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Taiwan's ruling party wins unprecedented third term

Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) Lai Ching-te has won Taiwan's presidential election. Lai's presidential victory risks further tensions with mainland China as Beijing sees DPP as independence-leaning and Lai as a "separatist". It will also test the recent stabilization of ties between China and the US. Beijing's reactions have so far been restrained. The focus turns to its responses between now and when the new Taiwan president takes office in May.

Taiwan's elections were held on Saturday, January 13. The presidential candidate from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Lai Ching-te, has been elected as Taiwan's new president. Lai is the current vice president from the ruling DPP, a party that leans towards Taiwan's independence. This marks the first time that a political party has won three consecutive presidential terms since direct presidential elections were introduced in 1996.

DPP won the presidential election but lost its parliament majority

DPP's Lai claimed the win by receiving 40.1% of the votes. His competitors, Hou Yu-ih from Kuomintang (KMT) and Ko Wen-je from Taiwan People's Party (TPP) received 33.5% and 26.5% of the votes respectively. The election had a turnout of 71.9% – about 14 million people – slightly lower than the 74.9% recorded four years ago.

Despite Lai's victory, the DPP has lost its majority in the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament. In fact, no single party will hold a majority. DPP won 51 of the 113 seats (45% of the total seats) in the legislature, down from the previous 61 seats in the 2020 election. KMT won 52 seats (46% of total), up from 38 seats prior, while TPP won 8 seats, an increase from its previous 5 seats. Two seats went to other candidates. The results mean that even if Lai wants to push for a more aggressive agenda, his hands will be tied in the legislature.

Election results to test US-China ties

The presidential election result will test the recent stabilization of ties between China and the US. Lai has repeatedly stated that he does not want to change the status quo between mainland China and Taiwan. However, Beijing views Lai with deep distrust. Lai has been labeled by Beijing as a troublemaker and "separatist".

Beijing sees Taiwan as an inseparable part of China and has never renounced the use of force for reunification. The US, in common with most countries, does not recognize Taiwan as an independent state – a position President Biden reiterated on Saturday – but

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is opposed to a change in the status quo by force. While the Taiwan Relations Act, which provides the legal basis for US support for Taiwan's defense, does not require the US to defend Taiwan, it states that it is US policy to maintain the capacity to do so.

Beijing's reactions have so far been restrained. In a brief statement, Beijing's Taiwan Affairs Office said "this election cannot change the basic pattern and development direction of cross-strait relations ... nor can it stop the general trend that the motherland will eventually, and will inevitably, be reunified." Beijing emphasized its "resolute opposition" to Taiwan's independence, "separatist activities and interference from external forces".

The focus turns to Beijing's responses between now and when the new Taiwan president takes office in May. Taiwan's security officials said they don't expect Beijing to conduct large military exercises around the island immediately after the elections. However, they see Beijing ratcheting up pressure before May. Experts said Beijing may be reluctant to risk the progress it had made in reducing tensions with the US in recent months. Beijing would likely continue to respond with more aggressive rhetoric, and possibly conduct more military drills around the island. A maritime blockade or a direct military conflict is seen as low probability for now.



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