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THE TAIWAN ELECTION RESULT

A STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY FOR A CALMER TAIWAN STRAIT

Taiwan held combined presidential and legislative elections last weekend. The international media generally expected that a win by Lai Ching-te (DPP), who in the past has favoured independence, would lead to tensions and even conflict in the Taiwan Strait. However, there are several reasons why the opposite could be the case.

The results of the Taiwan elections were reported with concern in the global media. The alarmist views are understandable given that the situation in the Taiwan Strait has become tense in recent years. Back in 2016, the DPP returned to power with a strong win in the presidential election and a clear majority in parliament, with over 60% of the seats. Beijing exhorted newly elected President Tsai Ing-wen to adhere to the so-called 1992 consensus, whereby the two sides both agree in principle that there is One China, but disagree on what this entails. However, in her inaugural speech, President Tsai did not meet China's expectations. Around the same time, US policy towards both China and Taiwan started to change.

In recent years, the United States has strengthened its ties with Taiwan politically, economically, militarily and symbolically. It has introduced a law requiring it to promote Taiwan's participation in some international organizations and has begun to provide arms directly from its own stocks. In effect, the US has de facto begun treating Taiwan more like a sovereign state than before.

In the strategic competition between the two great powers, the US has increasingly regarded Taiwan as a strategic asset that cannot be lost to China, especially as the world is highly reliant on Taiwan's semiconductor manufacturing prowess. This differs from the past, when the

US had no objections in principle to unification, as long as it occurred peacefully and with the consent of the Taiwanese people. Seen from Beijing's perspective, the US has been reneging on the commitments it made to China when relations were established in the 1970s.

However, the election result has brought about a strategic opportunity for the tensions around the Taiwan Issue to actually start to ease. There are three reasons for this, related to Taiwan's internal politics, China's options, and the role of the US.

Firstly, the DPP's position weakened considerably in the elections. While the party retained its presidency, it lost its parliamentary majority. This is a weak mandate

that does not support making any major changes on sovereignty issues, especially given that a stable majority of voters (around 80%) favour maintaining the Cross-Strait status quo, and legal hurdles to revising the constitution are high. This makes drastic changes in Taiwan's status unlikely in the next few years. Taiwan will remain a de facto sovereign state actor separate from China, while the China connection will still be visible in the official name, Republic of China.

Secondly, the former long-term ruling party, the KMT, with whom Beijing would prefer to interact, has become semi-permanently locked into a position as the biggest opposition party, unable to return to power. This means that China needs to reconsider its approach and acknowledge the need to draft a new Taiwan policy taking into account the changes in Taiwan's political landscape, including the changed identity of the population. China has already stopped talking about the "one country, two systems" model with reference to Taiwan, fully realizing how unpopular the model has become in light of developments in Hong Kong.

Finally, and most importantly, the Biden administration has over

the past year seemingly woken up to the fact that its own policies were contributing to the Cross-Strait dynamics veering towards a conflict. Hence, there has been a strong impetus to restore communication channels with Beijing. Recently, military contacts have resumed, China's leader Xi Jinping visited San Francisco, and several rounds of high-level political talks have taken place.

After the election results were announced, President Biden came out and said that the US does not support Taiwan independence, while State Secretary Blinken gave a more detailed statement. Blinken reiterated the original US agreement with Beijing regarding Taiwan, including the One China policy and the Taiwan Relations Act, which sets the framework for unofficial US-Taiwan relations, the three Joint Communiqués forming the basis of US-China diplomatic relations, as well as the unilateral clarifications to the communiqués, known as the Six Assurances.

Taken together, the statements by Biden and Blinken send a signal to China that US policy regarding Taiwan has not changed, and that the US position remains anchored in a dual approach of deterrence

and reassurances. On the one hand, the US cautions China against using military force against Taiwan, manifested in weapons deliveries. On the other hand, the US affirms that it will not actively contribute to changing the status quo.

All in all, from Taiwan's perspective, its democracy has proved to be mature and resilient, and the status quo can still be considered to best serve its interests. There is no need for China to take forceful action, as the threat of Taiwan independence has not become more imminent and the US baseline has not changed. At the same time, the US policy also acts as a deterrent, protecting Taiwan. In the best-case scenario, China would stop dictating its own terms for a solution and seek more peaceful ways to move forward. For the US, and the international community at large, it makes sense to continue a dual strategy of adhering to the One China policy while reminding China that unilateral action over the heads of the Taiwanese people will not be in the interests of international peace and cooperation. /