The Election in Taiwan: The View from and Implications for the United States

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As American attention is captivated by the war in Iraq and, more recently, our own upcoming national election, another important event is about to take place on the other side of the Pacific Ocean: the presidential election of Taiwan on March 21 (March 22 local time). This event is of great importance to the United States for a number of reasons. First there is the economic significance of Taiwan, which has emerged in recent decades as an important player in the global economy, especially in the IT sector. For instance, over 90% of the world’s OEM notebook PCs comes out of Taiwan factories, and Taiwan companies have also developed their own brand names, such as ACER. Besides, the island boasts companies like Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), the world’s largest contract chipmaker. America’s ninth largest trade partner in 2007, Taiwan has also been an important buyer of American weapons and other goods. Second, there is the geopolitical significance of Taiwan. U.S. links to Taiwan are a vital factor in the often fragile but increasingly mutually dependent relationship between China and the United States, countries that are widely viewed as the world’s two superpowers.

The election will decide who will lead Taiwan for the next four years. The choice is between two candidates: Frank Hsieh and Ma Ying-jeou. The Former represents the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), and the latter the Kuomintang (KMT). A crucial difference between the two parties is their respective policy on Taiwan’s relationship with mainland China. The PPD advocates independence, while the KMT wants to maintain the status quo. Ma, the KMT’s candidate, is widely projected to win the election. The leadership of the DDP, which came to power eight years ago, has become increasingly unpopular, particularly,
facing accusations of corruption and a prolonged economic slowdown. But as we have learned from the numerous dramatic last-minute developments in recent elections in Taiwan, any projections remain mere educated guesses at best. Under the uncharacteristic pre-election calmness lurks a potentially explosive danger that could engulf the Taiwan Straits and much of the world. It is commonly accepted that a declaration of independence on the part of Taiwan will mean war, a war that could threaten to involve the United States. The United States is already fighting a costly war in Iraq with no end in sight, a war that has cost the United States hundreds of billions of US dollars and the lives of nearly 4,000 soldiers. The prospect of being dragged into a military confrontation with a much more formidable opponent is the last thing it needs at this moment. Therefore, geopolitically speaking, maintaining the status quo across the Taiwan Straits is in America’s interest. In recent years, it has benefited, not only geopolitically but also economically, from that status quo. There is no reason to think that the United States should change its course at this movement. The danger of breaking the strategic balance, therefore, does not lie in public opinion or rational policy but in unpredictable political maneuvers that are more likely to happen at election time than any other moment. If public polls in Taiwan are any indication, it is clear that a majority of voters in Taiwan also prefer the status quo, which has benefited Taiwan as well, at least economically. Trade with China’s thriving economy has become a life line for Taiwan’s ailing economy. In 2007 trade across the Taiwan Straits exceeded $100 billion US dollars, and such trade activities gave Taiwan an annual surplus of over $46 billion US dollars. Meanwhile in its effort to develop its growingly modern and global economy, China continues to need the investment dollars and the technological and managerial know-how that pours into the PRC from Taiwan. There appear to be reasons to believe that if Hsieh is elected, he would not immediately move closer to declaring independence because he has vowed not to take any politically provocative actions. But he will continue to face pressure from the DDP, a party that has adopted independence as its platform. If Ma wins this weekend, as widely projected, he will certainly not declare independence politically. Because of the political baggage of his party, the KMT, which initially fled to Taiwan in 1949, Ma is more likely to maintain a greater distance from mainland China as either a choice or due to expedience. Reminiscent of enthusiastic participation in homeland politics by members of other ethnic communities throughout American history, the election in Taiwan has also been a heated issue among Chinese Americans, dividing them in recent years. Forums and rallies have been conducted in major Chinese American communities. Voters are going back to cast their vote. Chinese-language TV programs will carry the election live. At the end of the day, however, when the noise of election quiets down, ordinary people will realize that it is peace and prosperity, not political rhetoric, that best represents their interest. (Yong Chen is Professor of History at the University of California, Irvine) Photos: top right, Frank Hsieh; lower left, Ma Ying-jeou