INTRODUCTION

The early August visit of U.S. House speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan brought with it renewed global attention to the island, as well as a series of punitive measures levied against Taipei from the People’s Republic of China (PRC). These include military exercises in the vicinity of Republic of China (ROC) territory, as well as People’s Liberation Army (PLA) aerial encroachments across the tacitly respected median line of the Taiwan Strait—maneuvers that many have viewed as a move toward establishing a “new normal” in cross-strait relations. While many foresee this as a sign of further deteriorating ties between Taipei and Beijing, domestic political dynamics may bring even higher tensions to bear—as local trends are likely to move in a direction counter to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) preferred outcome. Taiwan’s political parties are readying themselves for two elections: at local levels this month and at the national level in January 2024. The former will showcase current and future party performance; the latter will serve in part as a de facto referendum on cross-strait policy; and both will make inroads in answering critical questions about the future of the island’s domestic political landscape—including on the longer-term viability of one of its key players—with broader implications for cross-strait relations and regional stability.

Taiwan’s domestic politics are complex even for the longtime observer—shaped by competing histories that intersected, oftentimes violently, over the latter half of the twentieth century. They flourished with the island’s democratization in the 1990s, bringing new voices to Taiwan’s political discourse as well as public calls for independence—that, for the first time, came without fears of retribution. The domestic political landscape has thus been dominated by divergent visions of what Taiwan is and what its future should look like, as seen in the blue-green divide that encapsulates the island’s party politics.
Covering the pan-blue spectrum are the parties that hold a greater affinity for China—though not necessarily the political encapsulation that is the PRC—particularly through Chinese history and culture, commonly seen through the lens of the long-standing legacy of the ROC. This includes the current opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), but covers smaller parties as well, with viewpoints that span from calling for deeper engagement with Beijing to supporting integration and unification with the mainland.

Encompassing the pan-green coalition are parties that hold a more Taiwan-centric view, focusing on the island’s story unique from China and of its own identity, which includes the current ruling party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). While the current DPP administration under President Tsai Ing-wen views Taiwan as already sovereign as the ROC, there are parts of the pan-green movement that view this de facto independence as insufficient and call for Taiwan’s de jure independence.3

**DYNAMICS ON THE GROUND**

From the 30,000-foot level, voters’ perceptions of their national identity—of what Taiwan is vis-à-vis China, as described briefly above—are a very accurate determinant of both party affiliation and, accordingly, vote choice in Taiwan, even when a number of other variables are factored in.4 Accordingly, polling data on identity trends consistently show that more and more individuals in Taiwan are viewing themselves as solely “Taiwanese,” rather than both “Taiwanese and Chinese” or just “Chinese.”5 For example, the National Chengchi University’s Election Study Center found those that identified as “Taiwanese” at a near high of 63.7 percent in June 2022, compared to 30.4 percent as both “Taiwanese and Chinese” and 3.5 percent as only “Chinese,” with trajectories likely to continue into the future.6

Thus, while threat perceptions from the PRC and Taiwan’s typical basket of political issues—such as the economy, pension and labor reform, and social justice—may shift the needle on voting patterns, it only does so incrementally, with overarching trends still tied to opinions over the question of China.7 These dynamics tend to play out more prominently in national-level elections, during which cross-strait debates hold greater weight and feature more heavily.8 Nonetheless, while local elections inherently focus on local issues, identity still factors in, just not in the same way. Instead, sense of identity in the local context informs viewpoints on parties’ domestic performance, and votes often reflect satisfaction or dissatisfaction with an individual’s preferred party.9

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Taiwan’s midterm elections are fast approaching and the question of party performance will be raised and measured, setting parties down the path for the general elections for the president and the legislature in 2024. The results of the local elections are often viewed as a bellwether for the succeeding national-level races, and how well a party does in the former will determine which candidates and policies are viable for the latter. With President Tsai Ing-wen concluding her second term and ineligible for another, all eyes are on the presidency, though the makeup of the Legislative Yuan (LY) will be just as critical.

