. This occurred after the party's major political heavyweights, Freddy Lim and Huang Kuo-chang, were unable to agree on what the party's stance should be regarding the DPP—that is, the question of whether the party openly endorses Tsai Ing-wen or not.⁷

The TPP now faces a similar struggle in that the KMT hopes to push the party into a collaborative relationship with it in the legislature.⁸ But the TPP, knowing the fate of the NPP before it, will now negotiate the challenge of avoiding becoming simply a “little Blue” party without alienating its existing base.⁹

⁶ David Sacks, “Taiwan’s 2024 Presidential Election: Analyzing Ko Wen-je’s Foreign Policy Positions”, Council on Foreign Relations, January 4, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/taiwans-2024-presidential-election-analyzing-ko-wen-je-foreign-policy-positions>.

⁷ Nick Aspinwall, “Taiwan’s New Power Party Faces Crisis After Departure of Heavyweights”, *The Diplomat*, August 17, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/taiwans-new-power-party-faces-crisis-after-departure-of-heavyweights/>.

⁸ Jonathan Chin, “2024 Elections: Ko Rejects Jaw DPP Appeal,” Taipei Times, January 12, 2024, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2024/01/12/2003811994>.

⁹ Ibid.

Yet before the disintegration of the NPP ahead of the 2020 elections, the NPP was firmly conscious of the danger posed by the rise of the TPP. In particular, the NPP was aware through internal polling that the NPP and TPP largely shared the same support base. In other words, despite that the NPP positioned itself as a progressive, pan-Green party, and the TPP as a light pan-Blue party, both parties shared a support base—swing voters, then, have largely come to hope for alternatives regardless of whether they would be pan-Blue or pan-Green.

These similarities can be traced back to the Sunflower Movement, which marked a convergence of domestic and international politics, significantly influenced by the "China factor." The movement is primarily remembered for its opposition to the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement (CSSTA), a trade deal the Ma administration aimed to finalise with China. This agreement would have permitted Chinese investment in Taiwan's service sector, building on the foundations of the earlier Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). However, a significant aspect of the movement was also reacting against the same issues that the DPP is now blamed for, regarding low salaries, unaffordable housing, and other forms of socioeconomic inequality faced by young people.¹⁰ The KMT was framed as compromising the interests of young Taiwanese people in favour of China.

The DPP attempted to deploy this narrative, emphasising the KMT as the pro-China party in Taiwanese politics again in the 2024 elections, particularly after Ko and the KMT came to support the reviving of the CSSTA. The KMT perhaps fell into the DPP's trap, also yoking its own domestic stances to cross-strait relations. Late in campaigning, the KMT began to lean into the narrative that low salaries in Taiwan only occurred because the Tsai administration had blocked relevant provisions of trade agreements inked with China under the Ma administration, such as the ECFA.¹¹

By contrast, Ko's approach was to strategically sidestep the link between domestic and cross-strait policy that the KMT seemed unable to. Ko did not wholly link his economic platform to China, though he did claim that he hoped for more communication with China, and mostly downplayed his comments on "One family on both sides of the Taiwan Straits."¹²

¹⁰ Brian Hioe, "Movement Demands," *The Daybreak Project*, <https://daybreak.newbloommag.net/category/movement-demands/>.

¹¹ Brian Hioe, "Presidential Debate Mostly Plays Out as Expected, With Cross-Strait Issues Playing Significant Role," *New Bloom*, December 30, 2024, <https://newbloommag.net/2023/12/30/2024-presidential-debate/>.

