



# BRIEFING ON TAIWAN'S PRESIDENTIAL AND LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS 2024

*Prepared by the China Strategic Risks Institute (CSRI)*

## Key point summary

- The Republic of China (Taiwan) will hold presidential and legislative elections on the 13th of January 2024. The incumbent President Tsai Ing-wen will step down after reaching the constitutional limit of two consecutive four-year terms.
- The latest polls for the presidential elections give a narrow lead to Lai Ching-te of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). However, tactical voting could swing a victory for the leading opposition candidate – the KMT's Hou Yu-ih. Polls project the Legislative Yuan to be under no overall control, with the KMT overtaking the DPP as the largest party.
- A DPP/Lai victory in the Presidential elections would likely see a continuation of President Tsai's efforts to strengthen Taiwan's role on the world stage, with a cautious pushing back against efforts by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to isolate Taiwan. Both Tsai and Lai have asserted Taiwan's separateness from the PRC while remaining ambiguous on questions of independence.
- A DPP/Lai victory would be met with hostility from Beijing, with the possibility of increased PRC military and economic coercion against Taiwan in the wake of the elections. The PRC has invested significantly in efforts to deter Taiwan's voters from supporting Lai, with targeted military manoeuvres, economic coercion and a widespread propaganda and disinformation campaign.
- While a KMT/Hou victory would be more warmly welcomed in Beijing, Hou's plans to build closer ties with the PRC will be restrained by an electorate that is increasingly wary of its neighbour. While Hou has stated his opposition to Taiwanese independence, he has also rejected the PRC's proposed 'one country, two systems' model for Taiwan – posing a major roadblock to so-called 'reunification' with the mainland.

# Who are the main contenders for the Presidency?

Contenders from Taiwan's three major political parties are contesting in the Presidential election.

- **'William' Lai Ching-te (Democratic Progressive Party, or DPP).** Lai, representing the DPP, has painted himself as the continuity candidate for President Tsai's eight-year rule. Though the DPP has a stated long-term goal of Taiwanese independence, Lai describes his support for independence as 'pragmatic', while vowing to continue President Tsai's cautious approach to bolstering Taiwan's international position.
- **Hou Yu-ih (Kuoming Tang, or KMT).** Hou is the incumbent mayor of New Taipei City and represents the most viable opposition to Lai. In contrast to the DPP, the KMT does not support Taiwanese independence and maintains a 'One China' principle. However, Hou has presented himself as a moderate on this issue, stating his opposition to unification with the PRC under a 'One Country, Two Systems' arrangement as proposed by the PRC, and prioritising defusing cross-strait tensions by promoting economic ties.<sup>1</sup>
- **Ko Wen-je (Taiwan People's Party, or TPP).** Ko founded the TPP on the back of popular dissatisfaction with the two established parties. Aiming to establish a third way between the TPP and the KMT, Ko has emphasised the importance of cross-strait interaction and communication in reducing the risk of war with the PRC, while also building military strength and closer relations with the US to deter the PRC from taking future actions.<sup>2</sup>

## Latest polls and state of play

- **Lai leads the Presidential race:** The final set of polls before the elections show the DPP's Lai narrowly leading the KMT's Hou in first place, with the TPP a distant third. The lead Lai has over Hou across polls conducted by various media outlets range from 3% to 11.5%.<sup>3</sup>
- **Tactical voters will prove critical:** Whether Lai's narrow lead holds will depend on whether TPP voters decide to vote tactically for the KMT to end the DPP's eight-year control over the Presidency. While the KMT might appeal to TPP voters seeking a more moderate approach to cross-strait relations, others, particularly younger TPP supporters, have little appetite for a KMT presidency.<sup>4</sup> Previous attempts by Ko and Hou to form an anti-DPP coalition broke down in dramatic fashion after disagreements over who should

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-65618692>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/world-47647843>

<sup>3</sup> <https://udn.com/news/story/123307/7650597>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.storm.mg/article/4964842>

lead the joint ticket.<sup>5</sup>

- **KMT projected to win the Legislative Yuan:** Even if Lai wins the Presidency, the ability of the DPP to govern effectively is hampered by its prospects in the legislative elections, where the KMT is projected to be the largest party with no overall control. The KMT's gains in last year's local elections suggest that many voters see the KMT as being stronger on local issues, an advantage which could play an important role in the legislative elections.<sup>6</sup>

## What would a DPP/Lai Ching-te victory mean for Taiwan/PRC relations?

A Lai victory would see the DPP holding the Presidency for the third consecutive four-year term. With Lai depicting himself as the continuity candidate, his victory would most likely see cross-strait relations continue on a similar trajectory, including:

