

External Factors in Taiwan's 2020 Election

Su Chi

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Just as the grand dramas of the KMT and DPP presidential primaries are set to reach their climax, a "martial arts film" about outside intervention in Taiwan's 2020 election stands ready to flash upon the silver screen. This is not the first time that this has happened, but its impact will definitely be greater, more direct and more variegated than ever before.

The biggest source of intervention in the past was from Mainland China. The United States was usually a benevolent onlooker. Only on two occasions when Beijing mobilized military force across the Taiwan Strait did the US dispatch aircraft carriers to the region for deterrence. The Mainland's severest intervention took place in 1996 when it engaged in the so-called "verbal assault and military intimidation." During the 2000 election, Beijing had learned its lesson and issued only "verbal assault," but not "military intimidation." In 2004, as the KMT's Lien Chan/James Soong ticket seemed favored to win, Beijing refrained from either tactic. In 2008, fearing another last-minute ploy akin to the notorious "shooting incident" of March 19, 2004 which tipped the election in favor of the DPP candidates, Beijing issued no "verbal assault" but quietly prepared for a military solution lest the DPP somehow luck out and win that election. By 2012 and 2016, Beijing had gained so much power and confidence vis-à-vis Taiwan, there were neither "verbal assault" nor "military intimidation." Now, although the election of January 2020 is still some months away, four salient external changes will surely make it an entirely different election.

First, ever since Taiwan's democratization, its government and people have always shunned intervention by outside powers. Yet, President Tsai Ing-wen now seems doggedly bent on dragging an external power into the upcoming election. Her announcement that she would run for re-election was rare in that it was not first announced to the domestic audience, but released through CNN in the U.S. Most recently she deliberately delayed the DPP's party primary for fear of losing to her intra-party challenger. It may also be an attempt to wait for the US factor to expand in importance so as to capitalize on her absolute advantage in this area over her internationally inexperienced primary opponent.

In September last year, President Trump accused Beijing of intervening in the US election in 2016 in order to shift focus from "Russia-gate." The Department of Homeland Security later clarified that Beijing had indeed tried to influence "public opinion" in the United States, but there was no evidence that it had actually targeted the "election." However, the Tsai administration quickly seized the topic and applied and expanded it inside Taiwan. Not only did it blame its sore defeat in the local election of last November almost entirely on Beijing's intervention, it also called for US-Taiwan cooperation in "political warfare" to resist Beijing's "political infiltration," as Legislator Hsiao Bi-khim said recently to a Washington audience.

Second, Washington's attitude toward Taiwan's election has changed from a "benevolent onlooker" to a "monitor on high alert," although it has not yet been as direct as in Venezuela (supporting the challenger) or Israel (recognizing the sovereignty of the Golan Heights). However, the "pushback against China" mentality inside Washington has brought the US policy elites closer to the "pro-US and anti-China" DPP, while away from the KMT which is "pro-US and non-antagonistic toward China." Add to this the fact that the KMT leadership has itself abandoned its longstanding ties and friendship with the US over the past two years. Result: American policy elites have been unable to hear the other half of political opinion in Taiwan.

Since the US only listens to one side, it has readily given credence to the empty declaration by President Tsai that she is "maintaining the status quo," while ignoring the unmistakable fact that the DPP almost completely undermined the cross-strait negotiations and exchanges achieved during the previous administration of President Ma Ying-jeou.

Also because the US only hears one side, it has virtually ignored the fact that the Tsai Administration has engaged in numerous anti-democratic practices inside Taiwan, including seizing control across-the-board of institutions of power and even civic groups under the specious pretext of "transformative justice." Most recent example is the appointment of a pure-bred DPP politician to head the Central Election Commission, which above all other such institutions has to remain impartial during the elections.

And because the US only heeds one side, it has conveniently ignored the fact of President Tsai's low approval ratings, which have hovered at about 30 percent ever

since her first year in office with no sign of an uptick. Neither the Americans nor Tsai herself seem to recognize that the main reason behind her low ratings is much less any nefarious intervention by Beijing than the plain truth that she has caused the Taiwan public to lose their sense of security and well-being,.

This “listening to only one side” has led to bias in Washington’s thinking and position and caused it to misjudge the results of last year’s nine-in-one local elections.

Third, Beijing appears far less fearful of US military intervention now due to the shift in the US-China military balance in the Taiwan Strait. Recently, PRC jet fighters crossed the midline of the Strait, and soon afterwards twenty-four military aircraft and five warships conducted training exercises nearby. These actions demonstrated to the US and Taiwan that the PRC’s naval and air forces could not only be more readily and speedily deployed than US warships, but its numbers could be so great as to saturate the skies above the island of Taiwan and the Strait.

The fourth and most subtle change is in the attitude of the public in Taiwan. In the past, Beijing’s “verbal assault” and “military intimidation” have always proved to be counter-productive inside Taiwan. However, the image of Tsai as someone who cares little for the security or economy of Taiwan and cares only about grabbing power and resisting China has attenuated Taiwan public’s disgust with whatever intervention Beijing might launch. Likewise, when pro-US citizens in Taiwan discovered that Washington now only considers “anti-China” to be “pro-US” and that one can no longer be simultaneously “pro-US” and “non-antagonistic toward China,” a strong sense of alienation and distrust toward the U.S. began to sprout. The pro-DPP Liberty Times recently lamented “an uncanny change” in the degree of influence that the U.S. has on Taiwan, when even “repeated expressions of praise from former US officials” failed to save the DPP candidate from defeat in the Kaohsiung mayoral election.

These four major changes (the DPP dragging in an external force, US partiality in Taiwan politics, Beijing’s increasing power and boldness, and a changed impression of China and the U.S. by the Taiwan public) are all unprecedented. As the KMT and DPP cross campaign swords the end of the year, should these four arrows of unprecedented change all happen to be shot off at the same time, it will be difficult for anyone to predict what impact they would have on the 2020 election. As things look now, all one can hope is, “God Bless Taiwan!”

(The author is the chairman of the Taipei Forum and the former Secretary General of the National Security Council)