¹² *Ibid.*

Ko was also successful in avoiding the perception of his TPP as opposing the strengthened ties with the US that have developed in recent years under the Tsai administration. This was not the approach adopted by the KMT, which has increasingly leaned into attacks on the Tsai administration over ties with the US. This ranges from questioning weapons sales to suggesting that the Tsai administration merely purchases weapons that the US foists onto Taiwan, even if they are dangerous for Taiwan. An example includes the KMT leaning into allegations that Volcano landmine systems purchased from the US are dangerous, possibly causing Taiwan to become littered with landmines similar to Cambodia.¹³

The KMT has further leaned into scepticism about economic ties with the US. A TSMC plant built in Arizona with the blessing of the Tsai administration was criticised as potentially leading to the loss of Taiwan's advantages in the semiconductor industry if Taiwan loses talent to US companies or has its intellectual property stolen in the US.¹⁴

By contrast, the TPP did not lean into such attacks, even if it did echo the KMT's discourse to some extent in suggesting that Taiwan should strengthen industries that give it an international foothold besides just the semiconductor industry.¹⁵ This, too, proves an illustration of how Ko's TPP sought to differentiate itself from the KMT regarding its US policy.

Much of the discourse regarding scepticism of the US has occurred after the presidential administration of Donald Trump, which raised questions about the reliability of the US as an ally. Further questions were raised about the extent to which the US would become involved in defending Taiwan after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (i.e., whether the US would only provide arms without becoming directly involved).

The China Factor as Continuing to Set the Master Narrative for Cross-Strait Policy

If a DPP victory is to be interpreted as on the basis of greater faith in its cross-strait policy, it must also be interpreted as showing greater faith in its governance. In particular, the historical choice of the Taiwanese voter electorate in presidential elections was whichever choice seemed to be the one that would preserve Taiwan's existing democratic freedoms.

¹³ Brian Hioe, "Volcano Mine Sales to Taiwan Come Under Fire from Pan-Blue Camp," *New Bloom*, January 30, 2023, <https://newbloommag.net/2023/01/30/volcano-mine-sales/>.

¹⁴ Brian Hioe, "TSMC's US Investments Spark Political Controversy in Taiwan," *The Diplomat*, January 18, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/tsmcs-us-investments-spark-political-controversy-in-taiwan/>.

¹⁵ Brian Hioe, "Presidential Debate Mostly Plays Out as Expected, With Cross-Strait Issues Playing Significant Role," *New Bloom*, December 30, 2024, <https://newbloommag.net/2023/12/30/2024-presidential-debate/>.

In essence, the 2024 election did not diverge from the established dynamics of Taiwanese presidential elections, where "cross-strait issues" have traditionally taken precedence over "domestic issues." Instead, these two spheres were consistently intertwined. The cross-strait issue should not be viewed as separate from domestic politics but rather as an external, dominant "China factor" that externally moulds Taiwanese politics, providing the context within which domestic issues are framed and understood.

At the end of the day, all three of the choices presented before the Taiwanese public claimed to be more status quo. But between three variants of the status quo, what Taiwanese voters wanted was the DPP—voting for stability rather than a return to a past status quo under the KMT or the ambiguous, untested one offered by Ko Wen-je. In this sense, although the DPP faced challenges as the incumbent over its domestic policy, this was its advantage when it came to international policy.

Part of the KMT's failure in negotiating the right formula mixing stances on domestic and international policy was in failing to assuage fears that yoking Taiwan's economic future to China could prove dangerous. By contrast, Ko was perhaps not strategic enough in having a concrete vision that allowed for a moderate cross-strait stance with more accommodation to China than the DPP, yet still emphasising preserving Taiwan's de facto freedoms. This was contrasted to what the DPP could offer—a clear and consistent stance on being pro-sovereignty.

The policy implications of evaluating the political landscape after the 2024 elections, then, present a more complicated picture than the view that domestic politics now take precedence in Taiwanese politics in a way that has pushed aside the centrality of the cross-strait. Rather, the two were always interrelated in that the "China factor" has long set the master narrative for domestic political issues.

Ultimately, the rise of Ko Wen-je's TPP does not reflect a new phenomenon but reflects a demand for alternatives to the two-party dominance of the DPP and KMT that has been visible for a decade. This demand from the public was previously expressed in the rise of the NPP.

