
Taiwan to the polls: elections take centre stage in China-US international diplomacy

It is a very small island, slightly larger than Sicily, but it is at the heart of a region of great vulnerability, where the balance between commercial interests and political equilibrium has historically marked a potentially explosive dynamic. As a result, Taiwan's upcoming general election is taking centre stage. It is perhaps the most closely watched and anticipated international event of early 2024. Taiwanese citizens will go to the polls tomorrow, Saturday 13 January, to elect a president and members of parliament. According to the latest opinion polls, Lai Ching-te, the incumbent vice president and a leading member of the centre-left Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the party of outgoing President Tsai Ing-wen, is favoured to win. Lai Ching-te - who has adopted a Western name and is known as William - has long been one of the most prominent figures in the movement advocating Taiwan's further separation from China. In the run-up to the vote, Beijing labelled William Lai a "serious danger" because of his pro-independence stance. But while Lai Ching-te is the favourite, there is still some uncertainty surrounding the election. In addition to Lai, other candidates include Hou Yu-ih of the Kuomintang (KMT), the country's leading conservative party, which for decades has been the most vocal advocate of good relations with China, and Ko Wen-je, the former mayor of the capital, Taipei, who presents himself as an independent technocrat. Opinion polls show a tight three-way race. But there are strong external pressures, given the possible scenarios that could unfold in state-to-state relations across the region and beyond. It is no coincidence that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken scheduled a meeting with a senior Chinese official in Washington on the eve of the vote. The Taiwan election has been described by some as a "choice between democracy and authoritarianism", and there are even those who believe it is a "choice between war and peace."

Speaking with SIR, Francesco Sisci, a journalist who has been a Beijing correspondent for years and is an expert on China, offers a less alarmist view. "The elections in Taiwan are important," he says, "but they are not a choice between peace and war, because no party and none of the three candidates want to change the status quo in Taiwan. The US has already made it clear that it will not support a rift. So the situation is quite calm. However, there is one problem that is likely to arise after the elections." Sisci explained: "Lessons can be learnt from the presidential elections and the renewal of parliament, where three candidates and three parties are competing. The candidate of the Progressive Democratic Party, the current ruling party, could become president, but the parliamentary majority could be different and it might be complicated to govern with two parties sharing the stage. We will have to wait and see what happens at the polls and how these frictions are resolved."

Domestic politics will be a key issue, as Taiwan's position towards the PRC will be questioned, with the three contending parties offering divergent political visions. "This could lead to friction," notes Sisci. "You have a president who wants the status quo and a parliament that wants a policy of greater openness towards Beijing. This could lead to uncertainty and instability." Only after the results of the elections will we have a clearer picture. "But the possibility of incidents and mistakes is limited", because "both Beijing and Taipei are familiar with reading each other's moods and know how to gauge tensions. On the other hand, some situations are much more threatening," the expert adds, "such as North Korea, the South China Sea, the border with India, where the chances of disruption and incidents are high, and for a thousand other reasons." Moreover, the lesson of our recent past is that "conflicts do not usually arise from a premeditated attack, but from mistakes in failing to control an escalation."