

ASIA PROGRAMME

SCHOLARLY HANDLING CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS: Tsai presidency

BY **Hugo TIERNY**

FORMER STUDENT OF THE CATHOLIC INSTITUTE OF PARIS

DECEMBER 2016

ASIA FOCUS #11



In the early days of December 2016, Tsai Ing-wen, the new DPP President of Taiwan had taken office for seven months and already hit surprisingly low in Taiwan national surveys¹. But that day, she just surprised everyone.

Taiwanese woke up on Saturday 3rd December and could read a Tweet that new US President-elect Donald Trump just wrote: *'The President of Taiwan CALLED ME today to wish me congratulations on winning the Presidency. Thank you!'*

Donald Trump declaration on Twitter had just signed a huge precedent in cross-strait relations. Indeed, since 1979, there was no direct talk between any Taiwan and United States Presidents, accordingly to the One China policy that has been endorsed on the eastern side of the Pacific Ocean since the shift in recognition from the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China the same year.

Moreover, what is even more spectacular is that Donald Trump has designated Tsai Ing-wen as the 'President of Taiwan', giving her and the island an unexpected upsurge of legitimacy. By calling Tsai Ing-wen the President of Taiwan, new US President-elect broke with decades of US ambiguity toward Taiwan and he explicitly recognized, although informally, the existence of a sovereign state in Taiwan. Although he previously promised that he would get rid of Asian "freeloaders", such declaration stands for a firm renewal of support to Taiwan.

Facing anger in both China and the United States, Donald Trump justified its position by retweeting: *'Interesting how the U.S. sells Taiwan billions of dollars of military equipment but I should not accept a congratulatory call.'* This message indicates that Donald Trump is rightfully portraying the absurdity of a longstanding diplomatic protocol and gives an official backing to the already existing ties between Taiwan and the United States. Since both countries do enjoy close security ties: Why wouldn't President-elect Donald Trump talk to Tsai Ing-wen? The logic speaks for itself.

The phone call is a strong signal that Tsai Ing-wen, who has lately been deemed as being too prudent toward Beijing by its own political camp², is habile. She has been able to seize a historical opportunity for Taiwan to expand its global visibility by taking advantage of Trump's recent election and recklessness in international affairs.

Now everybody knows that Tsai Ing-wen is an extremely agile negotiator.

GOING BACK TO THE ROOTS: JANUARY 2016, A LANDSLIDE

Tsai Ing-wen's victory and DPP landslide in last January's Presidential and Legislative elections are a landmark in Taiwan's political history. For the first time, the DPP secured the majority in the Legislative Yuan (LY), whereas previously, the Kuomintang had always succeeded in keeping the majority of the seats. As such, the January 2016

¹ CHEN Wei-han for the Taipei Times, "Tsai's approval rating hits new low", Tue, Nov 29, 2016: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2016/11/29/2003660199>

² Su Fang-ho and William Hetherington for the Taipei Times, "Former president Lee urges Tsai to lead Taiwan without fear of Beijing", Sun, Nov 27, 2016: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2016/11/27/2003660077>

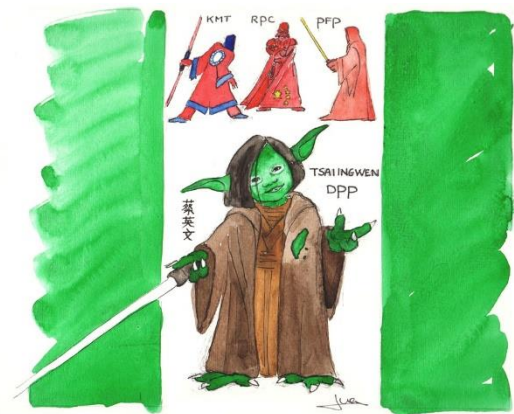
elections mark the first total transition of power since the lifting of the Martial Law in 1987³.



