Heightened US-China tensions impact Taiwan's presidential election campaign

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Candidates for the presidential election in Taiwan on January 13 were finalised last Friday. The election has taken on global significance as the Biden administration, following on from Trump, has deliberately transformed the island into a dangerous flashpoint for conflict with China, even as it wages war against Russia in Ukraine and backs Israel's genocidal onslaught on Gaza.

The current frontrunner for the presidency is William Lai Ching-te, the country's vice-president and chairman of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). He took over as DPP chairman from the current president, Tsai Ing-wen, who is ineligible to stand as she has already served two four-year terms. Lai was selected as the DPP candidate in April.

Taiwan's status is an explosive issue. The US and Western media commonly refer to Taiwan as "self-governing," also noting that the island has never been ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). While true, Taiwan is only separate from China today because the US Navy prevented its takeover following the 1949 Chinese Revolution that forced the Kuomintang (KMT) to flee to Taiwan.

Both the KMT and the CCP claimed to be the legitimate ruler of all China. The US backed the brutal KMT military dictatorship on Taiwan, only ending its diplomatic recognition of Taipei in 1979 after reaching a quasi-alliance with Beijing against the Soviet Union. Central to the new US-China relationship was the One China policy under which Washington de facto recognised Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

Over the past decade, however, successive US administrations have deliberately undermined the diplomatic protocols underpinning relations with China, which Washington regards as the chief threat to its global dominance. The Biden administration has boosted diplomatic and military ties with an island it formally regards as part of China, increased arms sales to Taiwan and carried out provocative naval operations through the sensitive Taiwan Strait.

As Taiwanese president for the past eight years, Tsai Ing-wen has been a willing partner with Trump, then Biden, in heightening tensions across the Taiwan Strait. She has significantly strengthened the Taiwanese military and welcomed the growing stream of high-profile US visitors to Taipei, including the highly provocative trip by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. At the same time, Tsai did not take steps towards a formal declaration of independence, knowing that Beijing has repeatedly warned that it would respond by forcibly reunifying the island with China.

Lai, however, represents sections of the DPP committed to pursuing independence more aggressively. As premier in 2017, he described himself as a "pragmatic worker for Taiwanese independence." In 2019, Lai contested the DPP primary for the 2020 presidential election, in what was the first serious challenge to a sitting president, saying he would take responsibility for ensuring Taiwan was not annexed by China. After losing, he accepted Tsai's offer to become her vice-presidential running mate.

As the DPP candidate, Lai has played down his support for Taiwanese independence and thus the threat of war with China, restricting himself to remarks that Tsai has previously made. While attempting to reassure voters nervous about the danger of conflict, he states that Taiwan is already a "sovereign independent country" and does not need to formally declare itself as such.

At the same time, Lai is determined to build on the close relations established with the US under Tsai. In August, he made two "stop-overs" in the United States on the pretext of an official visit to Paraguay—one of the few countries with diplomatic relations with Taipei, not Beijing—and undoubtedly held discussions with US

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officials. China regards such visits by top Taiwanese politicians as a breach of the One-China policy.

Lai has also chosen Hsiao Bi-khim, the former de facto Taiwanese ambassador to the US, as his vice-presidential running mate. Hsiao is not only well-connected in political and strategic circles in Washington but is known as a "cat warrior" for responding aggressively to Chinese diplomats branded in the Western media as "wolf warriors."

Not surprisingly, Beijing has responded to the Lai-Hsiao ticket as a "union of pro-independence separatists" and has branded Lai as a "troublemaker." Zhu Fenglian, a spokeswoman for the mainland's Taiwan Affairs Office, warned that "people who pursued Taiwan independence were essentially instigators of war." She bluntly told a news conference on November 15: "Taiwan independence means war."

There is no doubt that tensions across the Taiwan Strait will worsen if Lai is elected. US imperialism, however, is chiefly responsible for upsetting the status quo and deliberately heightening the danger of war over the island. It has hyped the threat from China to justify drawing Taiwan closer to Washington and thereby encouraging Lai and the DPP to adopt a tougher stance towards Beijing.

The outcome of the January 13 election is far from certain. Lai has a significant lead over the other two presidential candidates—Hou You-yi from the KMT and Ke Wen-je from the Taiwan People's Party (TPP)—both of whom favour an easing of tensions and closer relations with China.

The KMT is based largely on the descendants of those who fled the Chinese mainland, in many cases airlifted by the US military, after the 1949 revolution. It claimed to be the government-in-exile of all China, placed the island under martial law and ruthlessly suppressed any opposition. Amid a wave of strikes and protests in the 1980s, the KMT regime gradually relinquished its iron grip on power. The first direct election for president and vice-president was only held in 1996.

As the CCP turned to capitalist restoration, the KMT sought to develop closer relations with Beijing opening the way for Taiwanese corporations to exploit cheap Chinese labour. The KMT continues to adhere to the so-called 1992 Consensus with the CCP under which Taiwan was declared to be part of One China, but disagreed on where legitimate power resided. The DPP has refused to ratify the 1992 Consensus, with Lai declaring that to do so would be tantamount to "relinquishing our sovereignty."

Lai has consistently polled ahead of both of his rivals: a poll in late October showed Lai with 32 percent of support, Hou Yu-ih with 22 percent and Ko Wen-je with 20 percent. In an election based on first-past-the post, Lai would win the presidency even though he received less than 50 percent of the votes.

A fourth potential candidate—Terry Gou, the multi-billionaire founder of Foxconn, which operates huge electronic assembly plants in China—polled just 5 percent. Gou, who favours closer relations with Beijing, pulled out of the race just hours before nominations closed last Friday.

Last week, the KMT and Taiwan People's Party engaged in a last-ditch attempt to forge a unity ticket to challenge Lai and the DPP. Negotiations, however, fell apart in spectacular fashion on Thursday when the KMT abruptly walked out of talks being broadcast live on television.

While the issue of relations with China inevitably looms large in the election, domestic issues including low economic growth rates, rising unemployment and social distress will also have a marked impact. Taiwan entered recession in the first quarter of 2023 as GDP contracted by 3.02 percent compared to the same period last year. The economy is expected to grow by just 1.61 percent for the year.

As around the world, workers in Taiwan are being hit hard by inflation, with a sharp drop in real wages in the first quarter. Real estate speculation is fuelling a growing housing crisis. While official unemployment figures remain relatively low overall, youth unemployment for those between 20 and 24 is more than 11 percent.

The outcome of next year's election certainly has implications for relations between Beijing and Taipei. Whoever wins, however, the US has no intention of stepping back from its reckless and provocative confrontation against China. It is determined to preserve its global hegemony and subordinate Beijing to its economic and strategic interests through all available means including military.

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