Indeed, the public was largely hoping for alternatives, driven by the rising number of swing voters in Taiwan—especially among younger and newer voters. This did not necessarily reflect a substantial shift toward the pan-Green political spectrum in the aftermath of the 2014 Sunflower Movement. And, as the fate of the NPP goes to show, newly emergent third parties often find themselves enmired in and unable to navigate a political landscape that is still dominated by the DPP and KMT, as well as to build structural foundations that

transcend and surmount the individual political personalities (i.e., the leaders of these political parties).

Understanding these dynamics of Taiwanese politics proves key to a grasp of the new political landscape in the future. Those formulating policy on Taiwan need to understand that whilst domestic political issues are indeed of growing political importance, this is not secondary to the cross-strait issue; rather, domestic politics has always been shaped by the cross-strait issue.

Dealing with the changed political landscape in which the DPP and KMT both occupy sizable chunks of the Taiwanese legislature. Still, the TPP attempts to balance between both parties in a way that maximises its future political gains will require a strong grasp of this fact, particularly as the parties attempt to play to their respective strengths. The KMT will likely continue with its calls for a return to the past in reviving engagement with China. At the same time, the DPP will sharpen its critical view of China and work on addressing its domestic policy shortcomings. The TPP will try to bridge the gap between the two larger parties. Nevertheless, it cannot indefinitely remain a party that concentrates exclusively on domestic issues without a clear position on cross-strait relations. Sooner or later, domestic matters will inevitably circle back to the topic of China.

Many questions remain about Taiwan's political future, particularly as the KMT attempts to pressure the TPP into a closer political relationship and seeks to formulate means of undercutting the DPP's political legitimacy going forward. Yet the rules of the game have not been thrown out yet. A nuanced understanding of the interrelation of domestic politics and the centrality of cross-strait issues is necessary for understanding the shifting views of the Taiwanese public at a moment of transition.

Policy Recommendations

The dynamics of the 2024 elections by which the DPP took blows as the incumbent and the TPP became a viable political force in spite of its cross-strait stance are linked to the Taiwanese electorate's desire to move beyond two-party politics. But it is not the case that the Taiwanese public moved beyond cross-strait issues as being the deciding factor in the vote; rather, domestic political issues dovetailed with the cross-strait ones, as has always been the case.

The rise of US-sceptic views reflects these structural dynamics in Taiwanese politics, with the KMT leaning into such views to attack strengthening ties between the Tsai administration and the US. The TPP likely sought to avoid echoing the KMT on this front

so as to differentiate the party from the KMT. However the TPP could potentially be swayed by or pressured by the KMT into eventually presenting a united front, which would potentially undermine future cooperation between the US and Taiwan.

If the US aims to affirm its commitments to Taiwan in a manner that ensures military exchanges and economic connections are not weakened by rising doubts about the deepening relationship between them, it may need to:

1. Address scepticism that the US push for closer economic ties with Taiwan with regards to semiconductor development (or in other aspects) is only to avoid its own overreliance on Taiwan. The TPP could potentially echo such views, hence the crucial need to make stances clear at present.
2. Reiterate the US support for Taiwan on the basis of shared values, not just economic interests. This would be best supported by offering a vision of economic prosperity for Taiwan that links Taiwan's future to the US, proving the corollary to how the pan-Blue camp tries to promote a vision of economic prosperity for Taiwan that links this to renewed geopolitical closeness with China.
3. Domestic issues feed into and shape views and political choices offered by political parties to the Taiwanese electorate on cross-strait policy, with the economy being a major determinant. As such, and as evidenced by the gains that the KMT and the TPP made primarily because of their economic platform, the US, as Taiwan's historic security guarantor, could offer more than just geopolitical security to Taiwan—it could also offer economic security. This drives home the point of how strengthening trade ties between the US and Taiwan is more vital than ever at the current juncture.

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