The three former presidential candidates, James Soong for the PFP, Eric Chu for the KMT, and Tsai Ing-wen for the DPP, source: CHUCK CHEN / POOL / AFP

For Michael J. Cole, *“Tsai landslide victory gave the mandate (Tsai Ing-wen) needed to approach China with confidence and the ability to stand firm on the fundamentals that are non-negotiable to the Taiwanese, such as protection of their nation’s democratic system”*.⁴

Tsai Ing-wen was elected with 56.1% of the popular vote and the DPP secured a comfortable majority of 68 seats out of 113 in the Legislative Yuan. This will give the new coalition in power a very strong mandate and great length to implement its program. The DPP has succeeded in convincing the Taiwanese that it renewed its shape and discourse between 2012 and 2016; built an image of a responsible political party, departed from its deep green stance and secured a good relationship with the United States. All the same, its cadres are younger and Tsai has ridden the wave of the Sunflower Movement.



Tsai Ing-wen seen by the artist Ivan Gros, Copyright: Ivan Gros

Tsai was elected thanks to popular resentment against Ma Ying-jeou’s inability to secure Taiwan’s economic growth and social well-being. The new administration is now largely awaited for on these specific grounds. Also, Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP will have to find the correct middle line between Taiwan, hostile China and the most radical voices of the

³ LE PESANT Tanguy for Le Monde Diplomatique, «*Taiwan en quête de souveraineté économique*», May 2016, page 20: <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2016/05/LEPESANT/55448>

⁴ COLE Michael J., *“Taiwan’s New President Likely to Surprise on Cross-Strait Ties”* for Thinking Taiwan.com, January 25, 2016: <http://thinking-taiwan.com/taiwans-new-president-likely-to-surprise-on-cross-strait-ties/>

deep greens, advocating for an immediate *de jure* (opposed to *de facto*) independence of Taiwan.

Let's have a closer look on Tsai's promises and challenges ahead...

TSAI'S DOMESTIC POLICY PROSPECTS

Fix divisiveness inside Taiwan politics

For Michael J. Cole, Taiwan politicians have to "*leave behind the zero-sum approach*" to politics⁵. During the Tainan Feb.6, 2016 earthquake, DPP Mayor William Lai (賴清德) was attacked despite his great efforts to face the disaster. Such divisions have only one certain outcome: the weakening of the country and the loss of credibility of its administration. Differences over symbolic matters should not hinder the realization of a long-term policy anymore. In sum, unity and responsiveness to the country's issues have to be strengthened. To highlight her goal, Tsai ended her May 20th inaugural speech with a plea for unity:

*"The new government's duty is to move Taiwan's democracy forward to the next stage. Before, democracy was a showdown between two opposing values. Now, democracy is a conversation between many diverse values."*⁶

To achieve unity, President Tsai Ing-wen is striving to initiate consensus within the whole political spectrum. Past disputes and divisions indicate that the road ahead is a long one. However, DPP's strong mandate will enable Tsai to undertake major reforms, without fearing the reaction of a conservative KMT held Legislative Yuan⁷.

In particular, she is working to convince ex-blue servants and competent assets of previous Ma Ying jeou administration to serve under a DPP government⁸. She has already began such a program by appointing staff affiliated to the Kuomintang like the new Minister of Foreign Affairs – a decision which shows that Tsai Ing-wen prefers the consolidation and the stability of her power over big bang politics⁹. In the meantime, Tsai might have to give length to renewal by dismissing some of her old supports.¹⁰

⁵ COLE Michael J., "*Taiwan needs unity*" for Thinking Taiwan.com, February 16; 2016: <http://thinking-taiwan.com/taiwan-needs-unity/>

⁶ TIEZZI Shannon, "*It's Official: Taiwan Has a New President*" for the Diplomat, May 20th, 2016: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/its-official-taiwan-has-a-new-president/>

⁷ CORCUFF Stéphane, "*Taiwan : 2016, début d'une nouvelle ère*", for the Asialyst.com, May 19th, 2016: <https://asialyst.com/fr/2016/05/19/taiwan-2016-debut-d-une-nouvelle-ere/>

⁸ COLE Michael J., "*Taiwan needs unity*" for Thinking Taiwan.com, February 16; 2016: <http://thinking-taiwan.com/taiwan-needs-unity/>

