

## **Weekly Commentary 47 – Nov 2022**

### *How Another Week Ends the Great Debate Over the Possibility of War in the Taiwan Straits*

Last week, we had good news coming out of the G20 meetings in Bali, when the leaders of China and the US met to lower tensions between the two countries. That event was a big step towards calming nerves about a possible conflict in the Taiwan Straits between the two superpowers, over independence for Taiwan, which many people feared would a point of major geopolitical confrontation in the Western Pacific.

This week, those tensions have been reduced further. In fact, by a lot.

This is due to the outcome of the local elections in Taiwan over the weekend. These were elections for the political leadership of several cities and counties on the island, and by the end of Saturday, the opposition Kuomintang captured 13 out of 21 seats, including the crucial mayorship of Taipeh. The ruling DPP were left with a measly clutch of five seats in the south of the island.

The Democratic Progressive Party led by Tsai Ing-wen, who has been championing Taiwanese independence, lost badly in these elections. The pro-China opposition party, the Kuomintang, won in such a huge landslide, that Tsai was compelled to resign her chairmanship in the DPP. While these elections do not change the government in Taipeh immediately, the presidential elections are just a little over a year away, in Jan 2024, and these local elections for the posts of city mayors and county chiefs, have traditionally influenced the outcome of the following presidential elections. In particular, the mayor of Taipeh city will have a good chance to be the next president. In the weekend's polls, this post has been won by a great grandson of Chiang Kai-sek, who was the leader of the KMT and of the first government in Taiwan, a historical giant.

It is likely that should the revival of the KMT's political fortunes continue, and they get to lead the next government after Jan 2024, then the DPP effort to distance Taiwan from the Mainland will end, as the KMT has, until they lost power in 2016, been building bridges to Beijing to unify both territories. It was Tsai and her DPP that had sought to make a case for non-cooperation with China, trying to instil a false sense that Taiwan is an independent "country", that had led to the Americans coming in to use Taiwan as an excuse to contain China's development. Now with the DPP likely to lose power, the path to peaceful unification of the two entities on both sides of the Taiwan Straits will resume under KMT rule.

Even if the KMT does not win in 2024, the DPP will understand that the people are not interested in war and they will pipe down on talk about confronting the Mainland.

And the threat of a cross-Straits war will end.

As I have said before, nothing is obvious about a war over Taiwan. It all depends on who rules in Taipei.

I have written about this in previous Commentaries. When most of the western media were pushing the story that Taiwan would become another Ukraine, I said that two facts would render that improbable. The first was that Taiwan had no military capability of its own, and is completely reliant on the US, which would be reluctant to put boots on the ground, especially when it is not a foregone conclusion that the fight against the PLA would be a piece of cake. The second fact was that western media and the political class in the west had assumed that all of Taiwan's population bought into the DPP's notion that Taiwan is an independent state and wanted to resist reunification. As a fan of Taiwanese talk shows, I knew that is not the case. Ninety percent of Taiwan's population prefer to have the status quo, peaceful coexistence and to let the issue of reunification be settled in due course. Peacefully.

And half the population on the island support the KMT, whose policy is to pursue a path of gradual re-integration into a single China.

In particular, young Taiwanese have no wish to fight for independence. I believe if they have a choice, they would prefer independence; but die for it? No way. I thought that as long as the DPP remains in power, a threat of confrontation between Taiwan and the Mainland would exist, and offered Taiwan up as a pawn for the Americans to use to counter China, in much the same way Ukraine has been used to engage in a proxy war against the Russians. That would end as soon as the KMT regains power.

While that has not happened yet, the weekend's elections have changed the course of Taiwanese politics and brought back peaceful reunification as the most probable outcome of the situation in Taiwan. Two weekends in a row, and the threat to peace in the Western Pacific has been significantly reduced.

How did that happen so quickly? Even Tsai Ing-wen was caught by surprise by the backlash against her party. Just days ago, she has pitched these elections as a referendum on her government. She said that Taiwan will not compromise on its sovereignty or democracy, shortly after China hailed a proposal that the self-ruled island adopt a Hong Kong style governance (one country, two systems) model.

