Beijing’s More Coercive Approach toward Taiwan in 2024 and Beyond

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Overall, 2024 is likely to be a determining year for cross-strait relations. If the survey results reflect Beijing’s calculus, China is likely to further escalate coercion and demonstrate its displeasure against Taiwan beyond what it has done during the Tsai administration.

The year 2024 will be critical for determining cross-strait dynamics for at least the next four years, if not longer. Current Taiwan president Tsai Ing-wen, a member of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) who has served for two terms, is stepping down. The election of current Taiwan vice president and DPP candidate William Lai on January 13, 2024, will shift cross-strait dynamics.

Beijing’s Approach toward Taiwan Will Become More Coercive

In December 2023, prior to the Taiwan elections, the CSIS China Power team conducted a survey of leading U.S. and Taiwan experts to help forecast what to expect in 2024. The survey showed that over 80 percent of leading thinkers in both regions believed that China would not maintain its current approach toward Taiwan after the elections. Instead, they believed Beijing was approaching a fork in the road, where it could adopt starkly different ways of dealing with the island depending on if China views the winning Taiwan leader as more pro-China or pro-independence.

The surveyed experts believed that a candidate who was more preferred by the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—such as Kuomintang (KMT) leader Hou Yu-ih or Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) leader Ko Wen-je—and was willing to affirm support for the 1992 Consensus in one form or another could encourage Beijing to improve ties with the island. This could come in the form of more PRC political or economic “carrots” or reduction in the use of “sticks” or coercion against Taiwan.

Interestingly, 46 percent of Taiwan experts were optimistic, believing that China would unilaterally improve ties with the island if one of its more preferred candidates won. This contrasted with 46 percent of U.S. experts who assessed that the newly elected Taiwan president would need to showcase goodwill first before China would take a positive step.

Respondents were less certain how Beijing would respond if its least preferred candidate, William Lai,
won the Taiwan presidency. China views Lai as significantly more provocative and pro-independence than Tsai. Here, the results from the CSIS China Power survey were mixed. Half of U.S. and Taiwan experts believed that China would escalate against the island in the event of a Lai presidency, regardless of what the new Taiwan president does—indicating that China’s anxieties and deep-seated animosity toward Lai likely clouds and shapes PRC thinking.

If this logic holds, it is possible that China may react more negatively and strongly to Lai even if he embraces the exact same actions as Tsai. Similarly, China could react more negatively toward U.S. support to Lai, including against high-level congressional visits to Taiwan as well as U.S. arms sales to the island.

**Wide-Ranging Views on How China Could Escalate**

In terms of how Beijing could respond to Lai’s victory, the majority of U.S. and Taiwan experts believed that China would reserve its most escalatory measures until at least after Lai is inaugurated on May 20, 2024 (or even later, after he has implemented significant policy changes). China had already increased pressure on Taiwan in the lead-up to the elections, and this buildup could continue post-election. Over a third of Taiwan experts, however, were worried that China would embrace its most escalatory response against Taiwan after the election but before the inauguration.

At the same time, even in the event of Lai’s victory, 60 percent of U.S. experts believed that the most escalatory option that China would take in 2024 is a large-scale military exercise encircling Taiwan (achieving temporary blockade-like effects). A handful of U.S. experts believe that if dynamics worsen, there is a possibility that China could quarantine, blockade, or even invade Taiwan in 2024.

Taiwan experts were less pessimistic. Forty-nine percent assessed that China will maximize non-military coercion of Taiwan. This could include China’s efforts to undermine and stir chaos within Taiwan’s democracy, PRC economic coercion of the island, as well as China’s attempts to squeeze the island’s international space. This is more than the 43 percent of Taiwan participants who think China will launch a large-scale military exercise. A handful of Taiwan experts believed that China could quarantine Taiwan, but none assessed that China would blockade or invade the island.

**What to Expect in 2024**

Overall, 2024 is likely to be a determining year for cross-strait relations. If the survey results reflect Beijing’s calculus, China is likely to further escalate coercion and demonstrate its displeasure against Taiwan beyond what it has done during the Tsai administration.

The discrepancy in the survey between U.S. and Taiwan expert views showcases how difficult it is to forecast potential PRC courses of action given the wide range of political, economic, and military tools that Beijing could leverage against Taipei. Whereas U.S. experts tend to focus on PRC military activities as most escalatory and problematic, Taiwan experts are slightly more worried about other types of PRC actions in the political, economic, and information domains.

In reality, Beijing is likely to embrace whatever political, economic, or military measures it believes will best assert its control over Taiwan and allow Beijing to make “progress” on unification. Beijing will likely use a combination of different and wide-ranging measures against the island. In addition, China’s willingness to escalate large-scale military exercises around Taiwan in August 2022 and April 2023 suggest that Xi is willing to push forward on Taiwan even if such actions could trigger potential costs and international blowback.

There has also been much speculation on whether internal PRC conditions, such as the state of China’s economy, will significantly dampen or elevate Beijing’s appetite to take risk vis-à-vis Taiwan. The CSIS China Power survey finds that 50 percent of leading U.S. experts assess that a sharp, prolonged PRC economic downturn will not impact potential PRC use of force against Taiwan. A dominant reasoning is that strategic and political factors will determine whether China decides to use significant military force against Taiwan.
Taiwan experts, however, were more divided and believed China’s economic conditions mattered more. Thirty-seven percent did not believe China’s domestic economic troubles impacted PRC use of force against the island; 34 percent believed they would decrease PRC use of force; and 29 percent believe they would increase the likelihood of use of force.

It is important to carefully monitor conditions within the PRC, but for now, the main determinant of China’s approach to Taiwan in 2024 and beyond is likely to be how China perceives Lai’s words and actions, particularly after he assumes the Taiwan presidency in late May 2024.