⁹ CORCUFF Stéphane, "*Taiwan : 2016, début d'une nouvelle ère*", for the Asialyst.com, May 19th, 2016: <https://asialyst.com/fr/2016/05/19/taiwan-2016-debut-d-une-nouvelle-ere/>

¹⁰ COLE Michael J., "*Taiwan needs unity*" for Thinking Taiwan.com, February 16; 2016: <http://thinking-taiwan.com/taiwan-needs-unity/>

A mandate placed under the sign of economic reforms

During her May 20th inaugural discourse, Tsai Ing-wen also emphasized economic issues. *“Let us leave behind the prejudices and conflicts of the past, and together fulfill the mission that the new era has entrusted to us,”* (...) *“At this moment and as president, I declare to the citizens of this country that my administration will demonstrate resolve in spearheading this country’s reform, and will never back down.”*, Tsai said.¹¹

Contrary to what most people assume outside of Taiwan, the 2016 electoral campaign, just like the others, relied more on economic issues than on the cross-strait relationship. As a result, the Taiwanese are mainly waiting for improvements on economic grounds, especially the youth, who had placed their hopes in Tsai after Ma Ying-jeou ignored the issue of stagnant salaries and rises in housing prices.¹² The new administration plans to encourage the development of a new generation top-tier industry in 5 different fields: green sources of energy, biotechnologies, connected devices, smart machines and national defense. Public funds will likely be invested in R&D (research and development) and high tech enterprises.¹³ Tsai Ing-wen also made the promise that Taiwan would be “liberated” from the nuclear power by 2025, whereas 20% of Taiwan’s electric consumption still relies on this source of energy¹⁴.

All the same, Tsai Ing-wen seems to have acknowledged the need to increase the efforts to develop the domestic defense industry, in order to depend less upon the United States for acquiring the much needed military supply¹⁵. As such, she declared in Washington in June 2015 that she would increase Taiwan’s defense capabilities with the objective of creating a credible deterrence against the PLA and promised the creation of 1,000 jobs, especially in the missile industry. Finally, a cyber-force should be created in order to efficiently neutralize PLA cyberwarfare and cyberespionage options.¹⁶

However, to fulfill her promises, Tsai will have to rectify Taiwan’s economic decline. The economic growth of Taiwan has recently showed great signs of strain; between 2008 and 2013, Taiwan GDP has grown with an average rate of 3.3% compared to 6.7% between 2000 and 2008¹⁷. In 2015, this number fell to 0.75% with the country entering recession in the last two quarters of the year. On this specific matter, there are high risks that Tsai Ing-wen will disappoint the Taiwanese. The economy isn’t something that someone can fix rapidly.

¹¹ **TIEZZI** Shannon, *“It’s Official: Taiwan Has a New President”* for the Diplomat, May 20th, 2016: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/its-official-taiwan-has-a-new-president/>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ **LE PESANT** Tanguy for Le Monde Diplomatique, *«Taiwan en quête de souveraineté économique»*, May 2016, page 20: <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2016/05/LEPESANT/55448>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ **CHUNG** Jack, *“Tsai unveils ambitious national defense policy”* for the Taipei Times, October 30, 2015: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2015/10/30/2003631276>

¹⁶ **LE PESANT** Tanguy for Le Monde Diplomatique, *«Taiwan en quête de souveraineté économique»*, May 2016, page 20: <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2016/05/LEPESANT/55448>

¹⁷ **LE PESANT** Tanguy for Le Monde Diplomatique, *«Taiwan en quête de souveraineté économique»*, May 2016, page 20: <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2016/05/LEPESANT/55448>

Tsai Ing-wen's social and judicial reform proposals

During her inaugural speech, Tsai Ing-wen laid the founding values of her mandate: transparency, accountability, equality¹⁸. These three words resonate with the main critics of Ma Ying-jeou's poor management and secret talks with China.