- **Cautious attempts to strengthen Taiwan's international role:** Lai has repeatedly pledged to 'pragmatically continue President Tsai's approach', with a continued push against the PRC's attempts to exclude Taiwan from the international stage.<sup>7</sup> Lai has expressed support for continuing Tsai's flagship New Southbound Policy, which aims to bolster trade and cultural exchange with countries in the Asia-Pacific region, and will likely continue the push for Taiwan's participation in the World Health Organisation (WHO) and joining the International Criminal Court.<sup>8 9</sup>
- **Ambiguous approach to independence questions:** Lai looks set to continue President Tsai's ambiguous approach to questions of Taiwan's independence, which aims to assert Taiwan's separateness from the PRC without formally declaring independence. Lai has vowed to continue Tsai's usage of the 'Republic of China (Taiwan)' to refer to Taiwan, striking a middle way between both traditional usage of the 'Republic of China' and pro-independence demands for a renaming to the 'Republic of Taiwan'.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Lai's comments that the Republic of China and the PRC "do not belong to one another" suggest an attempt to increase de-facto recognition of Taiwan's independence from the PRC without formally declaring it. Lai's stance will continue to draw heavy criticism from

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.storm.mg/article/4913690>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.chinatimes.com/realtimenews/20231227001565-260407?chdtv>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.storm.mg/article/4734238>

<sup>8</sup> <https://udn.com/news/story/6656/7499651>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/31/taiwan-considers-joining-icc-to-deter-potential-china-invasion>

<sup>10</sup>

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/my-plan-to-preserve-peace-between-china-and-taiwan-candidate-election-race-war-7046ee00>

the PRC, which condemned Lai as the 'destroyer of cross-strait peace'.<sup>11</sup>

- **Continued PRC pressure on Taiwan:** Judging from its current trajectory and rhetoric, a Lai victory will mean that Beijing will likely maintain its current level of pressure on Taiwan, if not escalate to even more dangerous levels. Ways that the PRC has exerted such pressure in the recent past include:
  - **Diplomatic pressure:** Beijing has consistently blocked Taiwan's bid to participate in international organisations, such as the WHO.
  - **Military threats:** Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in PRC military aircraft crossing the informally acknowledged 'median line' between the PRC and Taiwan. Beijing has frequently stepped up military activities around key political events, such as US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022, and would likely escalate activities in the wake of a Lai victory.
  - **Economic coercion:** Beijing has banned the import of different types of Taiwanese pineapples and other agricultural goods in an attempt to weaken support for a hawkish stance towards the PRC in Taiwan.

## What would a victory for any other candidate mean for Taiwan/PRC relations?

### *Implications of a KMT/Hou victory*

While the PRC has repeatedly condemned Lai and the DPP government more broadly, what a vHou victory would mean for cross-strait relations is less straightforward. While PRC officials have urged Taiwanese voters to "make the right choice" and engaged in dialogue with senior KMT officials, there are limits on how much cooperation can be achieved between the PRC and a KMT-led government in Taiwan.<sup>12</sup>

- **Prospects for short-term de-escalation:** Hou has emphasised the 'three Ds' of deterrence, dialogue, and de-escalation as priorities for cross-strait relations. This is self-characterised as a 'pro-US' and 'pro-peace' stance. As part of this, Hou wishes to restart negotiations over the expansion of trade goods and services between Taiwan, and is the only candidate who explicitly endorses the so-called '1992 Consensus', which

---

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/xwdt/xwfb/wyly/202312/t20231230\\_12590800.htm](http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/xwdt/xwfb/wyly/202312/t20231230_12590800.htm)

<sup>12</sup>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/19/how-beijing-is-changing-the-way-it-involves-itself-in-taiwans-election>

recognises both the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the PRC as part of 'one China'.<sup>13 14</sup>

- **Rejection of 'one country, two systems':** While Hou and the KMT embrace the 'one China' principle, Hou has rejected the PRC's proposed 'one country two systems' as a model for unification with the mainland. This concept, modelled on Hong Kong's handover in 1997, would see Taiwan retaining some degree of political and economic autonomy while formally being subsumed within the PRC. This stance puts Hou at odds with President Xi Jinping, who has insisted on 'peaceful reunification with one country two systems' as the best resolution to the Taiwan question.
- **Underlying tensions remain:** While there is potential for warmer ties with the PRC if Hou wins, such rapprochement will be heavily restrained by significant public opposition to closer alignment with the PRC, particularly against 'reunification' under 'one country, two systems'. Such consensus directly contradicts the long-term objective of the CCP under President Xi to 'reunify' Taiwan, meaning that underlying cross-strait tensions are unlikely to dissipate for the foreseeable future.

### ***Implications for a TPP/Ko victory***

Ko and the TPP are seeking to transcend the longstanding debates between the DPP and the KMT, seeking to portray Taiwan as a bridge fostering interaction between the PRC and the US, rather than a flashpoint for increased tensions. Like the DPP's Lai, Ko has sought to de-emphasise the 'one China' principle of the 1922 Consensus and vowed to continue President Tsai's pragmatic approach.<sup>15</sup> However, Ko claims that his approach would be more agile than Lai's, without the burden of the DPP's track record and internal divisions. Like the KMT's Hou, Ko would aim to restart negotiations over the trade of goods and services with the PRC.<sup>16</sup> While a Ko victory may be more welcomed in Beijing than a Lai victory, Ko's rejection of the 'one country, two systems' proposal and ambiguity over the 'one China' principle means that the current status quo would likely be maintained.