“The Beijing authorities should not make any misjudgement on account of Taiwan's vigorous democratic system,” Tsai had said during Taiwan's National Day speech on Oct 10. “They must not mistake there is room for compromise in the Taiwanese people's commitment to

democracy and freedom.” At that time, she was responding to a proposal by Elon Musk, Commander-in-Chief of Planet Earth, who had suggested that Taiwan should become a Hong Kong style special administrative zone of China. China had responded that this was the Chinese proposal all along, and reaffirmed that China would create ample space for peaceful reunification, but would not leave any space for Taiwan separatists and independence. The term “separatists” is generally used by China to refer to Tsai, her PM Su Tseng-chang and the top officials of the DPP.

Proposals for any form of integration with Beijing face resistance from the DPP government which the west generally takes as the view of all of Taiwan. Those of us who understand Chinese and follow Taiwanese news and opinions know that this is not true.

Tsai had made it a campaign issue this time that the plan of integration with China was not acceptable. “We must defend our national sovereignty and our free and democratic way of life,” she said. “On this point, we have no room for compromise.”

As it turns out, that was only her position. Her party’s position. It was certainly not the position of all of Taiwan’s 24 million people. It has always been the case that the opposition party, the Kuomintang, opposed independence and was working with China to find a peaceful way out of a historical abnormality. Obviously, if the KMT took over the reins of government, the clamour for independence would be over. And the Americans would not be able to exploit this rift between two Chinese communities to block the PRC’s rise.

The DPP also talked about Taiwan making a military service extension this year. In Oct, it announced that Taiwan will extend its four-month military conscription requirement by the end of the year. The Defence Minister, Chiu Kuo-cheng said “insufficient manpower in the military is one of the reasons for extending military service. Four months of service is not enough as threats from the enemy are now severe.”

That is actually an idiotic policy. A generation ago, the Taiwanese had the remnants of the KMT army that followed Chiang Kai-shek to escape from the Mainland in 1950 after decisive defeats in the Chinese civil war. Since then, that military capability has dissipated, as successful economic development and economic integration into the Chinese economy made militarism meaningless. A four-month national service is totally inadequate for any military force, but that was the choice of successive electorates – modern Taiwan has no appetite for war. For the DPP Defence Minister to say that it is not enough to handle the PLA, the better strategy which the people prefer is not to make war at all. Expanding Taiwan’s military with a few more conscripts to bolster what is popularly known locally as the “strawberry army” to take on the 2million strong PLA is not exactly a wildly popular idea. As a matter of fact, the horror of it kills votes.

The time frame Chiu outlined to make a decision on conscription was until after the November local elections (ie this last weekend), seen as a mid-term test for President Tsai ahead of the 2024 presidential race. Extending military service is not a balm among many young Taiwanese to take on the Chinese army. These young voters are crucial for DPP support. If this is the case, the idea of extending conscription and still expect people to vote for them must surely count as bad political judgement.

It is ironic that Tsai herself made her leadership to be the fundamental issue for this weekend's local elections, saying that a vote for her party's candidates would be important for her and Taiwan. This is how Reuters reported on the DPP's electoral platform.

*"Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen on Thursday cast this weekend's local elections as a referendum on her leadership, saying a vote for her party's candidates was a vote for her and her commitment to "take good care" of Taiwan and ensure peace with China.*

*Tsai's second term in office runs out in 2024 and she cannot stand again as president because of term limits. She was re-elected by a landslide in 2020 on a pledge to stand up to China and protect Taiwan's freedom and democracy.*

*Saturday's elections, for city mayors, county chiefs and local councillors, are ostensibly about domestic issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic and crime, and those elected do not have a direct say on China policy.*

*But Tsai has reframed the campaign to put relations with China, which views Taiwan as its own territory and has increased military pressure to assert those claims, front and centre.*

*In a video message, Tsai said voting for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidates was the same as voting for her.*

*"If you have not yet decided which city or county chief candidate to vote for, then I ask you to please cast this vote for me, for candidates I am recommending," she said.*