According to public opinion polls, Tsai and the DPP have enjoyed relatively high levels of support since the start of the pandemic, largely due to how effectively her administration managed the crisis. However, these approval ratings have declined over the first half of 2022 because of the outbreak of the omicron variant in Taiwan and a shift away from a zero-Covid policy.10 Nonetheless, the party is still well positioned going into the 2022 local elections, with polls showing overall satisfaction with the Tsai government, as well as its performance in promoting economic development and in navigating cross-strait relations, the top two issues prioritized by the public.11

The opposition KMT continues to trail the DPP in public opinion polls, and its difficulties can be attributed to internal divisions, its inability to recruit and appeal to the youth, and inconsistent messaging—all of which are mutually reinforcing.12 The common thread behind these issues is an inability to reach an intraparty agreement on what its approach to the PRC should be. The KMT is uniquely poised with direct access to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and party-to-party contacts are frequent. Under the party’s previous president, Ma Ying-jeou, the two sides espoused a common “One China” baseline through the 1992 Consensus, which facilitated a period of cross-strait rapprochement.13 Yet, to Taiwan domestic audiences, the utility of the 1992 Consensus has run its course, due largely to a hardening
from Beijing’s side—with Xi Jinping indirectly tying the 1992 Consensus with the unpopular “One Country, Two Systems” formulation in January 2019. The KMT has since grappled with the question of how to reformulate its interpretation of the 1992 Consensus, but attempts have been walked back or met with criticism from opposing factions. However, some longtime observers have pointed to the KMT’s unwillingness to tackle the difficult questions on China and work on reformulating its own policy positions, noting that it has instead diverted its attention to opposing anything the DPP supports.

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Since the Sunflower Movement in 2014—which emerged in protest over a trade services agreement with the PRC that was viewed as too opaque in its review process and led to a student occupation of the LY—the third force parties that grew out of it have played a growing role in Taiwan politics. While structurally the ROC system of government has built-in advantages for the two major parties, these new parties, including the New Power Party (NPP) and the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP), have over the years been able to secure seats in the legislature, with demonstrated success in the party vote—showcasing that Taiwan’s electorate may be moving beyond the KMT-DPP binary.

Furthermore, and at risk of oversimplification, if the political spectrum in Taiwan is envisioned with one end at unification and the other at independence—however defined—the emergence of many of these third force parties pushes the median line of Taiwan politics closer to the independence side and expands the playing field for pan-green parties, pursuant to the identity trends discussed above—and could force the DPP and KMT to adjust their policies accordingly.

These third parties also raise the dilemma of vote splitting on both the pan-green and pan-blue sides, prompting both cooperation and conflict. For example, the DPP has collaborated with the NPP in fielding candidates to ensure solidarity across the pan-green vote, but this is not always the case. The pan-blue side faces the same issue, with the TPP now being viewed as increasingly blue, despite its founding claim of being a supposed “white force” that transcends the blue-green limits of Taiwan politics, and is perceived as an alternative option for the KMT’s traditional supporters in certain races.

In short, Taiwan’s political playing field has expanded over the past decade to include a number of new players—ones that serve as alternative choices from the traditional KMT-DPP dichotomy. Moving into the local elections—and beyond—are the increasing salience of these new voices, a KMT at odds with itself and its policies, and a relatively well-poised DPP. Whether and how these dynamics will shift this November will determine which candidates—and associated policy platforms—parties will field in the general election.

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**MIDTERMS**

Taiwan’s local elections are commonly known as the “nine-in-one” elections, referring to the nine levels of positions up for a vote, from neighborhood wardens and village chiefs to city councilors and mayors of the major municipalities. This year’s election is slated for November 26, and Taiwan’s political parties have focused on critical battleground districts—notably, Taipei, New Taipei City, and Taoyuan. In Taiwan, election observers often quip that “a lot can happen in a short time,” holding that polling and speculation even a week out can be inaccurate and does not serve to be predictive, given that so many dynamics are in flux. However, the outcomes of key districts will shape the direction of the next two years of Taiwan politics—determining which party heavyweights will be nominees for the presidency and allowing for demonstrated party performance going into the 2024 general elections. On the former point, if a party underperforms and the opposition sweeps the overall election or is able to secure a number of major districts, the party chair steps down and leadership is reshuffled.

Aside from how election outcomes will reshape Taiwan’s local political landscape, the crucial question will be
what role the PRC will play in both the lead-up to and aftermath of these elections. While questions on China and cross-strait relations typically fall to the backburner in local elections, Beijing has over the past decade become increasingly focused on—and, arguably, increasingly adept at—trying to influence Taiwan’s local elections to its preferred outcome. It deploys the vast range of its tool kit in support of this objective, oftentimes in conjunction with the broader tactics it deploys against the island, but also at more localized levels. Perhaps the most prominent effort has been through disinformation campaigns—as seen in the 2018 local elections—but the PRC has also infiltrated local media, targeted and co-opted local grassroots groups, and implemented a “divide-and-conquer” approach to the island’s various localities.

