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Election win for Trump: A more turbulent future for Taiwan.

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Summary

It was a nail-biting campaign, putting two very opposite personalities and very different policy choices against each other. Vice President Kamala Harris and her running mate Tim Walz crisscrossed the so-called Swing States – where a win or lose in even one or two states could determine the Electoral College outcome – while former President Donald Trump and his running mate JD Vance did the same. The campaign was closely contested, with immigration, abortion, and the economy dominating the headlines, while foreign policy received minimal attention.

Through the evening of 05 November, election night, it became increasingly clear that Donald Trump would regain the White House. The early lead that Kamala Harris had built up in the swing states of Georgia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan evaporated when the returns from the pro-Trump rural areas came in. At the time of this writing, Trump had passed the 270 Electoral College threshold with 301 votes, while Harris remained at 226, while for the popular vote Trump stood at 51% versus Harris' 47.5%.

In the Senate, the Republicans regained a majority with 52 against 46 for the Democrats, with two seats still to be called, while in the U.S. House of Representatives, the majority was still up in the air: Republicans had 213 wins, while the democrats were at 208, with 218 being the necessary number for a majority.

The results are highly consequential for Taiwan, its safety and security, and its future. In this essay we analyse what we can glean from the two camps by looking at the past pronouncements of the candidates and discuss how this can be seen as indicative of future policies.

We then lay out a number of policy recommendations that may help the new U.S. Administration, as well as other like-minded countries in the world, to assist Taiwan in finding its place and role in the international community. Summarised, these are as follows:

- First, it needs to be made clear to Beijing that the perpetuation of its current zero-sum strategy of military, economic and political pressure is not conducive to cross-Strait relations and that peace and stability across the Strait can only be achieved if China moves toward acceptance of Taiwan as a friendly neighbour.
- Second, the international community itself must reimagine its Taiwan relations. Democratic Taiwan of 2024 is not the same as the repressive Republic of China (ROC) of 1971 when the current 'One China' policies of the West were formulated. A new situation on-the-ground requires new policies.

- Third, in due time and at its own pace, Taiwan needs to reinvent itself and remove some of the remaining vestiges of the old and repressive KMT rule. This process has already been underway since the transition to democracy in the early 1990s, but it can be expected to accelerate under the newly elected government of President Lai Ching-te.

How did I.R. scholars look at the campaign?

But first, a look at the overall picture. In mid-October 2024, the Teaching, Research, and International Policy Project at William & Mary's Global Research Institute, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, surveyed I.R. scholars at U.S. colleges and universities about the consequences of the presidential election for U.S. foreign policy. The results reported below are based on responses from the 705 scholars who participated.ⁱ By significant margins, the experts surveyed expect stark differences between the policies Harris or Trump would pursue if elected president.

The two candidates diverge sharply on the climate crisis, U.S. membership in NATO, nuclear cooperation with Iran, trade, and foreign assistance. However, according to the scholars surveyed, the election results would have less of an effect when it comes to U.S. use of force and conflict escalation in the Middle East, Ukraine, and Taiwan. Just focusing on Taiwan and Ukraine, one needs to wonder if that would hold true, in particular if one examines Trump's positions, which we will do below.

Regardless of the candidates' policies, the I.R. experts saw a large gap between Harris and Trump in their *abilities* to manage foreign policy, command U.S. forces, and implement their agendas on the global stage. In that regard, the experts said, Trump doesn't make the grade.ⁱⁱ So, how do the positions of Harris and Trump on Taiwan differ? Below, we present an outline based on past pronouncements and views expressed.

What was Harris' position towards Taiwan during the past few years?

For Harris, the conventional wisdom was that she would provide a steady continuation of the policies of President Biden: gradually broadening and deepening relations with Taiwan while 'managing' relations with China.

To understand Biden's policies, one needs to go back to the Democrats' election platform, which contained the clause "future of Taiwan needs to be determined in accordance with the wishes and best interests of the people of Taiwan." This found its way into the 2022 White House Indo-Pacific Strategyⁱⁱⁱ and the 2022 Taiwan Policy Act, Senate Resolution S.4428, introduced in the Senate by then Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez.^{iv}

This clause was also the underlying reason for the four unequivocal statements made by President Biden that the U.S. would defend Taiwan in the case of a Chinese attack.^v

These are the rather clear pronouncements by President Biden himself, but what has Vice-President Harris said during the past few years?

It is true that she did not venture too often into the field regarding Taiwan and China, but she did on one specific occasion, which was during her September 2022 visit to Japan right after the visit to Taiwan by then House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, which prompted the Chinese to conduct major military exercises around Taiwan.^{vi}

During the September 2022 visit to Japan, she gave a speech on board the USS Howard (DDG 83) at Yokosuka Naval Base, in which she referred to: “China’s disturbing behaviour in the South China Sea and East China Sea and most recently provocations across the Taiwan Strait.”

