

Challenges ahead after DPP win in Taiwan

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ByHindustan Times

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On January 13, this year, Taiwan's ruling party--the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Lai Ching-te won the presidential elections. He contested elections against Kuomintang (KMT)'s Hou Yu-ih and Taiwan's People's Party (TPP)'s Ko Wen-je. Lai got 40% of the total votes, while the former president from the same party had got 57% of the total votes. This time, the total percentage of votes was 72%, compared to 75% in 2020. The emergence of the third party, the TPP cut into the percentages. While DPP's candidate won the presidential elections, there is no clear-cut majority in the legislature. This is the first time since 2004 that there is no majority in the Legislative Yuan. The DPP won 51 seats, the KMT 52, and the TPP eight. The possibilities of greater disagreements in the Legislative Yuan now loom large, which will affect not just domestic policies but foreign policy options as well. This has happened in the past in Taiwan during DPP president Chen Shui Bian's tenure. Also, while the president appoints the premier, the Legislative Yuan can oust her/him by a vote of confidence which requires 57 lawmakers to vote in favour.



Taiwanese Vice President Lai Ching-te, also known as William Lai, center, celebrates his victory with running mate Bi-khim Hsiao, right, and supporters in Taipei, Taiwan.

(AP)

The three presidential candidates broadly had similar manifestos on defence reforms, public service, social reforms, and on United States (US)-Taiwan relations. Hou and Ko had promised to resume talks with China on a now abandoned trade pact, a move which Lai opposes. Former KMT president, Ma Jing-yeou had sought to strike a deal with Beijing but was forced to give it up after weeks of student-led mass protests and occupation of the legislature. Immediately after the declaration of the results, a spokesperson for China's State Council Taiwan Affairs Office stated that Taiwan is China's Taiwan and added that the DPP cannot represent the mainstream public opinion on the island.

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This does not come as a surprise as China had unleashed various forms of aggression against Taiwan. On December 13, in the hours leading up to the elections in Taiwan, five Chinese balloons had been detected by the Taiwanese ministry of defence, threatening aviation safety and with the plausible motives of waging psychological warfare on the electorate. The Taiwanese ministry of defence had also stated that it detected eight military aircraft, one of which crossed into Taiwan's southwest air defence identification zone. Six ships from the Chinese navy were also seen around the island on the same day. On July 12, a day before the elections, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning had stated, "the elections of Taiwan region are China's internal affairs. Regardless of the result, it will not change the basic fact that Taiwan is a part of China and there is only one China in the world". On the same day in Washington, US secretary of state, Antony Blinken met with senior Chinese official Liu Jianchao and he reiterated the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Straits and in the South China Sea.

In December, a few weeks before the elections, Taiwan accused China of economic coercion and election interference after Beijing announced coercive economic measures against some chemical imports from Taiwan stating that Taipei had violated a trade agreement. On January 9, the Chinese commerce ministry stated it was studying "further measures to suspend tariff concessions" including for machinery and auto parts. These moves were aimed at the Taiwanese electorate to sway them away from voting for the DPP which Beijing had labelled as "pro-war". If military escalations, spy balloons, and economic coercion were not enough, China-sponsored social media handles tried taking advantage of cyberspace and tried spreading disinformation, aimed particularly at the DPP candidate and now president Lai. Even president Tsai Ing-wen was not spared as murky narratives around their past, riddled with betrayal and corruption were attempted to be pushed out. Some other malicious narratives tried instilling doubts about the reliability of the US as an ally, and stories around the Taiwanese government secretly harvesting blood from citizens and giving it to the US to make bioweapons to attack China were pushed out. However, these narratives were quickly debunked by not just the government but also by Taiwanese civil society organisations.

As is already clear, China is not happy with the results and tried everything within its means to coerce the Taiwanese electorate to not vote for the DPP. However, the Taiwanese electorate defied all sorts of threats and voted for the candidate that suits Taiwan best. In the immediate future, in line with China's tactics just before the elections, more aggressive posturing can be envisaged, which could include more spy balloons, naval ships, economic coercion, and information manipulation coupled with disinformation. For the US, which is one of the biggest allies Taiwan has in the democratic world, the manoeuvring will be difficult, and it needs to make adequate preparations. For India, which has had healthy and improving economic, scientific, and technological ties, greater cooperation with Taiwanese businesses, helping Taiwan to deal with Chinese economic coercion needs to be planned. China had already issued warnings to India last year, telling it to stay away from military and security cooperation with Taiwan. However, the blossoming of ties between India and Taiwan began under the DPP and is expected to continue and India can expect more aggressive warnings from China, asking it to not engage with Taiwan. Domestically, given the lack of a clear-cut majority in the Legislative Yuan, any foreign policy which is more pro-US will face opposition.

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