While questions on China and cross-strait relations typically fall to the backburner in local elections, Beijing has over the past decade become increasingly focused on—and, arguably, increasingly adept at—trying to influence Taiwan’s local elections to its preferred outcome. The latter approach was seemingly fine-tuned to a tee. Beijing, oftentimes through its local officials, would offer “carrots” to pan-blue counterparts across the strait, in the form of political access and economic benefits, while withholding the same from pan-green ones—arguing that any cross-strait benefits must derive from a 1992 Consensus baseline. This has also played out more recently in PRC import bans of agricultural products from key pan-green constituencies.

Yet, mere hours after Pelosi landed in Taipei, the PRC announced an abrupt overnight ban of over 2,000 food products from Taiwan, ranging from seafood and fruits to confectionaries and processed foods, going beyond earlier tactics of targeting single products, such as grouper and pineapple, and impacting major publicly listed food manufacturers. In the aftermath, it was revealed that the PRC’s initial approach was not as delicately tailored as presumed and that KMT-held local districts had also suffered from previous batches of bans and were demanding support from the central government in light of the most recent one.

Accordingly, evolving—or perhaps devolving—dynamics between the KMT and CCP over the course of the next few years will be important to watch. The existence and presence of the KMT acts a moderating force in cross-strait politics. The party has thus far served as both an avenue for direct lines of communications between the two sides and as a counterbalance to PRC perceptions that the Taiwan people—through DPP and pan-green proxies—are actively seeking independence. In essence, so long as the PRC views the KMT as both electorally viable and pursuing policies consistent with a shared notion of “One China,” the Taiwan domestic political element of Beijing’s broader Taiwan considerations is viewed as sufficiently managed, and Beijing is likely to refrain, to a degree, from more belligerent actions.

However, there have been signs that Beijing may be losing its patience with the KMT on both counts, with accusations cast on the party for its failures in both the 2018 and 2020 elections, as well as frustration with the fluctuations that have come with the stream of party chairs from across the party’s factions, particularly as it pertains to their framing of the 1992 Consensus and Taiwan within the construct of the ROC. For example, during his visit to Washington, D.C., to formally launch the party’s representative office in the United States, Eric Chu called the 1992 Consensus a “no consensus consensus.” This was met with backlash from the State Council’s Taiwan Affairs Office, which said that “the ‘1992 Consensus’ cannot be arbitrarily distorted.”

Accordingly, it will be important to see how the PRC adjusts its approach to the KMT, particularly after these midterm elections. And, as the KMT struggles with its messaging to Taiwan’s domestic audience, the other question is whether and to what extent the party’s ability to reform will be constrained by pressure from the PRC. One of the major predicaments the KMT has faced since 2016 has been squaring the circle between what the Taiwan people want and what the PRC is willing to accept, with the two increasingly at odds with each other and with Taiwan’s domestic politics trending in a direction away from the PRC’s desired outcome.

**CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM**

Coinciding with the November 26 local elections will be a referendum on whether Taiwan should make a constitutional amendment to lower its voting age for elections from 20 to 18 and open the door to future legislation to lower the candidacy age to run for office to 18 as well. If the question passes in an affirmative, the follow-on effects may be longer and more far-reaching than the actual midterm election itself.

This year’s referendum differs from the recent ones held in November 2018 and December 2021 in that it will require a higher threshold to pass—at more than 50 percent of all eligible voters—and will result in formal changes to the
ROC constitution. At face value, lowering the voting age has widespread support among Taiwan’s political leaders, with initial approval to set the referendum passing 109 to 0 in the LY (with four legislators not present for a vote). Taiwan’s two major political parties, as well as the NPP and the TPP, have brought the issue to the local election campaign trail, with each of the four launching campaigns for the referendum’s successful passage.

However, there are claims that the KMT had maneuvered behind the scenes in an attempt to decrease the odds of the referendum passing, including when the party called for the referendum to be disassociated from the election and held on a separate day, which would result in a lower turnout. Though this endeavor was ultimately unsuccessful, it showcased that lowering the voting age is politically popular in Taiwan, but that the KMT—whose supporters lean older and more traditional—would bear the brunt of any demographic changes to Taiwan’s electorate. Conversely, the inclusion of 18- and 19-year-old voters would benefit the DPP, as well as third parties that are vocally pro-independence.

