Carrying on the Chronicles of the Taiwan Issue

The last article on the Taiwan issue in NEO focused on the referendum held on December 18 2021, on four questions. Of those four questions, only one has any real foreign policy implications, touching as it does on the relations between Taiwan’s current leadership and Washington, its main supporter in the international community.

The referendum attracted considerable global interest, primarily in terms of its possible effect on the island’s future relations with its powerful neighbor across the Taiwan Strait. The answer to the question of whether China will opt for a non-peaceful solution to the above issue, which would clearly involve considerable risks (certainly for the region and possibly for the wider world) will largely depend on the answer to another question - that of how much support the governing pro-Independence (or “separatist”) Democratic Progressive Party, led by Tsai Ing-wen, current President of Taiwan, enjoys in the country.

The DPP, under Ms. Tsai, has headed Taiwan’s legislature and executive branches since 2016. But the next general election will be held at the beginning of 2024 (which is not far away), and observers are already beginning to speculate about the possible outcome of the vote.

When discussing future voting patterns, the key data includes the results of the above referendum. However, because of the low turnout (for a number of reasons, discussed earlier, 60% of the population failed to vote) neither of the two options - “yes” or “no” - obtained the support of 25% of the voting population, the threshold for a valid result. But there is another striking reason for the referendum’s failure - the votes cast by the minority who actually participated in the elections were split almost equally between the two options.

As it was, a “yes” vote on all four questions was supported by Kuomintang apparatchiks, while the DPP and President...
Tsai Ing-wen campaigned for a “no” vote. The (failed) referendum thus mainly served as an indication of the public's attitudes to the two main political parties on the island. And while the votes were almost even, on all four issues the DPP beat the Kuomintang by a margin of 1-3%.

The voting pattern in the referendum has been broadly replicated in other, apparently much less significant events, including votes in Taipei’s Fifth Electoral District on January 9, 2022 and in the 2nd District of Taichung, Taiwan's third city. In the first of those cases, the vote was on the reinstatement of an independent MP representing the District, who had been ousted from the national parliament by the Kuomintang. The second vote was a by-election to fill a vacant seat in the parliament. Both of the above votes turned into a contest between the DPP and the Kuomintang, with campaigning from the same party officials on both sides, including the President. And in both cases the governing party won by a small margin. Thus, in the Taichung by-election the DPP candidate was elected to the national parliament with 52.3% of the votes cast, while her Kuomintang rival won 47.7%.

Once again, it was a narrow margin, but nevertheless it represented a setback for the Kuomintang, and its leadership appear to accept that they will need to make some changes to the strategy and tactics they adopt in their political campaigns. Especially since at the end of this year there will be another important vote - the mayoral elections.

Readers will remember that in the last mayoral elections in November 2018 the Kuomintang won a convincing victory over the DPP, thus reversing the defeat it had suffered in January 2016’s parliamentary and presidential elections. It was the 2016 elections that first brought Tsai Ing-wen, the DPP’s charismatic leader, to the presidency. Her low point came just two and a half years after that triumph, in November 2018, when her party suffered a heavy defeat and she was even forced to step down as party leader for a while. But just a few months later she was reappointed to the party leadership, which did a great deal to pave the way for the DPP’s victory in the January 2020 general elections and her reelection as President of Taiwan.

Eric Chu, the current leader of the Kuomintang, clearly lacks the striking political charisma of his main rival, to whom he lost the 2016 presidential elections. He has already accepted responsibility for his party’s defeat in the January 9, 2022 elections, even though he had only taken up his (second) term as head of the Kuomintang three months earlier. In his comments on the results, Mr. Chu talked of his party’s plans to form a coalition with another opposition party in a bid to defeat their opponent in the next elections.

Among other significant developments, of particular interest is the comment by an unnamed representative of Tsai Ing-wen’s administration concerning her wish for Taiwan to join US President Joe Biden’s so-called Indo-Pacific economic framework. Apparently, she will raise this issue during the upcoming meeting of the regional Big Four - the US, Japan, India and Australia.

It is important to note a few points here. Firstly, discussions on this new economic initiative, which would be a regional competitor to China’s successful Belt and Road Initiative, began long before Joe Biden was elected to the White House. However, as yet there have been no actual results. But if the talks do finally come to fruition then this will be in line with the Biden administration’s overall foreign policy priorities: it sees the fight for influence in developing countries as a key element of its policy of countering China’s geopolitical ambitions.

As for Taiwan, its (possible) accession to the US initiative mentioned above would also help to promote its status as an sovereign nation, both in the wider international community and specifically in its relations with mainland China. Tsai Ing-wen had previously declared that she wanted Taiwan to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a regional body of which Japan is the unofficial leader, which is playing an increasingly prominent role in the discussions concerning the Taiwan issue.

Naturally - given the difficult relations between Taiwan’s “separatist” government and mainland China, all the above foreign policy initiatives run counter to the latter’s interests. At the end of 2020 Beijing vetoed Taipei’s attempts to accede to the recently-concluded Agreement on the creation of another regional body, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

It is worth noting that the next general elections, which, as discussed above, are due to be held at the beginning of 2024, represent the only chance of Taiwan’s current or “separatist” government being replaced by one that China finds easier to work with. But that seems a long time to wait. And, as the author has mentioned, at the moment the chances of the Kuomintang returning to power seem rather slim. Given the increasing urgency of the Taiwan issue, which involves the two leading global powers, it is very possible that not everyone involved in the process will make it to the 2024 elections.
In a videoconference held on January 15 the well-known conservative geopolitical commentator and historian Niall Ferguson (a former adviser to US Senator John McCain) made some predictions concerning possible developments in the Taiwan Strait over the next two years - comments which did not escape the notice of the PRC. In his view, after the XX Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, to be held in October this year, China may “ramp up pressure on Taiwan” for a number of reasons, possibly connected to its internal problems. Mr. Ferguson believes that now is the time for the USA and its leading allies (primarily Japan) to begin preparing deterrent measures in order to rein in China’s ambitions.

In response, the Chinese Global Times published an editorial casting doubt on Mr. Ferguson’s understanding of the Taiwan issue and emphasizing that external factors (such as any position that the US and its allies might adopt) would be at the bottom of the PRC’s list of considerations when deciding on a strategy in relation to the Taiwan issue. Everything will depend, it continued, on the policy adopted by Taiwan’s current government.

If that last statement is to be relied on, then one can only wish the Kuomintang can bounce back and win the 2024 general election.

That would be in the interests of all concerned - particularly the people of Taiwan.

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