She also added that “Taiwan is a vibrant democracy that contributes to the global good – from technology to health and beyond. The U.S. will continue to deepen our unofficial ties.”^{vii}

But since then, Taiwan has come up very little in the public pronouncements by Harris.^{viii} It did not come up directly during the August 2024 Democratic Convention in Chicago, although in her acceptance speech, Harris stated: “I will make sure that America – not China – wins the competition for the 21st Century, and that we strengthen – not abdicate our global leadership.”^{ix}

Also, the Democratic Party Platform contained the following: “The U.S. will continue to invest in our alliances and partnerships **to ensure China cannot coerce its neighbours or overturn the international rules that keep America secure and prosperous.**”^x

And finally, at a campaign stop in Detroit MI, a reporter asked Vice-President Harris: “the Chinese military has been doing drills around Taiwan, and Xi Jinping visited the province across from Taiwan. It’s raising pressure, obviously, on Taiwan. What is your position were there to be an invasion of Taiwan by the Chinese military under – if you were president at the time?” Harris responded by – saying that ‘Taiwan has a right to defend itself.’^{xi}

What was Trump’s position towards Taiwan during the past few years?

It is true that Taiwan did quite well under the 2017-2020 Trump administration, with increased arms sales, more high-level visits and enhanced economic relations. The national security and defence team under Trump – people like John Bolton and Matt Poettinger at the NSC, Randy Schriver at DOD, and David Stilwell at State – helped push things in the right direction for Taiwan, in spite of Trump’s own flailing and disturbing antics, and his repeated statements of being such good friends with Xi Jinping.

The problem is that none of these positive views and policies filtered up to Trump himself. As evidence of his state of mind, below are a few quotes from him about Taiwan

in the period 2020 until the present, with the most recent pronouncements from an interview with Joe Rogan, only a few days ago.

In a 23 August 2020 interview with Fox News, host Steve Hilton asked Trump, “If China tries to either invade Taiwan or effectively take control of it and its important industries, would you let them get away with it?” Trump responded, “China knows what I’m going to do. They know. I think this isn’t the right forum to discuss it. I don’t want to say I’m going to do this or that—I just don’t think it’s appropriate to talk about it here.” However, to close observers of U.S. policy towards Taiwan, this does sound like the ultimate form of vague ambiguity.

In an interview with NBC News on 17 September 2023, Trump was asked by host Kristen Welker: “if China were to invade Taiwan, have you made a determination, would you send the U.S. military into Taiwan if President Xi were to invade?” Trump’s response: “I won’t say. Because if I said, I’m giving away – You know, only stupid people are going to give that ... You can’t say that. So, when you ask me that question, I would never say that. Because you give away all your options.”^{xii} Again, this represents total ambiguity with regard to defending Taiwan. It stands in sharp contrast with the four or even five times President Biden responded with a clear and firm ‘yes,’ when asked the same question.

On 21 January 2024, during a Fox News segment, host Maria Bartiromo asked Donald Trump: “Will, under a hypothetical second Trump presidency, the U.S. protect Taiwan from Chinese aggression even if it meant going to war with China?” Trump declined to give a firm answer, but did suggest discontent with Taiwan for allegedly taking semiconductor business away from the U.S.^{xiii} However, the ‘They are stealing our chip business’ meme—which was deemed totally incorrect by prominent experts in the semiconductor field,^{xiv} already came up in an earlier interview with Bartiromo on 16 July 2023.

But the most extreme positions came in an interview with Bloomberg/Businessweek published on 16 July 2024, when he was asked ‘Would you defend Taiwan against China?’ Trump did not respond directly to the question but started rambling again that Taiwan had taken almost 100% of the American chip business away, that it should pay for its own defence (which it is doing) and that ‘Taiwan doesn’t give us anything.’

But to add insult to injury, Trump added: “Taiwan is 9,500 miles away. It’s 68 miles away from China. (both numbers off by some 30% - GvdW) and China’s a massive piece of land, they could just bombard it. I mean, they can literally just send shells. They don’t want to do that because they don’t want to lose all those chip plants. But I will tell you, that’s the apple of President Xi’s eye, he was a very good friend of mine. Same thing with Putin.”^{xv} By all measures, this was another incredibly ambiguous statement, indicative of his bewildering frame of mind. Not a single word about defending Taiwan or deterring China.

And last but not least, on 25 October 2024, in his three-hour interview with podcaster Joe Rogan, Trump repeated his unfounded criticisms of Taiwan, stating that Taiwan ‘stole’ the U.S. semi-conductor industry and ‘don’t pay us money for the protection’ from a possible Chinese invasion attempt. He also suggested that stiff tariffs on Taiwanese semi-conductor imports would be more prudent than an investment to rebuild that industry in the U.S. through the CHIPS and Science Act.^{xvi}

Where do we go from here under a Trump administration?