These concerns seem to be echoed among the KMT’s electorate and other pan-blue supporters—multiple public opinion polls from the past few years reflect this sentiment. One of the most recent, conducted in August 2022, shows disproportionate opposition to lowering the voting age from KMT and TPP supporters, at 62.4 percent and 54.5 percent, respectively, while pan-green parties are overall in favor. The same study indicates that, at this point in time, there is only 39.5 percent support among those eligible to cast votes in a referendum (the voting age for referendums was lowered to 18 in 2017) and fall 10.5 percentage points short of passing the threshold for a constitutional revision—a gap of 2 million votes from a required 9.65 million. As a point of comparison, Tsai Ing-wen secured the presidency in 2020 with a record 8.17 million votes, in a high turnout year, which is still 1.5 million votes short.

Accordingly, the margins will be difficult to surpass—especially given that voter turnout is lower during midterms than in general elections. That said, there has been invigorated fervor among youth and civil society organizations since the referendum passed the LY, and these groups have been active in advocating and lobbying for the cause. Proponents of lowering the voting age argue that, under other elements of ROC law, 18-year-olds are considered adults and thus should be able to elect their representatives. Others stress that a lowered voting age is a sign of a mature democracy and that Taiwan’s neighbors, South Korea and Japan, have recently passed similar initiatives. Yet, youth-led endeavors have spurred unprecedented change across Taiwan’s history—including the Wild Lily, Wild Strawberry, and Sunflower movements—and the prospect of surmounting these challenges should not be discounted.

Most critically, if the referendum does succeed, it will add 540,000 new voters to Taiwan’s electorate, who will be able to cast ballots in the 2024 general election—which is not insignificant when considering that this demographic is likely to bolster pan-green candidates across the field. In addition, if the constitutional amendment passes, it will be the first of its kind and showcase that constitutional amendments are electorally viable. This is likely to generate momentum among pro-independence groups in Taiwan that seek to revise other parts of the ROC constitution, including abandoning territorial claims, which currently includes land under the jurisdiction of the PRC—and which would be viewed by Beijing as an escalatory, “separatist” move to further “de-Sinicize” Taiwan.

Finally, young people in Taiwan would be empowered if the referendum is successful and, depending on the blue-green makeup of the LY and timing, could be further empowered to lobby the legislature to address the second topic in the referendum—lowering the age of candidacy—and draw up and pass the necessary legal provisions to bring this into fruition. This would open the door to a surge of young candidates and further shift the median line of Taiwan politics toward the pan-green end of the spectrum.

**LOOKING TO 2024 AND BEYOND**

It is likewise also too soon to accurately predict the exact outcome of the 2024 national-level election. Notwithstanding, the aforementioned identity trends and internal political dynamics set the scene for all the variables at play. Identity politics are trending toward a much larger swathe of pan-green support, with the prospect of this increasing even more, depending on the outcome of the November referendum. The KMT is at odds within itself, and the likelihood of party reform and unity is so far unclear. The PRC has been pursuing an overall more belligerent approach to Taiwan since 2016 and escalated this further after Speaker Pelosi’s visit, with more hardline approaches to Taiwan generally backfiring in the polls.

These signs point to a likely DPP victory, barring a major incident or scandal. There are currently murmurs that the top contenders for the nomination will be current...
vice president William Lai, current Taoyuan mayor Cheng Wen-tsan, or former vice president Chen Chien-jen, with Lai as the expected frontrunner. Fundamentally, however, whoever ends up securing the DPP nomination is of less consequence than the sole factor that the next president will be DPP. It has often been said that Tsai is the best DPP president Beijing will get, both in her policies and her background—but her commitment to the status quo and balanced approach to cross-strait relations has been flouted by the PRC. Since her first inauguration in May 2016, Chinese state media has consistently accused Tsai and her administration of “reckless provocations” and taking “separatist stance[s]” in support of “Taiwan independence.”

