

## *Beijing's Possible Miscalculations on Taiwan's Presidential Elections*

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An academic paper on Taiwan's upcoming presidential and legislative elections published on the website of the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. in July argues that the orientation of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)'s China policy during the election campaign will be "the largest variable in cross-strait relations" in the coming months. The assumptions put forward in the paper do not differ from current thinking among the majority of Chinese scholars and research institutions. They all point out Beijing's concern over Taiwan's elections and even point an accusing finger at DPP presidential candidate Tsai Ying-wen for failing to present a clear cross-strait policy.

They argue should Tsai win next year's election the "four-party relationship" within the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle could be affected. In fact, the political maneuvering between Washington, Beijing, Taiwan's ruling Kuomintang (KMT) and the opposition DPP has unfolded early on, because behind the scenes each player has different strategic perceptions. Among these four, Beijing's anxiety is growing deeper day by day so that the Chinese government might even make strategic misjudgments that could pose severe challenges for the DPP should it regain government power next year. Beijing's strategic misjudgments could come on three aspects: first and foremost, it could miscalculate the major decisive factors in next year's presidential election. Beijing and many international observers presume that cross-strait policy is the overriding campaign issue in the upcoming election. In recent weeks, the Ma government has bombarded the international community with the same message through Mainland Affairs Council Chairwoman, Lai Shin-yuan and Government Information Office Director-general, Philip Yang, hoping to create

election effects by reselling the exported message to domestic audiences.

Such thinking overestimates the importance of cross-strait relations in the upcoming election, and neglects or even deliberately plays down the influence of livelihood issues on voter behavior. This also explains why the Tsai camp is by far not ready to jump into the cross-strait agenda trap that the KMT and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have set. Instead, it insists on focusing its campaign on emerging topics such as the widening wealthy gap, unequal income distribution by class, social justice, government efficiency, and even agriculture and nuclear safety.

The second misjudgment can be attributed to a lack of understanding with Tsai's decision-making style and her resilience in negotiations. Beijing's Taiwan researchers have thoroughly analyzed every statement that Tsai has made to date on cross-strait relations, yet they have had problems finding out her true colors. So far they have only been able to use symbolic, isolated statements for systematic criticism such as "peaceful but recognizing differences," "establishing a lasting cross-strait framework," and "joining hands with the world to walk toward China." Tsai's approach reflects her longstanding, rich experience with international negotiations and her decision-making style, which differs from the hasty decision-making of traditional DPP leaders who tend to excessively cater to public opinion or public sentiment. Presently, the Tsai camp has responded to misgivings voiced by the external world, by simply stating "we do not oppose cross-strait economic and commercial contacts," and "cross-strait agreements will continue if the DPP returns to power," in a defensive strategy that aims to prevent losing public support over cross-strait policy.

The KMT and the CCP are both well aware that the DPP cannot accept the so-called “1992 Consensus.” Yet the two parties still joined hands trying to split the DPP over its basic stance on the cross-strait policy by taking advantage of the previous debate within the DPP over whether the party should propose an “alternative basis for political dialogue.” This divisive plot fell through when Tsai subsequently won her party’s presidential nomination. On the surface, Beijing still insists that Tsai must accept the “1992 Consensus.” But in reality, its mind has set and been well-prepared. Recently, Beijing has been sounding out the DPP via “track two” diplomacy whether there is a possibility of alternative proposals as it prepares to lay out a cross-strait scenario for the event of a DPP comeback.

Beijing’s third miscalculation is that it trusts too much that its concessions toward Taiwan and its pork barrel procurement delegations to constituencies in southern Taiwan will be able to erode voter support of the DPP. Even the Ma camp foresees that these efforts will prove counter effective and has therefore appealed to local Chinese government leaders not to visit Taiwan in the run-up to the elections. It is obvious that Beijing engages in too much wishful thinking.

From the perspective of agenda-setting, it is only natural for the DPP to push domestic issues. The Global Views Monthly magazine, which has consistently followed the Ma government’s domestic approval ratings, found in its latest opinion poll in July that Ma’s approval ratings remain low at 32.3 percent compared to 55.1 percent of disapproval. The respondents were equally divided over Ma’s credibility with 40.2 percent saying they trust the president and 43.5 percent distrusting him. These data underline that the Ma camp’s recent strategy of focusing on foreign policy achievements has not boosted his domestic approval ratings as the vast majority of

Taiwanese voters use the government’s domestic performance as their main criterion for assessing government efficiency.

Of course, the Tsai camp cannot keep shadow boxing or remain ambiguous on cross-strait policy all the way until electoral day. Beijing and Washington both keep a hawk’s eye on how Tsai’s “Ten-year Policy Platform” will draw a more concrete outline of the implications and vision of her cross-strait policy when the DPP holds its national congress in late August, and whether Tsai will give clear explanations on her ensuing visit to the United States. It’s then that relations among the four players within the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle will yet enter another stage in the campaign power maneuverings.

More importantly, after proposing a clearer cross-strait policy Tsai also needs to study beforehand how China might react to DPP’s victory to ensure when the time comes that Beijing’s possible overly negative and repressive attitude is not blamed on her party. Therefore, the cross-strait policy that Tsai is going to propose must incorporate at least the following key factors: First, it must reiterate maintaining cross-strait peace and ensure that next year when China undergoes its internal leadership transition the hardliners won’t gain the upper hand as a result of the DPP’s return to power. Second, it needs to urge China to enter into dialogue and exchanges with the new DPP government on a new political basis. Third, it must strengthen cooperation with the U.S., Japan and other countries to balance the risks stemming from excessive rapprochement with China during the Ma Era. Should Taiwan see a third power transition next year, it must at the same time ensure that there are no sudden changes in domestic politics and in the cross-strait situation in the fourth months gap between the elections and the inauguration of the new government. **BT**