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Opinion – Understanding Taiwan's 2024 Presidential Election

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YU-HUA CHEN, JAN 4 2024

Taiwan is situated at the epicenter of the clash between the rule-based international order led by the US and the resurgence of the Chinese international order in the Indo-Pacific region. In practical terms, the Taiwan issue holds the potential to trigger a nuclear war between the US and China. Over the past eight years, the international community has credited President Tsai Ing-wen for steering Taiwan as a reliable, predictable, and stable force in the rule-based international order. Under her leadership, Taiwan and, consequently, the Indo-Pacific region have safely navigated the treacherous waters of the U.S.-China competition. But, will the next president of Taiwan be able to do the same?

As the 2024 Taiwan Presidential Election nears, it is imperative to scrutinize the candidates' positions on US-China competition, whilst examining their worldviews as a basis for conjecturing the potential scenarios for regional security around Taiwan. Certainly, candidates' personal worldviews may not be a perfect indicator for predicting Taiwan's future policies toward the US and China because this island country is a democracy, of which a host of factors matter in the policymaking process. However, those worldviews could serve as a foundation on which to envision where Taiwan would be heading, given the significant power of Taiwan's president in making foreign and security policies. In short, while all the candidates are realists, distrust China, talk about deterrence, and hold the position that the country they live in is an independent country, the major difference distinguishing them from one another is their approach to managing the China threat – which has long-lasting impacts on the regional security.

The candidate currently leading in the polls is Lai Ching-te, representing the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Lai is the current Vice President of Taiwan and has served as Premier, Mayor of Tainan, and Legislator. On the issue of Taiwan sovereignty, Lai unequivocally rejected any unification proposals from Beijing, including One Country Two Systems or the 92 Consensus. This stance led him to formulate a four-pillars-of-peace strategy to manage China's future encroachment on Taiwan—deterrence, economic diversification, strengthened partnerships with like-minded countries, and steady and principled cross-strait leadership. A close relationship with the US is indispensable to the success of this strategy as it can greatly strengthen the first three pillars. As his running mate Hsiao Bi-khim stressed, “As we have been put in a situation where the geostrategic challenges are formidable. And a rock-solid partnership with the US is critically important right now.”

Lai can be argued as a realist with a regional focus in international relations theories. The concept of anarchy appears to be deeply ingrained in his worldview because he has been emphasizing the necessity of Taiwan relying on itself throughout this campaign. From Lai's perspective, China as a whole is an adversary of Taiwan, period. The best way to address the threat of China is to conduct internal (domestic military preparation) and external (allying with the US) balancing against China, as Lai articulated in the presidential debate “I have a hope for peace (with China) but do not have any illusion about peace.” What distinguishes Lai as a regional-focused realist is the tendency that he placed less emphasis on Taiwan's role in the global standoff between democracy and authoritarianism or the rule of law and revisionism compared to Tsai Ing-wen. Lai sees the Taiwan issue more in the context of Cross-Strait relations.

Regional security around Taiwan is likely to stay with the current form if Lai takes office primarily because he would

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cause no significant strategic turbulence to the current US-China competition. Lai vowed multiple times that he will follow the road Tsai has taken. Therefore, Taiwan under Lai is expected to continue to stand closely with the camp of defending the current international order, maintaining the status quo over the Taiwan Strait, and keep finding ways to balance against China as it has done in the past. Certainly, China will continue its pressure over Taiwan, but so does the continued support from the US and its allies.

Representing the Kuomintang (KMT) is Hou You-ih. Hou currently serves as the mayor of New Taipei City and spent most of his life in law enforcement as a police chief, making him have few experiences in international politics. Notably, he avoided talking about international politics until very recently. Given this, a viable way to understand Hou's worldview is to scrutinize the KMT's relevant statements, as many of the top brass in the party have strong influences on him. On the sovereignty issue, Hou adheres to the traditional KMT position that the Republic of China (ROC), not Taiwan, is an independent county. According to the ROC Constitution, Taiwan is a free area destined to unify with the Chinese mainland in the future. Consequently, Hou is open to negotiating with Beijing based on what he called a "ROC Constitutional 92 Consensus." Followed by this pro-China nature, an anti-US sentiment has been propagated by the KMT throughout the campaign. Chao Shao-kang, Hou's running mate, is famous for preaching the idea that the Ukraine War is a vivid example of US untrustworthiness. Thus, despite mentioning the importance of deterrence against China in his *Foreign Affairs* article, a pro-China stance is arguably the true color of Hou.