In essence, a DPP president—regardless of their exact policy positions and actions—will be perceived as a threat by the PRC due to the party’s history and its inability to accept a common “One China” baseline. Exacerbating this, William Lai comes from a deeper green faction of the DPP and has openly called himself “a political worker for Taiwanese independence,” though with the caveat of the party’s current position that Taiwan is already independent. Even if he were to further temper his position as president, as he has done as vice president (and as former DPP president Chen Shui-bian did over the course of his two terms), the PRC will hold to its inherent distrust of the DPP and continue and deepen its pressure campaign against Taiwan.

The outcome of the corresponding LY elections will also be worth watching. The DPP lost seats in the legislature in 2020, with the KMT gaining, but was nonetheless able to keep its majority. If the DPP is able to maintain hold of both the presidency and the LY in 2024, the party will more easily be able to pass and implement its policies. Conversely, it will be more constrained if the opposition secures the legislature. From Beijing’s perspective, this would be more expedient than the DPP controlling two of the branches of government—as the KMT would be able to stalemate pan-green agendas and rein in what the PRC would perceive as more “radical” policy proposals—though its ideal scenario would be the pan-blue coalition at the helm of both the Executive and Legislative Yuans.

Another element of the LY elections that will be revealing will be the result of the often-overlooked party list vote. In 2020, the DPP saw a decline of 10 percentage points in its share of the party vote from 2016—bringing it to about the same level as the KMT. The KMT performed surprisingly well in the party vote that year, despite mismanaging its candidate submissions—having made revisions to its initial list after public outcries that it featured a number of vocally pro-unification politicians. Assessments in the aftermath of the 2020 election held that the breakdown of the party list vote showed that the electorate rejected the KMT candidate but not necessarily the party, which was seeing resurging support since its losses in 2016.

Thus, the number of candidates from each party selected from the 2024 party list will be a good indicator of party support in Taiwan—and whether efforts by the KMT to reform, if any, pay off or if the party needs to further reassess to remain politically viable. In the two plus years since the last general election, the KMT’s popularity and approval ratings have been on a largely downward trend, due to long-standing problems with messaging and party unity, as well as fumbles in prioritizing issues and leveraging political capital—as seen in the December 2021 referenda and the January 2022 failed recall vote of independent legislator Freddy Lim.

Relatedly, in the off chance that the KMT secures the presidency or the legislature, it will likely have done so through a thorough readjustment of its cross-strait policy—to one the PRC is unlikely to find palatable. Though the 1992 Consensus of the Ma years hinged more on the political will to table differences, rather than any semblance of an agreement, the two sides are reconfiguring their framings to be increasingly contradictory—with the KMT seeking further ambiguity and the CCP seeking greater clarity on “One China” as the PRC. At the same time, if the KMT is defeated in 2024, it will likewise reassess its positions to one that better encapsulates the views and preferences of the Taiwan people, much like the party did after its defeat in the early 2000s, choosing to emphasize a multicultural identity (as both Chinese and Taiwanese, instead of solely Chinese) to broaden appeal. The issue, then, is a question of when and not if; at least if the party wants to remain viable in Taiwan politics.

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Accordingly, in either case, the course of Taiwan politics will move in line with the trends of Taiwan identity, which will drive party priorities in the same direction—and
further away from what the PRC wants. Though this may not necessarily hinge on the 2024 elections as a watershed, the domestic political dynamics explored in depth above will prevail in the long term, as demographic patterns suggest an even further consolidation of Taiwanese identity, bringing about broader electoral support for the pan-green coalition; the KMT “old guard” of Ma-era traditionalists will fade out with time and be replaced with a more reform-minded generation; disproportionately green-leaning youth will reach political maturity and vote in elections and referenda; and third parties will gain a more prominent foothold in Taiwan politics. And in parallel, conceptualizations of China—broadly defined—are becoming increasingly foreign to the Taiwan people, interestingly through both distance and exposure. It is unclear how Beijing will adapt to these developments, as state media and official remarks have focused disproportionately on the myth that the 1992 Consensus and “One Country, Two Systems” are widely supported by the Taiwan public and that only a handful of Taiwan’s people support the DPP and its purported “separatist” activities. The PRC will likely further harden its stance on Taiwan, including using the new post-Pelosi measures as a baseline and work to combat the internationalization of cross-strait issues—seen in the past years with growing Western support for Taiwan—through a renewed drive on discourse and narrative control, among other measures.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES**

Ultimately, tensions in the Taiwan Strait will rise further in the next decade—and even beyond. While the bulk of public discourse on Taiwan, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, has been focused on the possibility of a PRC invasion by 2027, it is critical to stress that U.S. attention should extend far beyond that date and include both short- and long-term planning. The year 2027 is a marker for the PLA's capability to launch a full-scale invasion—meaning the military technical and operational means to do so. The date says nothing of intent. However, domestic political elements in Taiwan are moving counter to what leadership in Beijing desires and represent one of the factors that could harden PRC resolve to invade, due to the perception that all non-military options have lost their utility and should no longer be pursued.