Thus, what can we expect under a Trump administration? As shown above, his personal views, likes and dislikes are all over the place, and the policies which will be shaped as the Administration is formed will bear the stamp of his more transactional approach, less wedded to building alliances with like-minded countries and more geared towards the perceived self-interest of the United States.

In the first Trump administration, his erratic tendencies were to a certain extent dampened by capable officials like Secretaries of Defence Jim Mattis and Mark Espy and National Security advisers H.R. McMaster and John Bolton, who made sure that there were guardrails that prevented worse. It remains to be seen if, in a second term such checks and balances would exist, as Trump has placed personal loyalty front and centre in his requirements for people serving his government.

Of the current top four foreign affairs and security aides of Trump – former ambassador Richard Grenell, former 3-star general Keith Kellogg, former national security advisor Robert O’Brien and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo – both O’Brien and Pompeo have an affinity for Taiwan and have spoken out for closer relations. But both Grenell and Kellogg are very much ‘America First’ isolationists who would care less about Taiwan and its future.^{xvii}

On the other hand, there is a second tier of aides – such as Messrs. Alexander Gray, Stephen Yates, Miles Yu, and Bridge Colby – who might rise to positions of influence and who would push support for Taiwan front and centre on the agenda of Trump. In addition, both the mainstream and the right side of the political spectrum within the Republican Party have always been very supportive of Taiwan. It will be interesting to see how these politicians would deal with a situation in which Trump distances himself from Taiwan.

In addition, Congress has traditionally also played a positive role in shaping policies towards Taiwan, ever since the passage of the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979. Taiwan is one of the few issues where one has seen strong bipartisan support, and Congress has generally leaned forward by pushing for Taiwan-friendly legislation, especially during the past half-decade since the passage of the Taiwan Travel Act in 2018 and the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019.

What will happen in the next four years in US-Taiwan-China relations? Trump’s views and inclinations will be the major determining factor of the overall policies, but –

depending on who is in what position – the views and attitudes of his lieutenants can significantly impact the way in which these policies are implemented towards Taiwan. On November 11, 2024, two choices were announced that actually bode well for Taiwan. Both Marco Rubio (prospective Secretary of State) and Mike Waltz (prospective NSC advisor) are very familiar with and supportive of Taiwan. Waltz visited Taiwan two years ago,^{xviii} and Rubio has, over the years introduced several strongly pro-Taiwan resolutions, the most recent one as late as April 2024.^{xix}

Towards a peaceful coexistence as friendly neighbours

Against this background, what would be the best way forward in the coming years? First, it needs to be made clear to Beijing that perpetuation of the current zero-sum strategy of military, economic and political pressure is not conducive to cross-Strait relations and that peace and stability across the Strait can only be achieved if China moves toward acceptance of Taiwan as a friendly neighbour.

This cannot be done by the U.S. alone but could be achieved through a coalition of like-minded countries, who jointly convince China to move into a more conciliatory direction vis-à-vis Taiwan. President Biden had shown adept at forming such coalitions, and Harris would have been expected to continue this approach. But it is uncertain how Trump will handle these alliances.

Interestingly, ‘peaceful coexistence’ is historically a key concept in China’s foreign policy: the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’ were enunciated by then-CCP chairman Mao Zedong (毛澤東) and then-Premier Zhou Enlai (周恩來) before a conference in 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia. At the conference, China courted the many newly independent countries that were organising themselves in the Non-Aligned Movement headed by then-Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and then-Indonesian President Sukarno.^{xx} It would be good if the international community could at least attempt to convince the PRC to apply these principles to its relations with Taiwan.

Second, the international community itself must reimagine its Taiwan relations. Democratic Taiwan of 2024 is not the same as the repressive Republic of China (ROC) of 1971 when the current ‘One China’ policies of the West were formulated.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Taiwan made a momentous transition to democracy and is eager to move out of the diplomatic isolation imposed on it by its complicated past. The U.S., Western Europe, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, in particular, need to look at Taiwan in its light and its own right.

We need to look at this new situation on-the-ground and, bring Taiwan in from the cold of political isolation and start working toward a gradual normalisation of relations. Under the principle of universality as enshrined in the UN Charter, we also need to start supporting Taiwan as a full and equal member of the international family of nations.

Third, in due time and at its own pace, Taiwan needs to reinvent itself and remove some of the remaining vestiges of the old and repressive KMT rule. This process has already been underway since the transition to democracy in the early 1990s, but it can be expected to accelerate under the newly elected government of President Lai Ching-te.

These three interrelated processes need to take place concurrently if there is to be peaceful coexistence and Taiwan is to have a bright future as a free and democratic nation that is accepted as a full and equal member of the international community.

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