## **What has China's role in the elections been?**

The PRC has resorted to various high-profile means to influence Taiwan's voters since the advent of free elections in the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> In this election, the PRC has adopted a mixture of methods to shape the election in its favour:

---

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aipl/202312170099.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/from-dove-to-hawk-kmts-transformation-and-the-quest-for-new-guard-rails-in-cross-strait-relations/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aipl/202312070092.aspx>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.thenewslens.com/article/187496>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.rti.org.tw/news/view/id/2191091>

- **Military manoeuvres:** In December 2023, the PLA sent the Shandong aircraft carrier group north through the Taiwan Strait, keeping to the PRC's side of the Strait's median line. It has, however, refrained from large-scale military exercises.<sup>18</sup>
- **Economic coercion and concessions:** In December, the PRC ceased tariff concessions for 12 Taiwanese exports, mainly petrochemicals, under the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) between Taiwan and the PRC.<sup>19</sup> The move was seen as a typical case of economic coercion by the PRC and was condemned by all three presidential candidates.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the PRC also removed the ban on the import of atemoya fruit from Taitung County, a move that was interpreted as intending to bolster the KMT stronghold in the region.<sup>21</sup>
- **Official statements:** In his 2024 New Year's address, President Xi Jinping proclaimed that Taiwan's 'reunification' with mainland China is a 'historical certainty'. This language is consistent with his previous speeches asserting the need for and inevitability of Taiwan's so-called reunification with the PRC.
- **Misinformation and discourse manipulation:** Last year, Meta uncovered a PRC influence campaign involving more than 7,500 accounts across different platforms, with many of the accounts targeting Taiwan. The PRC is also alleged to be co-opting social media influencers and journalists to amplify pro-CCP talking points.<sup>22</sup>
- **Bribery and co-optation of community leaders:** Taiwanese authorities are investigating alleged PRC attempts to bribe village and neighbourhood representatives with cheap tours to the PRC, in an alleged attempt to gain grassroots local support.<sup>23</sup>
- **Cyber-attacks:** Google has warned of a growing number of cyberattacks originating from the PRC against Taiwan in the lead-up to the elections, with targets including the defence sector, government and private industry.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/pla-navys-flashy-aircraft-carriers-begin-to-flex-muscles-near/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.businesstoday.com.tw/article/category/183025/post/202312210008/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.rti.org.tw/news/view/id/2190395>

<sup>21</sup>

<https://www.rfi.fr/tw/%E5%8F%B0%E7%81%A3/20231209-%E4%B8%AD%E5%9C%8B%E7%96%91%E9%81%B8%E5%AE%9A%E5%8F%B0%E7%81%A3%E5%9C%8B%E6%B0%91%E9%BB%A8%E5%8D%80%E7%B8%A3%E8%BC%B8%E5%88%A9-%E5%8F%B0%E6%9D%B1%E9%87%8B%E8%BF%A6%E5%8F%AF%E5%87%BA%E5%8F%A3%E5%A4%A7%E9%99%B8%E4%BA%86>

<sup>22</sup>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/19/how-beijing-is-changing-the-way-it-involves-itself-in-taiwans-election>

<sup>23</sup>

<https://www.voacantonese.com/a/china-lures-hundreds-of-taiwan-politicians-with-cheap-trips-before-election-20231201/7380264.html>

<sup>24</sup>

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-29/google-warns-china-is-ramping-up-cyberattacks-against-taiwan>

## How can democratic governments react to Taiwan's elections?

Regardless of who wins Taiwan's upcoming elections, the EU, UK and other democratic governments can use the opportunity to reiterate their support for Taiwan's democratic system and deter the PRC from escalating aggressions actions against Taiwan. In particular, the democratic governments should:

- **Publicly affirm Taiwan's electoral process**, including its right to hold democratic elections free from external coercion, including by congratulating the victor and voicing opposition to any attempts by the PRC to escalate military or economic tensions in the wake of the election.
- **Support Taiwan's inclusion in multilateral institutions**, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Labor Organisation (ILO) and the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change. Diplomats should push back against Beijing's attempts to use UN General Assembly Resolution 2758 to justify Taiwan's exclusion from such groupings.
- **Deepen political exchange with Taiwan**. Ministerial visits to Taiwan, including those at a senior level, are not in contradiction with any country's 'one China' policy and can send an important signal of support for Taiwan. The EU and UK should push for Taiwanese officials to be invited to G7 meetings and should join the US, Australia and other allies in taking part in Taiwan's Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) – which aims to foster greater cooperation across issues including health, trade, and the environment.
- **Increase trade with Taiwan**. Members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), such as the UK, should support Taiwan's application for inclusion. Taiwan offers a number of export opportunities for foreign firms and can also play a role in strengthening critical supply chains.
- **Create new opportunities for people-to-people exchange between the democratic countries and Taiwan**. There are significant opportunities for increasing academic exchange, particularly with Taiwanese educational institutions which can offer alternatives to the PRC's state-backed Confucius Institutes for Mandarin learning. Expediting arrangements for health insurance reciprocity, such as the European Insurance Health Card (EHIC), could also encourage tourism and other exchanges between the democratic countries and Taiwan.