



15 January 2020

'DPP's WIN IN TAIWAN ELECTIONS WILL HAVE REPERCUSSIONS'

by JAYADEVA RANADE

The results of Taiwan's national elections announced on January 12, confirmed assessments that Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's popularity ratings had received a substantial boost, partly because of China's threatening posture but mainly because of the unceasing protests in Hongkong that have now entered their ninth month without losing popular support. The results will impact China. Beijing -- and Chinese President Xi Jinping -- now confront the prospect of the 'China Dream', envisaging China's 'reunification' by 2021 or even 2049, becoming a distant prospect. The results could have wider repercussions in the region.

2. Discouraging for Beijing will be that it will now have to view the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as one with a sizeable following that contests China's "one country, two systems" policy and has overtly challenged its claims of sovereignty over Taiwan. Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen has, in fact, assiduously sought to build Taiwan's defence capability with Taiwan's defence budget expected to reach US\$ 11.9bn in 2020. Beijing would need to accept that 'Taiwan identity' and nationalism have both acquired a prominent salience for the Taiwan people.

3. With the mandate for a new 4-year term, the DPP will seek to consolidate its position and project itself as representing the youth, who by some estimates accounted for almost half the total number of votes polled by the DPP. By being unwavering in her policy of not yielding to China on issues of independence and sovereignty while at the same time trying to avoid hostilities with China, Tsai Ing-wen has shown Taiwan that such a policy can be viable. She has shown too, that its appeal over-rides that of the better economic prospects anticipated from a compromise with Beijing. Beijing would now need to try and 'befriend' political parties other than the KMT, as well as sections of Taiwan society apart from China-dependent businesses. It will undoubtedly step-up its 'united front' activities.

4. Initial official Chinese media reactions suggest that Beijing has been grudging in its acceptance of the DPP's win, and does not yet feel the need to change its policy towards Taiwan. China's state-owned CGTN newscasts did not mention the clear trends of a DPP victory till 6 pm on January 11. The authoritative, official news agency Xinhua published an article that reluctantly

acknowledged Tsai Ing-wen's victory, while the more nationalistic but official Beijing-based Global Times cautioned (January 12) that the US "will get up to more little tricks on the Taiwan question in the coming years", but that "China should firmly maintain the one-China principle and We should strive to hold the initiative of the Taiwan Straits in our own hands". Asserting that "First, we must strengthen the right to define the situation of the Taiwan Straits" and it should not be decided by the US and "Taiwan authorities", it warned "we can ignore some of the messages that they want to highlight, and we can harshly stop the acts that they want to slip through unpunished". It said China should maintain the "one-China principle" and "should encourage Tsai to ease her cross-Straits policies and not to further antagonize the Chinese mainland". It bluntly reiterated that China must meanwhile "plan to crack down on Tsai's new provocative actions, including imposing military pressure, which is an unbearable option for Taiwan authorities". It emphasised, in conclusion, that "the comprehensive strength of the mainland has been increasing, we have enough ability to contain "Taiwan independence." This is a fact that even those "Taiwan independence" forces believe firmly".

5. There have been adequate indications that as China becomes militarily stronger, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) increasingly feels that an offensive against Taiwan would be successful. Chinese President Xi Jinping has said he would not like to leave the 'reunification' to successor generations. In February 2019, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) released a music video called "My War Eagles are Circling the Treasure Island" featuring aerial footage of Taiwan and, in April and August PLA fighter jets for the first time in 20 years crossed the median line in the Taiwan Strait. The PLA Navy (PLAN)'s aircraft carriers 'Liaoning' and 'Shandong' similarly broke with precedent and sailed through the Taiwan Strait in June and December 2019. In September a Chinese government-backed Twitter account replied to a post by Taiwan's President saying: "once we have dealt with Hong Kong, we will settle the scores with Taiwan, military unification is unavoidable, we'll keep the island but won't keep the people except for [Taiwanese pop star] Jay Chou". Enoch Wu, a member of Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's last National Security Council, recently observed "We can debate whether it's 2020 or 2022, but we know it's not 2049." Taiwan's military capabilities are limited with mountain tunnels at two air bases providing safe shelters for more than 200 aircraft, but it is developing advanced sea mining capabilities, building fast attack craft and hoping to get meaningful assurances from the US. Thus far, though, Beijing has kept to psychological warfare. China will, however, try and intensify diplomatic pressure on Taiwan including by shrinking its diplomatic space.

6. The election victory of DPP leader Tsai Ing-wen has come at an inopportune time for Chinese President Xi Jinping. It coincides with the protests in the Hongkong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), where 23 years after reverting to China the people have challenged Beijing's right to govern Hongkong and the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It coincides too with the growing US-China friction and clear signs of the beginnings of disengagement between the two. Beijing's failure to resolve these problems could make it difficult for China to realise its declared ambition of a 'peaceful reunification' and the 'China Dream' by 2021. Whether the developments will give impetus to the resistance in Xinjiang and Tibet is unclear, but Beijing has repeatedly warned against attempts by the US and West at instigating "colour revolutions".

7. As Tsai Ing-wen commences her second term it is possible that US President Trump and she will initiate 'quiet' contacts to shore Taiwan's position and that will put pressure on China. The latter's comment on the congratulatory message from the White House to Tsai Ing-wen indicates how China would view this. China will react to increased overt US-Taiwan interactions. Given Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Chinese security bureaucracy's suspicions about "colour revolutions", vigilance has already been stepped up throughout the country. On November 28, Guo Shengkun, who is head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s Political and Legal Affairs Commission, published an article in *People's Daily* calling for the firm defence of "national political security," which is "the lifeline of the Party's and the nation's security, and an unshakable bottom line." He vowed "resolutely and severely to prevent and crack down on" the infiltration of hostile forces. In the article Guo Shengkun exhorted the whole country and entire population to enhance their awareness, be "on high vigilance, take resolute precautions, and severely punish" the hostile forces' infiltration and their destructive and subversive, activities to promote secession, thus "building a solid copper and iron wall for national security."

8. But the delay in diffusing the problem in Hongkong remains unexplained and points to differences within the Politburo. It was only in late July, a month after the protests began, that Chinese President Xi Jinping publicly commented on them. Another couple of months passed before he and Politburo Standing Committee member Han Zheng separately met HKSAR Chief Executive Carrie Lam. These meetings took place after the important annual meeting of Party veterans and senior cadres at the seaside resort of Beidaihe, where the protests in Hongkong were labelled a "colour revolution". Subsequently in mid-December 2019, another report hinting at inner-Party sniping surfaced. It alleged that a 'princeling' of a high-ranking military family and current member of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) had access to substantial wealth abroad. The report in the *Epoch Times*, which is owned by Falungong, a cult proscribed in China, gave enough specifics about the 'princeling' to suggest that the newspaper is aware of the individual's identity and perhaps intends to divulge it later. The situation is tenuous with the potential to put Xi Jinping under greater pressure.

9. As Tsai Ing-wen commences her second term it is likely she will re-energise her 'Southbound Policy' to reduce economic dependence on China and counter its efforts to diminish its space. The evolving cross-strait situation and political developments in China present India with an opportunity. India should actively consider initiating economic and commercial contacts with Taiwan in the slipstream of these developments in select areas. A visit by the Union Commerce Minister or Secretary would be welcomed by Taipei and, given China's extensive commercial and trade ties with Taiwan, cannot be objected to by Beijing. For India it would result in foreign investments in sectors that will upgrade Indian industry and job creation.

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