

East Asia after Taiwan's Presidential Election: China's armed unification is unrealistic



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Key points

- China's peaceful unification policy and cross-Strait relations are pluralistic.
- Weak Democratic Progressive Party government, China plans to unseat it in 2028
- In addition to defense capabilities, international cooperation is necessary to protect democracy

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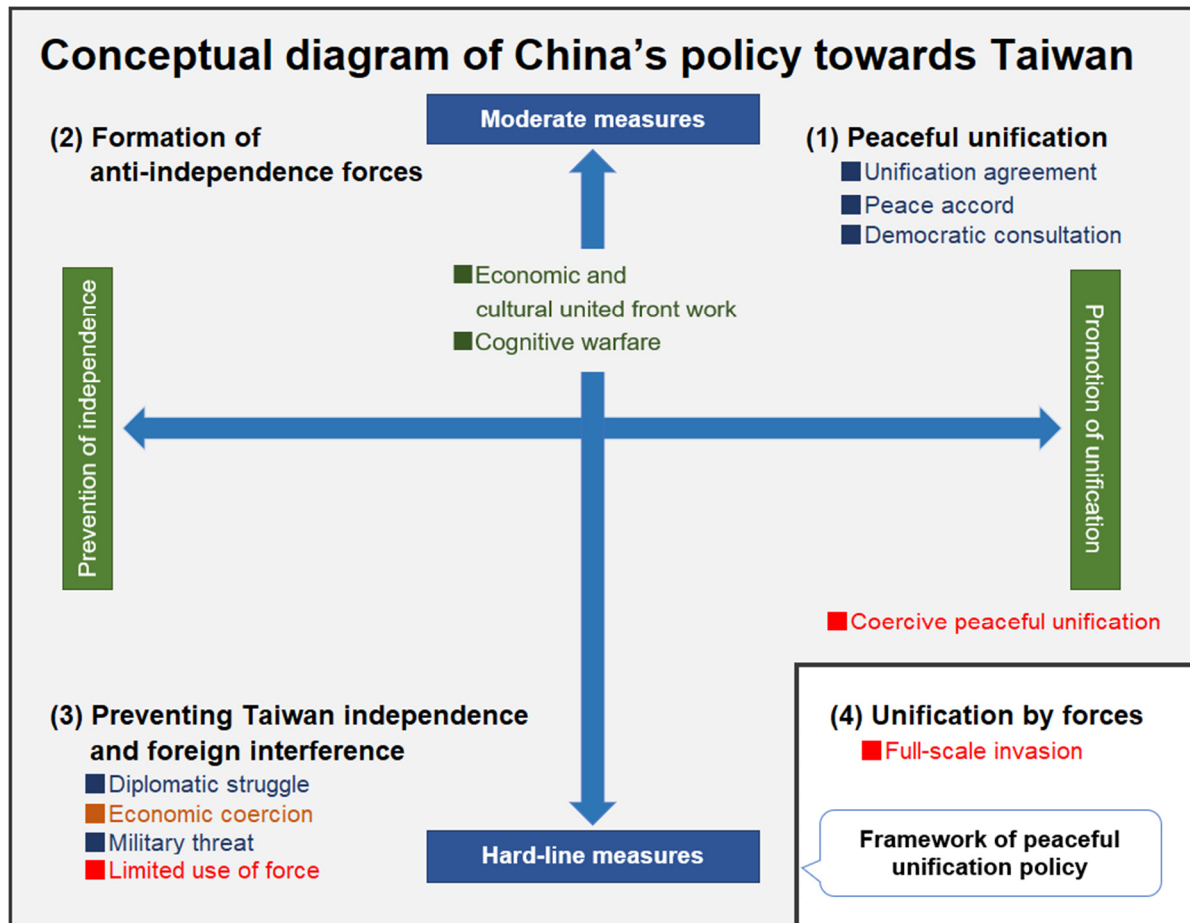
Taiwan's presidential and Legislative Yuan elections were held on January 13, 2024, and William Lai of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was elected president. This time, as there were three strong candidates, Lai's vote share was only 40.05%, and the ruling party is expected to fall short of a majority in the Legislative Yuan election, resulting in a “weak DPP” government.

The international community has been paying close attention to the presidential election because of fears that a war could break out in the Taiwan Strait, following in the footsteps of Russia and Ukraine, and Israel and the Palestinian Islamic organization Hamas. Concerns about the “Taiwan contingency” are growing.

However, from my experience of observing this region for many years, it is a bit too far from reality to view cross-Strait relations in terms of “the DPP government wants independence” and “the Xi Jinping government wants to unify by force.” Cross-Strait relations are more pluralistic and complex.



The chart shows the concept of China's policy toward Taiwan. The horizontal axis shows whether the strategic goal is to prevent independence (prevent Taiwan-led changes to the status quo) or to promote unification (China-led changes to the status quo), and the vertical axis shows whether the measures are moderate or hard. This is defined by four sub-goals: (1) peaceful unification, (2) formation of anti-independence forces, (3) prevention of Taiwan independence and foreign interference, and (4) unification by force. Each quadrant contains the means to achieve the four goals.