Leading up to 2027, the United States should conduct a long-overdue Taiwan policy review, with the last one being in 1994—notably before Taiwan had fully democratized. This should include assessments, pursuant to the Taiwan Relations Act, the Three Joint Communiqués, and the Six Assurances, on which elements of existing U.S. policy to emphasize or de-emphasize and which parts may be increasingly incompatible. Perhaps most critically, any Taiwan policy review should factor in decades-long realities that have stemmed from Taiwan’s robust and enduring democracy—expanding on the Clinton-era addition of articulating “with the assent of the people of Taiwan” to address the domestic political questions that have emerged. A policy review should likewise seek to address major changes over the last three decades in the broader geostrategic environment, to include the growing cross-strait military imbalance, expansive PRC influence around the globe and in major international organizations, and associated challenges from U.S.-China strategic competition, among others.

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Further, particularly looking forward to the next two years, there should be greater outreach to political actors in Taiwan to better understand party positions and priorities and to move beyond simple black-and-white characterizations of Taiwan domestic politics as a choice between “independence” and “unification,” in order for policymakers to better contextualize the nuances and complexities at play. Taiwan’s leaders and its people are pragmatic actors who will likely refrain from pursuing de jure independence—out of an awareness of the potential repercussions that would be dealt by Beijing. Nonetheless, a Taiwan Strait contingency may not necessarily be borne of such an overt declaration but rather an assessment from the PRC that it is no longer possible to bring Taiwan and its people back into the fold of a common “China”—and Taiwan domestic developments remain key factors in this calculus.

Relatedly, coordinated efforts to counteract Beijing’s discourse power (or “the right to speak”)—a component of broader PRC propaganda campaigns to shape global narratives to be more pursuant to CCP goals and interests—should also be pursued. This includes combating not only the oversimplification of Taiwan domestic politics described in the paragraph above but also pervasive PRC efforts to falsely assert the universality of its
“One-China Principle”—including by conflating it with the United States’ and other countries’ “One China” policies. While at first glance such an approach appears largely abstract, Beijing has over the past half century shifted the Overton window on acceptable discourse on Taiwan, be it in international organizations or in bilateral exchanges, in an attempt to not only normalize its stance globally but also frame any interactions other countries have with Taiwan as an affront to these norms and a violation of its supposed rights. The PRC aims to achieve a moral high ground, deflect blame for any of its actions in response to deepened contacts with Taiwan, and further constrain the already limited space countries have in engaging with Taiwan. For example, Beijing has gone as far as calling into question the validity of the United States’ Taiwan Relations Act—which is U.S. law—by tying its “One-China Principle” with UN General Assembly Resolution 2758.

Washington’s current approach to Taiwan and cross-strait relations has been largely reactive—oftentimes shoring up support for Taiwan in direct response to PRC actions toward the island. Moving forward, and with the wherewithal of foresight, as informed through Taiwan domestic political trends, a more proactive approach should be undertaken. This should include working with allies and partners to identify triggers, determine measures to preempt and mitigate any fallout, and strengthen Taiwan’s resiliency, be it through incorporating Taiwan into a larger number of multilateral fora, particularly those in which the PRC is not a part of, or helping Taiwan further diversify its economy through bilateral and multilateral trade agreements, among others.

Looking to both the immediate and longer term, and even before the possible lead-up to a full-blown invasion, the PRC will continue and likely intensify its gray zone warfare against Taiwan—or coercive moves short of military force—especially as Taiwan’s domestic politics move further away from Beijing’s preferences. For Washington and its allies and partners, momentum, focus, and emphasis on Taiwan must be maintained, especially as cross-strait issues persist beyond the 2027 window and in the following decades. This includes continued and enduring coordination among like-minded countries to ensure the longevity of international support for Taiwan and to share the burden of any blowback from Beijing.