Hou appears to also subscribe to a realist worldview, but his worldview is darker. Hou perceives the world as a jungle where one should trust no one because not only does he disbelieve Washington, but he is also not native to Beijing. Hou said, "I have no unrealistic expectations about Beijing's intentions of seeking unification, and if necessary, by force." Additionally, like Lai, state centrism is their underlying assumption about China during the campaign—paying limited attention to factors such as the Chinese people, international institutions, or multinational enterprises that might influence China's behavior toward Taiwan.

The power competition over the Taiwan Strait could potentially intensify if Hou is elected. While sharing a similar assessment of China, Hou's approach to addressing China's threat differs—he leans toward bandwagoning. He and the KMT supporters seem to believe Beijing is too powerful to be balanced effectively. For them, the balancing strategy undertaken by Tsai is a risky game, only resulting in war over the strait. Bandwagoning with China, like accepting the 92 Consensus, is a more prudent approach to ensure Taiwan's safety. This explains why Hou frames this election as a choice between peace and war. If this logic prevails, however, Beijing might feel compelled to keep showing force to Taiwan to underscore China's formidable strength. Conversely, to keep Taiwan close, Washington may also need to remind Taiwan the US still owns the most powerful force in the Indo-Pacific region. Contrary to Hou's aim, Hou's inclination toward bandwagoning may unintentionally prompt both Washington and Beijing to behave more aggressively at the end.

The final candidate is Ko Wen-je, the chairman of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP). Ko was a surgeon at the National Taiwan University Hospital so, similar to Hou, he had limited experience in international politics. However, upon assuming the role of Mayor of Taipei, in contrast to Hou, he frequently commented on Taiwan-US-China relations. Importantly, there is a perceived lack of coherence in his comments on those matters and by extension his political stance over the years. Flexibility/opportunism is probably the principle guiding his thoughts on international politics.

Although Ko claims to position Taiwan in the middle of the US-China competition, he could be more pro-China in nature than Hou. Similar to Lai, he agrees the name of his independent country is called Taiwan as he refers to Taiwan more frequently than the ROC during the campaign. But such a stance does not necessarily alienate China because Ko publicly accepted the content of the 92 Consensus—a compromise that may be more significant to Beijing than Hou's position. For him, what needs to be changed is the terminology of it since this term has been smeared in the Taiwan society. Regarding the US, he expressed in a CSIS interview that "it is China that pushes Taiwan to the US," suggesting the shared values between Taiwan and the US relations may not have too much weight.

Ko, akin to other candidates, is a realist, but with some liberal elements. The concept of anarchy also affected how he

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perceives the world, leading him to believe Taiwan should not place its fate to other countries' benign intention, including the US. For instance, Ke said "Taiwan is just a product on a shelf (of the US)." For Ko, military preparation of Taiwan is the priority because "when it comes to democracy and freedom, I believe there is no free lunch. There is always a price tag attached." Nevertheless, what distinguishes him from Lai and Hou is his dream of transforming China. He often questioned that "if we believe in universal values, then why should we believe China will never have freedom and democracy," and criticized the US for using a wrong method to change China. Moreover, he is also the only candidate who unpacks the shell of the state and maintains that the best defense of Taiwan lies in fostering positive feelings among Chinese people toward Taiwan.

Despite the dream of transforming China, regional security around Taiwan could become chaotic and unpredictable should Ko assume power. Given that there is no ideology or value restraining Ko's range of his actions and words, Taiwan under Ko may oscillate between balancing and bandwagoning depending on the circumstances. If that is the case, it is quite likely that neither the US nor China would fully trust Taiwan since both Washington and Beijing cannot be certain about Taiwan's true intentions. How the US and China would respond to Ko's fickleness is hence hard to predict. Regional security under this scenario has the highest level of uncertainty, which international relations scholars loathe.

About the author:

Yu-Hua Chen is an assistant professor in the Global Studies Program at Akita International University (AIU) in Japan. Before joining AIU, he served as a visiting fellow at George Washington University, a lecturer at Australian National University, and held the rank of Second Lieutenant in Taiwan.