Armed unification is currently outside the framework of the policy of peaceful unification. On the other hand, China's policy of peaceful unification includes the hard-line measure of limited use of force. This will be used on a limited basis to demonstrate China's rejection of extreme situations such as Taiwan declaring independence or the United States intervening militarily to defend Taiwan. This is what President Xi refers to when he says, "I will never promise to renounce the use of force against Taiwan."

Another possibility is that China will use force to deter and subdue the United States, thereby forcing Taiwan to form an alliance without the use of force (coercive peaceful unification), which would include the threat of force. However, this is still many years away, as it will only be possible once China acquires the capabilities necessary for armed unification.

Other Chinese hard-line measures include diplomatic battles to force a change in diplomatic recognition (from Taiwan to China) or to expel Taiwan from international organizations, and economic coercion to stop imports of agricultural products from Taiwan and tourists to Taiwan. Then there are military threats, such as the movement of warplanes and warships into close proximity or the conduct of large-scale military exercises. These are also means to prevent a step toward the use of force.

What we must not forget is the economic and cultural united front work and cognitive warfare that encompasses both the prevention of independence and the promotion of unification. China has made Taiwan economically dependent on China and routinely engages in co-optation and infiltration operations that exploit religious and other cultural ties. They are also taking advantage of Taiwan's open Internet space to spread a large amount of false and true information through social media to discredit the DPP government. This method is being used consciously or unconsciously by Taiwan's opposition forces.



Then what will China choose based on the results of this election? The continuation of the DPP government has made it impossible to achieve (1) “peaceful unification,” which aims to achieve unification through talks and agreements over the next four years. On the other hand, (4) “unification by force” lacks the capacity and is outside the scope of current policy to begin with. The Xi administration may last more than a decade, so there is no incentive to use force at this stage.

It is unlikely that Taiwan will ever declare independence, and the United States does not feel the urgency to send troops to Taiwan, but rather seeks to stabilize the situation through communication with China. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine China using military force in a limited manner (3) to prevent Taiwan independence and foreign interference.

China will see the birth of a “weak DPP government” and will probably try again to unseat the DPP government in the 2028 presidential election. In other words, it should support (2) the “formation of an independent opposition force,” that is, the strengthening of opposition forces. At the same time, China will try to establish channels behind the scenes to control the Lai regime as much as possible.

China is likely to continue its hard-line policy (3) to prevent Taiwan independence and foreign interference. Immediately after the presidential election, the Pacific island nation of Nauru announced that it was severing ties with Taiwan and establishing diplomatic relations with China. On the economic and military front, China is likely to step up economic sanctions and provocative military actions around Taiwan, while keeping an eye on Taiwan's behavior. These are the responsibilities of government departments coordinated by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, and the People's Liberation Army, and each must produce results.

In addition, China's economic and cultural united front efforts would be stepped up to (2) form an “anti-independence force” and (1) lay the foundation for “peaceful unification.” China will gradually resume travel from China to Taiwan. People-to-people exchanges in person will make it easier to push forward the united front work. Preferential treatment for Taiwanese residents to invest, study, set up businesses and settle in China would also be implemented as planned.

What China can continue to promote is cognitive warfare through the Internet. This election demonstrated the power of China's cognitive warfare through services widely used by young people, such as TikTok and YouTube. Many young people dissatisfied with the current situation are believed to have been influenced by information containing anti-regime and anti-establishment messages and switched their support to Ko Wen-je of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP).

This is an area where there is scope for international cooperation. The 2016 US presidential election is a good example, and election interference through social media and other means is becoming more sophisticated. Suppressing criticism of the government is antithetical to democracy. If the government tries to suppress it, the opposition parties will fight back, creating a sense in society that “both sides are

equal.” If that happens, it will be at the mercy of authoritarian countries seeking to weaken democracy. Open democracies will be damaged unless governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) work together to combat the cognitive warfare of authoritarian states while maintaining fairness. Taiwan is at the forefront of this effort.

It is recalled that at the US-China summit meeting in November 2023, US President Biden warned President Xi not to intervene in Taiwan’s election. As a result, it became common knowledge within Taiwan that China was indeed interfering in elections. In other words, international cooperation and communication are effective.

As mentioned above, the answer to the question “What will China do?” is not necessarily the use of force. However, it is also true that Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, contrary to the predictions of most experts, and there are no absolutes in politics. Above all, China is working hard to build the military power necessary to enforce coercive peaceful unification.

Therefore, it remains important to maintain a deterrence posture in the future so that China will not be tempted to use force to change the status quo. Japan needs to fundamentally strengthen its defense capabilities while, like the United States, strengthening dialogue with China. Japan should also engage in substantive dialogue not only with the Taiwanese government but also with the opposition party that holds a majority in the Legislative Yuan, which is responsible for deliberating budgets and bills, in order to build a deterrent posture against China. The countries involved need to take a close look at the regional realities and make comprehensive responses.

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