On the social front, Taiwan's unemployment level is as high as 4% and the working conditions are hardening¹⁹. Social inequalities are also rising and the average monthly outcome is stagnating (44,739 NTD, about 1225 euros).²⁰ To address such deficiencies, Tsai announced pension reform, better wealth redistribution, augmentation of the minimum wage, creation of new social housing and reduction in the working time legal limit (42 to 40 weekly hours).²¹

On the judicial front, she said: *"The general sentiment is that the judicial system is not close to the people, and is not trusted by them. (...) It is unable to fight crime effectively, and has lost its function as the last line of defense for justice."*²² Tsai promised the creation of a "Truth and Reconciliation Commission inside the Presidential Office", which will fulfill her promise to address the harsh years of the White Terror and the Chiang Kai-shek dictatorship crimes²³. She also paid special attention to the Aborigines tribes.

Then, Tsai will have to address the critics on the on-going existence of the death penalty in Taiwan²⁴. The debate has restarted following the condemnation to death of the man who attacked a group of people with a knife killing 4 in Taipei MRT in 2014, as well as the decapitation of a 4-year-old girl in March 2016²⁵. Both incidents sparked indignation in the country.

PROSPECTS OF CROSS-STRAIT DEVELOPMENTS AND ENSURING SOVEREIGNTY

A moderate President

Tsai has proven to be a moderate on cross-strait issues and she has made steps toward Beijing while promoting pacific, stable, calm and long-lasting relationships with the PRC.

¹⁸ TIEZZI Shannon, *"It's Official: Taiwan Has a New President"* for the Diplomat, May 20th, 2016: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/its-official-taiwan-has-a-new-president/>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ LE PESANT Tanguy for Le Monde Diplomatique, *«Taiwan en quête de souveraineté économique»*, May 2016, page 20: <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2016/05/LEPESANT/55448>

²¹ Ibid.

²² As cited in: TIEZZI Shannon, *"It's Official: Taiwan Has a New President"* for the Diplomat, May 20th, 2016: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/its-official-taiwan-has-a-new-president/>

²³ PEDROLETTI Brice, *«A Taiwan, la prochaine présidente promet la vérité sur les massacres de Tchang Kai-chek»*, for Lemonde.fr, March 2, 2016: http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/asi-pacifique/article/2016/03/02/a-taiwan-la-prochaine-presidente-promet-la-verite-sur-les-massacres-de-tchang-kai-chek_4875007_3216.html

²⁴ CASTER Michael, *"Taiwan: Can Tsai Ing-Wen Change the Politics of Death?"* for the Diplomat.com, February 10, 2016: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/taiwan-can-tsai-ing-wen-change-the-politics-of-death/7/>

²⁵ IZADI Elahe, *"4-year-old girl's decapitation in Taiwan sparks outrage and death penalty debate"* for the Washington Post, March 29, 2016: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/03/29/4-year-old-girls-decapitation-in-taiwan-sparks-outrage-and-death-penalty-debate/>

²⁶ To this end, she highlighted that she would not backtrack on the ECFA, to the exception of the CSSTA, which sparked the Sunflower Movement and which has not been ratified by the LY.

Tsai supports the status quo between China and Taiwan²⁷. She reflects the position of the large majority of the Taiwanese who find that ensuring the status quo equals ensuring the *de facto* independence of Taiwan without endangering the stability of the relations in the strait. But given Beijing's hostility toward the DPP, whose clause still contain a reference to the *de jure* independence of Taiwan, Tsai will have to play a tough game reassuring Beijing without compromising with the hopes of Taiwanese in favor of *de jure* independence of Taiwan.

Another one of her priorities will be to safeguard Taiwan's voice in international negotiations. In late April 2016, Kenyan authorities expelled Taiwanese thugs from their territory, who were then transferred directly to China. Taiwan had not even been consulted, and was deprived the possibility to judge the criminals. The country was shocked yet again by such a development and even Ma Ying-jeou was embarrassed since this decision confirmed the failure of its "Diplomatic Truce" policy²⁸.