*"Thank you for choosing Tsai Ing-wen the last time around, and I believe that I can take good care of Taiwan," she added. "I am also very conscientious and responsible about Taiwan getting a firm footing internationally, and committed to maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait."*

*The election is happening a month after the end of the 20th congress of China's Communist Party, where President Xi Jinping secured an unprecedented third term in office - a point Tsai has repeatedly made on the campaign trail.*

*China carried out war games near Taiwan in August to express its anger at a visit to Taipei by then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.*

*Taiwan's main opposition party the Kuomintang (KMT), which traditionally favours close ties with China and crushed the DPP at the last local elections in 2018, says it too is committed to protecting the island's democracy and freedom.*

*But the KMT has criticised the DPP for being overly confrontational with China.*

*Former Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou, who remains a senior KMT member, wrote on his Facebook page on Thursday that voting for the DPP could bring war and supporting the KMT would ensure peace.*

*"Choose peace and reject war!" he added.*

*Tsai has repeatedly offered to talk to Beijing on the basis of equality and respect, but has been rebuffed.*

*Reporting by Ben Blanchard and Yimou Lee. Editing by Gerry Doyle*

The three lines in red are my emphasis. The first, about the fact that Tsai won the last election because she countered China, was before the Ukraine war. In the last year, Taiwanese have come to understand that the Americans will never fight China for them on their behalf and that any desire for independence requires the people to do their own fighting and dying. Nobody on the island has the appetite for that. As such, the plea by Tsai to rely on the election strategy of two years ago demonstrates that her understanding of the different attitudes by the Americans in considering conflict has not been updated. She is dwelling on past glories. The KMT is far more realistic and understand the people better – when called to go to war, they will much rather have peace.

Well, in the event, it has been proven that Tsai has made a colossal blunder on her strategy. The vote against the DPP, in favour of the KMT, was overwhelming. It means that the electorate has rejected everything she and her party stands for, and that includes, at the heart of it, a confrontation with the PRC.

The results are well summarized by Bloomberg:

***Chiang Kai-shek's Great-Grandson Claims Key Taiwan Poll Win***

- *Chiang Wan-an will become the youngest-ever mayor of Taipei*
- *DPP takes fewest seats in local elections in 36-year history*

*Chiang Wan-an speaks to supporters after winning the Taipei mayoral election in Taipei. Photographer: Lam Yik Fei/Bloomberg*

*By*

*Cindy Wang and Sarah Zheng*

*27 November 2022 at 9:19 AM SGT*

*Chiang Kai-shek's great-grandson declared victory in the race to be mayor of Taiwan's capital, as the ruling party suffered a resounding defeat in island-wide local elections a little more than a year before a new president is chosen.*

*Chiang Wan-an of the opposition Kuomintang will become, at 43 years old, the youngest-ever mayor of Taipei, a position that can serve as a springboard to the presidency.*

*"Everyone, we did it," he told a crowd of several thousand people outside his campaign headquarters Saturday night. He didn't mention simmering tensions between the US and China over the democratically ruled island's autonomy in his brief remarks.*

According to Central Election Commission, KMT won 13 out of 21 cities and counties, while DPP only managed to secure five cities in the southern part of Taiwan, the least since its founding in 1986. KMT candidates took 50% of votes in the contests, versus 41.6% for the DPP, 11.39 million votes counted as of 11:53 pm in Taipei, according to the official election website.

That prompted President Tsai Ing-wen to step down as party leader, saying in televised remarks: “In the face of these results, there are many areas where we need to engage in self-reflection.”

The elections represented the last major test of Tsai’s DPP before her second and final term draws to a close and Taiwan picks a successor in early 2024. The KMT, or Nationalist Party, hopes the gains in local races will help it mount a comeback after defeats in presidential elections in 2016 and 2020.

The results will be closely watched in Washington and Beijing, since the DPP’s rise to power has prompted China to cut off communications with Taiwan and ramp up diplomatic and military pressure on the island. The KMT, which favors eventual unification with China, had previously overseen a historic expansion of ties with Beijing, easing travel, trade and investment across the Taiwan Strait.

