

Challenges and opportunities for Taiwan's new President

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On May 20, 2024 Dr. Lai Ching-te, President-elect since last January, acceded to the Presidency of the Republic of China (Taiwan).

Dr. Lai succeeded President Tsai Ing-wen, during the Presidency of whose he served as Vice-President and Prime Minister. At the same time, another close associate of President Tsai Ing-wen, Ms. Bi-khim Hsiao, former Ambassador in the U.S., assumed the Office of the Vice-President. The new Leadership of the island republic comes from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as did the previous one. Our readers should bear in mind that Taiwan is a presidential democracy.

Dr. Lai Ching-te has acceded to the Presidency of his country at a time when the international system is in its greatest flux and uncertainty in three decades, notably since the collapse of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the Communist regimes of Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe.

The new President must navigate the ship of his state through choppy waters, particularly when taking into consideration that the ruling state and party elite of the

People's Republic of China constantly and persistently repeats that "Taiwan must, and will be unified with [mainland] China".

Besides, albeit all the contradictions, strategic deficit as well as the obvious lack of Leadership of the West, it is widely held in more and more Western capitals that *democratic Taiwan* is of particular significance for the security and maintenance of the *liberal international order*.

Indeed, the island republic is the strategic nerve of the globe. Half of the international maritime transport goes daily through the Taiwan Strait. Significantly, the country produces by far the largest part of microchips and semi-conductors which are absolutely necessary for the smooth functioning of the PCs. Evidently, Taiwan possesses a critical place in the global supply chain. Any escalation in the Taiwan Strait would therefore have disastrous consequences for the international economy.

Besides, Taiwan is proud of having grown, since the end of the long lasting military rule, to a Western-type democracy *par excellence* in South-East Asia. At the same time, Taiwan stands as a perpetual reminder of what is possible in international relations. As we repeatedly put it in our previous articles, the mere existence of the island republic offers proof that development – both political and economic – is possible; and also that democratization of non-“Western” countries is possible – and need not require outside intervention or bloodshed. Indeed, Taiwan represents all these values of the *Free World* which the West has occasionally attempted to “export” – but *in vain*, causing *revers of blood* (see *Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Kosovo*, etc.). Instead, Taiwan succeeded; and she did so on her own, despite all limitations unfairly imposed on her since the 1970s.

Despite fears to the contrary, the *Biden* Presidency has demonstrated remarkable political will to continue President *Trump*'s policy on Taiwan, about whom it must fairly be said that he proved to be the most pro-Taiwan President of the U.S. since Ronald Reagan. Indeed, since the new administration assumed office, it proceeded with the policy of political and military support for Taiwan which had been drafted out and impressively implemented by former U.S. President *Donald Trump* and his Secretary of State *Mike Pompeo* – following a quite long period of stagnation in the bilateral relations during the Clinton, [G.W.] *Bush*, and *Obama* Presidencies. At the

same time, it is amazing to see the constantly increasing bi-partisan support for Taiwan in the U.S. Congress and the Public Opinion – a phenomenon which would have been inconceivable twenty years ago, when, all but a few *comme-il-faut* Democrat and Republican politicians used to be ardent advocates of the Washington-Beijing ties, with some of them doing so for ideological reasons whereas many others simply expected huge economic benefits for the U.S.

Yet, albeit all the truly spectacular strengthening of the Washington–Taipei relationship, it is a fact that Taiwan remains excluded from U.S.-led institutional initiatives, both in substantial terms and at the level of political symbolism. Remarkably, the Planetary Power [U.S.] kept Taiwan out of the *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity* (IPEF). Similarly, despite Taiwan’s extremely critical geo-strategic value for the U.S., the island democracy has been kept out of the *Quadrilateral Security Dialogue* (Quad) or the AUKUS military alliance structure (Australia – United Kingdom – U.S.A.) built by the traditional [Anglo-Saxon] Maritime Powers.

This curiosity has not escaped the attention of distinguished analysts. In a recent article of her titled “*US-Taiwan Relations and the Future of the Liberal International Order*” published in the U.S. Army War College Quarterly: Parameters, Ms. *Christina Lai*, *Academia Sinica* Institute of Political Science Research Fellow, offered truly interesting ideas on how Taiwan can make more substantive contributions to the U.S.-led international order in the major Indo-Pacific geopolitical region, such as the Quad per instance. By the way, the prestigious *Academia Sinica*, one of the oldest and most important Chinese academic institutions, continued to exist in Taiwan after the imposition of a Communist regime in the mainland.

Of course, State Department’s conventional wisdom says that any formal and substantial integration of Taiwan into U.S.-led multilateral structures might increase the risk of a conflict with the People’s Republic of China. The counter-argument is here though that, as one learns from huge experience with both strategies of *Appeasement* and strategies of *Containment*, the U.S. must make its “red line” crystal clear to the other side. The more Taiwan participates in the *Quad*, per instance, or any other regional security network – such as a trilateral U.S.-Japan-Taiwan partnership –

the more likely this strategy is to prevent Beijing from initiating a military coup against Taiwan. In other words, this is the well-known argumentation of the researchers of the school of *Political Realism* who speak in favour of *Strategic Clarity* towards revisionist China, instead of State Department's conventional policy of the so called *Strategic Ambiguity*.

Coming to talk about the EU, there is no doubt that there has been a remarkably increasing support for Taiwan from the part of more and more Member-States as well as from the part of European institutions. Indeed, in recent years large delegations of national Parliaments, and of the European Parliament, have visited Taipei. Several Governments of *former Communist* countries have upgraded the level of their political and diplomatic presence in the model democracy of the Far East. Moreover, all, or almost all Western European states, the founders of the former European Economic Community, have upgraded, *de facto*, the level of their presence in Taiwan, even if they have doing so under the cover of a [Cultural] Institute, or similar.

Last, but not least, *Turkey* – though not only considered to be not China's strategic partner, but even a *Client State* of the People's Republic of China – is ensuring, through an Institute of Turkish Culture, that she will enjoy strong presence and influence in Taiwan, notably in the Taiwanese political, social, and academic elites of today, and more importantly, of tomorrow. *Athens is absent as usual...*