Being a former head of the Mainland Affairs Council (Taiwan's organism in charge of the discussion with China), Tsai is a well-trained cross-strait negotiator. To appease Beijing, she said that she would not be against meeting a Chinese leader, and opinion polls show that the Taiwanese would support such a meeting if it follows Taiwan's democratic procedures²⁹. A second meeting could give Taiwan some recognition as well as confirming that Tsai is ready to discuss matters constructively with the Chinese.

It is now up to Beijing to respond and set up a second meeting or not.

Non-recognition of the 1992 Consensus

Beijing is putting great pressures on Tsai Ing-wen to recognize the so-called 1992 consensus (an agreement that there is one China, which allows both Taipei and Beijing to define "China" differently) as the prerequisite for cross-strait discussions.

²⁶ LE PESANT Tanguy for Le Monde Diplomatique, «*Taiwan en quête de souveraineté économique*», May 2016, page 20: <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2016/05/LEPESANT/55448>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ CORCUFF Stéphane, "Taiwan : 2016, début d'une nouvelle ère", for the Asialyst.com, May 19th, 2016: <https://asialyst.com/fr/2016/05/19/taiwan-2016-debut-d-une-nouvelle-ere/>

²⁹ COLE Michael J., "Taiwan's New President Likely to Surprise on Cross-Strait Ties" for Thinking Taiwan.com, January 25, 2016: <http://thinking-taiwan.com/taiwans-new-president-likely-to-surprise-on-cross-strait-ties/>



**Tsai on inauguration day, May 20th 2016.
Taiwanese Presidents still swear an oath in front
of Sun's portrait, the father of the ROC.**

During her inaugural discourse, Tsai's approach was not to clearly talk about the "1992 consensus" and remained vague about it. Tsai acknowledged during her inaugural speech that discussions between the two sides took place in 1992 and that *"both sides had a common agreement to set aside differences and seek common ground"*³⁰. That said, Tsai reminded everyone that the so-called "1992 consensus" was nothing more than an informal meeting which laid the foundation for China and Taiwan to "agree to disagree"³¹.

According to Wen-Cheng Lin, president of the Institute for National Policy Research, such a vague approach enables Beijing to make its own interpretation of whether or not the "1992 consensus"*is included in the "existing political

framework" Tsai has accepted.³² With this foundation, Tsai tried to arrange its position between those in her electorate who are more pro *de jure* independence and Beijing.

Beijing has expressed its dissatisfaction with Tsai's ambiguity. After her discourse, the Chinese relied on their classic anti-independence stance warning that the "pro-independence movements are the main obstacles for peace in the Taiwan Strait". The PRC has appealed to Tsai Ing-wen to clarify her position on her declarations, but nothing shows that Tsai Ing-wen will depart from her ambiguity. Tsai Ing-wen, before she turned moderate on cross-strait issues, was known to be one of the architects of Lee Teng-hui's 1995 speech at Deutsche Welle about "special state-to-state relations" between China and Taiwan³³. Remembering this former pro-independence stance, the Chinese might apply the same suspicion to Tsai they applied to Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) when he was still a moderate at the beginning of his mandate in 2000 (he became a staunch advocate of Taiwan's *de jure* independence afterwards).

Ma Xiaoguang, spokesman of PRC's Bureau of Taiwan's Affairs said: *"I reiterate that the mainland and Taiwan belong to one China and that the cross-strait relations are not ones between two different states"*³⁴. As such, the PRC repeats the argument Stéphane Corcuff had shown in his article about the pro-unificationist forces: The Chinese make use of

³⁰ As cited in: COLE Michael J., *"Taiwan's New President Likely to Surprise on Cross-Strait Ties"* for Thinking Taiwan.com, January 25, 2016: <http://thinking-taiwan.com/taiwans-new-president-likely-to-surprise-on-cross-strait-ties/>

³¹ The expression of "1992 consensus" had been created in 2000 by a KMT minister and since then, this mental construction justifies PRC's position on unification with Taiwan. In 1992, Taiwan's politics were still undemocratic, consequently the KMT has never been mandated to negotiate the accords, which, anyway, have no written basis.