All in all, domestic politics in Taiwan are instructive: they show a direct response—in the form of an unequivocal rejection—to Beijing’s pretense of “peaceful unification” under “One Country, Two Systems” and the entirety of the PRC system of governance. Forecasting the future course of Taiwan domestic politics and the associated response from Beijing points to a further deterioration of ties and increasing PRC belligerence—closer to the precipice of full-out military conflict.

Yet, the odds of returning to rapprochement are improbable. Those that advocate for a restoration of cross-strait calm often misplace the blame, reverting to the early 2000s trope of Taiwan as a “troublemaker,” dismissing the fact that Taiwan’s democratically elected leadership is relaying the will of its people and that the onus of deteriorating ties is almost squarely on Beijing. They also fundamentally misunderstand how significantly the broader geostrategic environment has shifted in just the past five years alone.

In short, the forward trajectory of Taiwan domestic politics, as informed by identity trends that have been in part reinforced by PRC policies and actions, will continue fostering an increasingly tense cross-strait relationship. While much attention has been cast on the PRC side of the equation, such as on the importance of credible deterrence, the Taiwan side, in particular its complex domestic political dynamics, has been underexplored—and its ability to foretell the future trajectory of party and leadership preference underappreciated.

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ENDNOTES


5 Notably, it is important to disambiguate the use of the term “Chinese” here from the PRC party-state and look to broader definitions of the term [i.e., huaren (華人) versus zhongguoren (中國人)]. Yet, this is not the limiting factor, as research has shown that perceptions of the PRC and its system of governance also play in. For a more detailed exploration of the nuances, see: Shirley Rigger, Lev Nachman, Chit Wai John Mok, and Nathan Kar Ming Chan, “Why is unification so unpopular in Taiwan? It’s the PRC political system, not just culture,” Brookings Institution, February 7, 2022, https://bloomerang.com/CFR/2022-12-18-a-kmt-debacle/.


7 Achen and Wang, The Taiwan Voter, 275–76.

8 Ibid., 126–27.

9 Lev Nachman (assistant professor at National Chengchi University) in discussion with the author, August 2022.

10 “蔡英文總統連任兩周年滿意度民調” [Public opinion poll on satisfaction with President Tsai Ing-wen on the second anniversary of her inauguration], 民意調查中心 [TVBS Poll Center], June 8, 2022, https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/2022/20220609/76014287c144bd775e03e59ca9005554.pdf; and “蔡英文總統滿意度與四大公投民調” [Public opinion poll on satisfaction with President Tsai Ing-wen and the four major referendums], 民意調查中心 [TVBS Poll Center], November 11, 2021, https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/20211112/5eedad51a15728968116c185f3f39d4.pdf.


13 The entirety of the 1992 Consensus is contentious, from its origin to whether there is in actuality any form of consensus between the KMT and the CCP. Its endurance from 2008 to 2016 as the foundation for cross-strait engagements was largely based off of the political will of both sides. For more, see: Jessica Drun, “Taiwan’s Opposition Struggles to Shake Pro-China Image,” Foreign Policy, March 11, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/11/taiwan-opposition-kuomintang-kmt-pro-china-1992-consensus/.


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There are three types of seats for legislators in the LY: (1) 73 seats for representatives voted in through first-past-the-post in specific districts; (2) six seats for indigenous representatives; and (3) 34 seats through proportional representation based off party-lists. For more see: “Member of the Legislative Yuan,” Republic of China (Taiwan) Legislative Yuan, 2010, https://www.ly.gov.tw/EngPages/List.aspx?nodeid=340.


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The “One-China Principle,” as described in a 2000 PRC white paper, is Beijing’s view that “there is only one China in the world, Taiwan is a part of China and the government of the PRC is the sole legal government representing the whole of China.” This is, however, separate from countries’ “One China” policies, which vary across the spectrum. The United States’ “One China” policy, as well as those of a number of its key allies and partners, does not agree with the PRC position and instead holds Taiwan’s status as undetermined. For more see: Jessica Drun and Bonnie Glaser, “The Distortion of UN Resolution 2758 to Limit Taiwan’s Access to the United Nations,” German Marshall Fund, March 2022, https://www.gmfus.org/news/distortion-un-resolution-2758-and-limits-taiwans-access-united-nations; and Jessica Drun, “One China, Multiple Interpretations,” Center for Advanced China Research, December 28, 2017, https://www.ccpwatch.org/single-post/2017/12/29/one-china-multiple-interpretations/.