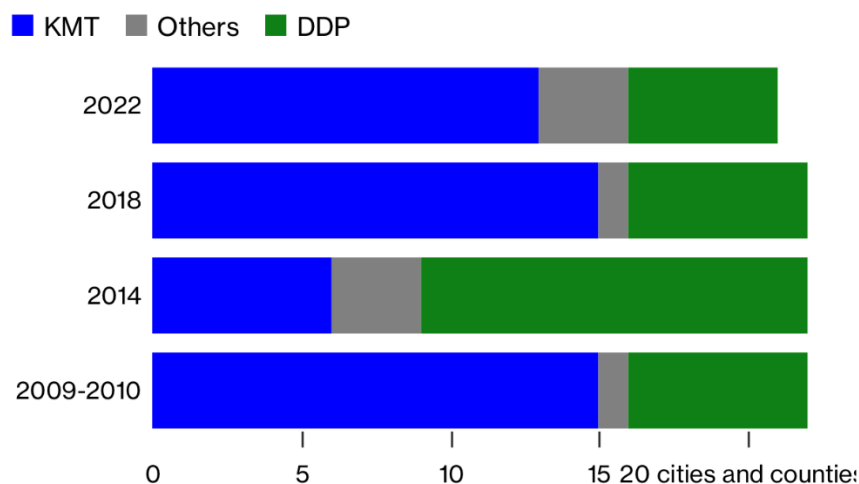
The outcome Saturday “would count as a major victory for the KMT,” said Chang Teng-chi, professor of political science at National Taiwan University.

The strong showing could help KMT party head Eric Chu and New Taipei Mayor Hou Yu-ih in any run for president, Chang added. Hou was poised to win re-election.

“Eric Chu will take credit for the win, and will be qualified to run for presidency for sure,” Arthur Wang, secretary general of Asia-Pacific Elite Interchange Association, said. “However, New Taipei City Mayor Hou Yu-Ih is long favored as the next candidate in the party. Which of the two strong figures will stand out is yet to tell.”

### Big Loss

#### DPP wins just five city and county leadership races



Source: Central Election Commission  
NOTE: Chiayi City will hold election on Dec. 18

*Chiang's great grandfather was the late KMT leader, who fought and lost a civil war against Mao Zedong's Communists and is remembered by many Taiwanese for his repression. Taiwan marks a holiday on Feb. 28 each year to remember thousands of people killed in a military crackdown by his government.*

*In the crowd of enthusiastic supporters outside Chiang's campaign headquarters, Denise Lee, who described herself as an independent voter in her 60s, said she was **highly concerned about cross-strait tensions**. In August, China held unprecedented military drills around the island that also included the People's Liberation Army sending missiles overhead.*

*"It's very concerning now," she said. "It actually seems like war could break out."*

*In other results, the KMT won four of six major cities, where some 70% of the population live. The DPP held on to its southern stronghold of Kaohsiung, where Chen Chi-mai won.*

*Voters appeared to reject a referendum to lower the voting age to 18 from 20. About 5.6 million people backed the first civil referendum in the island's history, well short of the 9.6 million needed.*

*One key issue on the minds of voters was the economy as 2022 winds down. Exports dropped for a second straight month in October and officials have warned that overseas shipments for November are expected to fall between 5% and 8%.*

*Jessica Drun, a specialist in cross-strait ties at the Atlantic Council think tank, said Beijing "will likely be reassured" by the results of Saturday's elections, and may soon make goodwill gestures to the KMT, possibly in the form of economic incentives.*

*"It will likely also seek to foster or deepen ties with successful candidates and factions in order to shape the party's policy approaches," she said.*

*— With assistance by Chien-Hua Wan and Spe Chen*

My sense of where the Tsai Ing-wen strategy is erroneous in this election is that she assumed that her electorate would want Taiwanese independence so much that they would fight a war to get it. That is obviously not the case. When the Taiwanese population, especially the younger people who would have to bear the brunt of the fighting, is posed with the stark reality of voting for DPP, which would mean that the conscription would be extended and that they would have to prepare for war, the choice for them became very obvious. It was a huge no. The other thing that has also become obvious to Taiwanese, who were all for independence and sticking up a middle finger to China, is based on previous assumptions that the US military would fight for them. That would be a good deal for them.

