

Perspectives

Taiwan's presidential election: Ramifications for Australia

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In 2024, [40 countries and economies](#) will go to the polls. The first out of the gate will be one of the most significant: Taiwan's presidential election on January 13.

Currently in the running are four candidates. Lai Ching-te (賴清德), the Democratic Progress Party (DPP) candidate and current Vice-President; Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜), the Kuomintang (KMT) candidate; Ko Wen-je (柯文哲), the Taiwan People's Party candidate and former Mayor of Taipei; and Guo Tai-ming (郭台銘), the billionaire owner of Foxconn, the world's largest contract manufacturer of electronics, who unsuccessfully sought the KMT nomination.

Whomever of these emerges the victor will determine the Peoples Republic of China's (PRC) approach and attitude towards the island. It is expected that Beijing's approach and attitude will differ depending on which of the four assumes the presidency. The outcome, therefore, has the potential to shape the strategic, diplomatic and military environment of the Indo-Pacific and, as such, will have ramifications for the entire region, including Australia.

[Opinion polling](#) conducted by Formosa from November 13 to November 15 indicates that Lai from the 'green', or more independence-leaning, camp is the frontrunner, but securing less than 40 percent of the vote. The remaining vote is spread across the remaining candidates who are all different shades of 'blue-white', the camp which sees merit in a relatively friendlier approach to relations with the PRC.

The Formosa poll shows that the DPP's Lai received 32.6 percent support followed by the KMT's Hou with 25.5 percent and the TPP's Ko with 17.8 percent. The independent Guo has 4.8 percent support, while 19.2 percent of respondents said that they were undecided or not intending to vote.

When Guo is removed from the polling, Lai has 33.6 percent support, Hou 28.5 percent and Ko 20.5 percent with 17.4 percent undecided or not intending to vote.

As Taiwan has a first-past-the-post electoral system, the likely winner would be Lai. In the 2000 presidential election, the DPP candidate Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) [won](#) the election with 39.3 percent due to two KMT-linked candidates splitting the 'blue' vote – the independent candidate Soong Chu-yu (宋楚瑜) won 36.84 percent and KMT candidate Lien Chan (連戰) won 23.1 percent of the votes.

But Lai's election is not guaranteed just yet. In the remaining two months to the poll, the dynamics of the election could change due to candidates dropping out, making a major mistake or forming a coalition – as is currently being [discussed](#) by the KMT and TPP. A 'blue-white' coalition with Hou and Ko as presidential and vice-presidential candidates, respectively, will make the election more competitive and the outcome more uncertain.

According to many analysts in Taiwan, a Lai victory would see the continuation of the uncompromising policy Beijing has applied to the current Tsai administration, including politico-military pressure around Taiwan and attempts to isolate and restrict Taiwan's international space. The PRC insists that cross-Strait relations must be governed by the recognition of 'one China' embedded in the '1992 Consensus', which the DPP rejects, meaning no contact or compromise across the Taiwan Strait.

On the other hand, Taiwanese analysts expect that in the event of a win by the KMT, the TPP or the independent, the PRC would seek to engage with them and move them towards some form of cross-Strait accommodation with Beijing. This could include concessions to Taipei from Beijing but this will also come with the expectation that Taiwan will embrace the 1992 Consensus in full. While potentially more inclined to engage with Beijing, there will, however, always be limits on how far the 'blue-white' camp can accommodate Beijing's expectations. The expected PRC request for reunification talks may well be rebuffed, triggering a negative reaction from Beijing.

Taken together, these factors mean there is no certainty about the stability of cross-Strait relations post-election.

Australia has [adhered](#) to its one China policy since 1972 but has also consistently [opposed](#) the use of force to change Taiwan's status. At a conference in Seoul in October, Defence Minister Richard Marles [called for](#) the strengthening of deterrence against coercion in the Taiwan Strait. He stated that while 'Australia does not take a position on the final status of Taiwan other than it must be arrived at peacefully, consistent with the will of peoples on both sides of the strait, and not through the use of force or coercion', the consequences of conflict between the US and the PRC are 'so grave' that 'we cannot be passive bystanders.'

Marles' remarks, while not committing Australia to the defence of Taiwan, indicates that Australia is prepared to work with the US and its allies to deter potential conflict across the Taiwan Strait. While such conflict is not preordained, the result of the presidential election could play a role in determining the direction of cross-Strait relations and tensions.

The outcome of Taiwan's presidential election will have a direct impact on Australia's policy towards Taiwan and support for the status quo across the Taiwan Strait. Canberra will also need to consider Washington's response to Beijing's approach to the new president, particularly as the US readies for its own presidential election later in the year.

The new president will be inaugurated on May 20 but the period between the election and the inauguration may end up being a period of political manoeuvring in Taipei and in Beijing as the PRC sizes up the new president and decides what message to send. Beijing is likely to maintain a hard line on Taiwan if Lai is elected. If a non-DPP candidate is elected the PRC could make offers to the president-elect on trade or access to some international organisations. There may either be a relaxation or increase in tensions depending on the result and how the new president responds to Beijing.

In an unpredictable and potentially volatile political environment Australia could be called upon to act decisively and flexibly in response to developments following Taiwan's 2024 election. Canberra must be ready to tailor its policies and approach to cross-Strait relations as each different election result could lead to different demands on how Australia will need to act.

Author

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During his career with DFAT, among other jobs Mr Magee headed up the areas dealing with both China and with Russia. He also led the Taskforce that established the National Foundation for Australia China Relations and was the interim CEO of that organisation.

He holds B.A. (Hons) and LLB degrees from Monash University and was recognised by Monash University in 2011 as a Monash University Distinguished Alumni. In 2013, he was recognised by the Taipei Language Institute as a TLI Outstanding Alumni. In 1992, he was appointed a United Nations Fellow and spent half a year based in Geneva and New York.