³² As cited in: TIEZZI Shannon, *"It's Official: Taiwan Has a New President"* for the Diplomat, May 20th, 2016: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/its-official-taiwan-has-a-new-president/>

³³ CHEN Dingding, *"Without Clarity on 1992 Consensus, Tsai and DPP Will Face Challenges Ahead"* for The Diplomat, May 25, 2016: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/without-clarity-on-1992-consensus-tsai-and-dpp-will-face-challenges-ahead/>

³⁴ XINHUA (France), *"La nouvelle dirigeante de Taiwan doit clarifier sa position sur la nature des relations entre les deux rives (porte-parole)"*, May 25, 2016: http://french.xinhuanet.com/2016-05/25/c_135387231.htm

statements of principle, which avoid any argumentation and only seek to strike what they think is true³⁵.

The Chinese warned that any non-recognition of the “1992 consensus” would lead to the immediate cease of cross-strait talks. The PRC makes use of Orwellian newspeak by accusing Taiwan to be the one threatening peace in the strait. But, it is not Tsai Ing-wen who is threatening peace, it is the Chinese. As a result of this intimidation, Medias showed that the Taiwanese are starting to fear China’s reactions. The Taiwanese supported the recognition of the “1992 consensus” by 40% on May 24th, 2016³⁶ but dropped afterwards. The future remains wide open.

Is Tsai’s future deadlock being caught between Beijing and the Greens?

Tsai has been elected for what she is: a DPP candidate and she is perceived as an “independentist”. Tsai Ing-wen is thus awaited on the field of political emancipation by all deep green supporters, who say that the maintenance of the status quo is not enough and that Taiwan should take more serious steps to achieve formal *de jure* independence (change the name of the ROC in “Republic of Taiwan”, change the constitution...).

In fact, potential detractors of Tsai’s future policies are still numerous. If Tsai is constrained to depart from her position over China and has, for instance, to recognize the “1992 consensus”, she might lose a large part of her supporters. The risk here is to revive faction politics, to the advantage of resentful DPP leaders who have been sidelined after post-election job hunt³⁷. ■

³⁵ CORCUFF Stéphane, « Les partisans de l’unification face à la Taiwanisation », Perspectives Chinoises, 82 – Mars/Avril 2004 : <http://perspectiveschinoises.revues.org/1352>

³⁶ Taipei Times, “Poll shows support for ‘1992 consensus’ recognition”, May 24, 2016: <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2016/05/24/2003647004>

³⁷ LIN Zhimin and WANG Jianwei, “Tsai Ing-wen’s Limited Options on Cross-Strait Relations” for The Diplomat.com, May 18, 2016: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/tsai-ing-wens-limited-options-on-cross-strait-relations/>

ASIA FOCUS #11

SCHOLARLY HANDLING CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS: Tsai presidency

BY

HUGO TIERNY/ FORMER STUDENT OF THE CATHOLIC INSTITUTE OF PARIS

DECEMBER 2016

Hugo Tierny is a former student of the Catholic Institute of Paris, from which he obtained a Master Degree in Geopolitics and International Security. He is currently living in Taipei, Taiwan to pursue his studies of the island. This article is originally part of his Master thesis, aiming to provide readers with a broad understanding of Taiwan's relations to China, in the wake of Tsai Ing-wen's elections and whereas nation building on the island is completing. It is entitled: Taiwan's relation to China in 2016, so near and yet so far (2016).

ASIA FOCUS

Collection sous la direction de Barthélémy COURMONT, directeur de recherche à l'IRIS, maître de conférence à l'Université catholique de Lille, et Emmanuel LINCOT, Professeur à l'Institut Catholique de Paris – UR « Religion, culture et société » (EA 7403) et sinologue.
courmont@iris-france.org – emmanuel.lincot@gmail.com

PROGRAMME ASIE

Sous la direction de Barthélémy COURMONT, directeur de recherche à l'IRIS, maître de conférence à l'Université catholique de Lille.
courmont@iris-france.org

© IRIS

All rights reserved

INSTITUT DE RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES ET STRATÉGIQUES

2 bis rue Mercoeur

75011 PARIS / France

T. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60

contact@iris-france.org

@InstitutIRIS

www.iris-france.org