But then, Ukraine happened. All these smart Taiwanese saw that the US and the west would not put any of their soldiers at risk in Ukraine, or surely, also not on their behalf, and it is now starkly obvious that any dying to pursue independent Taiwan would be on their own account. It will be Taiwanese sons and husbands who will have to die to pursue this elusive concept called Taiwanese independence. That is a bridge too far. The DPP's basic electoral premise, identical to that two years ago, to lead the country is nothing more than Tsai's wistful nostalgia.

## ***Taiwan president quits as party head after China threat bet fails to win votes***

By [Sarah Wu](#) and [Yimou Lee](#)

*Taiwan votes in local polls amid China tensions*

*TAIPEI, Nov 26 (Reuters) - Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen resigned as head of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) on Saturday after her strategy to frame local elections as showing defiance to China's rising bellicosity failed to pay off and win public support.*

*The elections for mayors, county chiefs and local councillors are ostensibly about domestic issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic and crime, and those elected will not have a direct say on China policy.*

*But Tsai had recast the election as being more than a local vote, saying the world is watching how Taiwan defends its democracy amid military tensions with China, which claims the island as its territory.*

*The main opposition party the Kuomintang, or KMT, was leading or claimed victory in 13 of the 21 city mayor and county chief seats up for grabs, including the capital Taipei, compared to the DPP's five, broadly in line with expectations and similar to the results of the last local elections in 2018.*

*"The results failed our expectations. We humbly accept the results and accept the Taiwanese people's decision," Tsai told reporters at party headquarters as she quit as party head, which she also did after 2018's poor results.*

*"It's not like the DPP has never failed before," Tsai, who will continue serving as president until 2024, added. "We don't have time to feel sorry. We fell, but we will stand up again."*

*Tsai said she had rejected a resignation offer from Premier Su Tseng-chang, also a senior DPP member, adding she had asked him to stay in office to ensure her policies would be properly implemented.*

*The Cabinet said Su had agreed to stay due to the need for stability amid the "arduous" domestic and international situation.*

*China's Taiwan Affairs Office said the result showed that mainstream Taiwanese public opinion was for peace, stability and "a good life", and that Beijing would keep working with Taiwan's people to promote peaceful relations and to oppose Taiwan independence and foreign interference.*

### ***'RED' ACCUSATIONS***

*Both the DPP and KMT, which traditionally favours close ties with China though strongly denies being pro-Beijing, had concentrated their campaign efforts in wealthy and populous northern Taiwan, especially Taipei, whose mayor from the small Taiwan People's Party could not run again due to term limits.*

*The KMT has accused Tsai and the DPP of being overly confrontational with China, and of trying to besmirch the party for being "red" - a reference to the colours of the Chinese Communist Party.*

*It focused its campaign on criticising the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially after a surge in cases this year.*



*KMT Chairman Eric Chu celebrated their victory, but said they would also protect Taiwan's freedoms.*

*"We will insist on defending the Republic of China and protecting democracy and freedom," he told reporters, using Taiwan's official name. "We will also work hard to keep regional peace."*

*China carried out war games near Taiwan in August to express anger at a visit to Taipei by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and its military activities have continued, though on a reduced scale.*

*The election took place a month after the 20th congress of China's Communist Party, where President Xi Jinping secured an unprecedented third term in office - a point Tsai repeatedly made on the campaign trail.*

*Focus will now turn to the 2024 presidential and parliament election, which Tsai and the DPP won by a landslide in 2020 on a pledge to stand up to China and defend Taiwan's freedoms.*

*Tsai is serving her second term in office and cannot stand again as president because of term limits.*

*Reporting by Sarah Wu and Yimou Lee; Writing by Ben Blanchard; Editing by Gerry Doyle, William Mallard, Edmund Klamann, Mark Heinrich, Kirsten Donovan*

Anyone following Taiwanese news and opinions in their media would have known this long ago. Taiwanese are not Ukrainians. The population is trained to make money, not war. It is very well known that they are not keen to serve in the military, or fight the PLA knowing that there cannot be a good outcome. They are all keen to talk independence when they don't have to fight for it. When they do, they stop talking, and want their government to shut up as well. That is how merchants, unlike mercenaries, behave.

This will throw a couple of spanners into the American strategy to use the Taiwan card to hold back China. The strategy is simple-minded. There are obvious similarities between Ukraine and Taiwan - another internecine contest - and the west had hoped that supporting Taiwan would be on the same terms as in the case of Ukraine - sell them weapons and let them do their own fighting. The Ukrainians are stupid enough to do that, but the Taiwanese are far smarter. It is way better to manipulate others to do your bidding, but it would be silly to be manipulated to do others' bidding. A cross Taiwan Straits war is not in the interest of Taiwan and the population would not want to be steered into that, not by the Americans nor by the DPP.

DPP, in my humble opinion, is finished. They are now identified by their own people as too inane to keep out of a geopolitical contest, and were being steered into being a pawn to serve American geopolitical interests. Not every Taiwanese is as dumb as Tsai, who has to pay for her mistake by losing her chairmanship of her party and will become politically irrelevant.

As for the Americans, it will become clear after this weekend that there won't be anybody to take up cudgels against China on their behalf in any sort of proxy war. The talk of self-independence, like in Hong Kong, has been nonsensical, at best, for populations who understand commerce not combat, and anyone who did not understand that would only have themselves to blame. Biden's agreement with

Xi at Bali will come to pass because Taiwanese are not foolish enough to become proxies to fight a war.

What are the economic implications coming out of Taipeh over the weekend? There are a number of these, as follows:

- 1) There is no hope for any western strategy to create distance between China and Taiwan. Whichever way they are organized politically, they are essentially one economy. If there is a war between them, the damage to both sides will be tremendous. The US was counting on turning Taiwan into a renegade province and perhaps trap China into a war in exactly the same way as it has done with Russia and Ukraine. The media would have played up the David vs Goliath story and turned China's foreign policy into a mess with all other countries in the world. That would have been detrimental to the forward progress of economic development in China and its rise to overtake the US economically.
- 2) Taiwan was once considered by the US as frontline defence (first island chain) against the growing prowess of the PLA navy. In the aftermath of the Pelosi visit, this concept has become obsolete. The aircraft carrier, USS Ronald Reagan, did not even want to sail close to Taiwan during the military exercises that the PLA conducted to express its displeasure with the Pelosi provocation. Since we now know that Taiwan is opting out of being a pawn, with the electorate's unambiguous rejection of becoming a platform to confront China, it will become clear to the Japanese and the Koreans that the first island chain is no more. It will lead to a more stable development of economic relations in East Asia, focused on the economics.
- 3) If all this war mongering is put away, there is a chance that the policy makers at the US State Department understand that there is nobody around other than Zelensky who will become compliant to the pursuit of militaristic policies against America's foes. Not the EU countries which are trying to re-establish trade and investment ties with China, as they did in the last few weeks, and now not even Taiwan, whose DPP government had been enticed by sweet talk about being regarded as a second China. Some fools in the DPP wanted the friendship of the US to look larger than life to their supporters, but in the end, most common-sensical Taiwanese saw through the ploy to instigate a fracture in a relationship that was progressing towards eventual reunification. Peacefully.
- 4) The PRC has demonstrated it has wise leadership that would not get entrapped by provocative events like the Pelosi visit, which may have been designed to generate a response that would have been against its interests. Like in the case of HK, in spite of lots of foreign provocation, Beijing kept its cool and solved the problem quietly and decisively a year after the riots. It is achieving the same kind of outcome in Taiwan, once Tsai and her DPP become history.
- 5) The rejection of the DPP in Taiwan to serve as a proxy for the US to take on China this week is a bigger deal than the Xi-Biden agreement in Bali last week.
- 6) So, one more time, no war in the Taiwan Straits...

That is the good news coming out of Taiwan over this weekend.

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*Un-Influencer in a World full of Hubris*