



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# Taiwan is the winner after the US-China summit - will this be the case in 2024?



Taiwan reaped the biggest collateral benefit from the meeting between US and Chinese presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping in San Francisco last week.

There were no significant breakthroughs on the extensive list of issues that burdened the 2 countries' relations during the much anticipated and well-prepared meeting.

However, this outcome, which was at the top of priorities for both sides, was perhaps the most desirable for Taiwan. Both leaders left the 4-hour meeting convinced they had defended their previous position on Taiwan, which would benefit them for domestic political purposes.

The meeting between Biden and Xi relaxed the general climate of considerable tension that prevailed during the past year, even though it had no significant breakthroughs.

Taiwan has been a collateral victim of that tension by being exposed to frequent military attacks by the Chinese army and political and economic pressure.

## Taiwan can breathe a sigh of relief

After San Francisco, the 25-million entity that China considers part of it could at least take a breather from the increasingly frequent combat provocations of the Chinese army. Whether the US-China relationship continues to improve will determine how long this will last.

The easing of Taiwan's position after the US-China summit will result from Biden and Xi's agreement to resume high-level direct communication. This includes the resumption of military-to-military dialogue, interrupted more than a year ago when Nancy Pelosi, while serving as the Speaker of the House of Representatives, visited Taipei.

"We're back to direct, open clear direct communication on a direct basis. He and I

agreed that each one of us can pick up the phone call directly and we'll be heard immediately", said Biden after the conversation with the Chinese leader.

The result of this agreement is the meeting of US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin with the Chinese Minister of Defence as soon as the successor of the recently dismissed Li Shangfu is appointed.

During this time, the 2 countries will establish "operational engagements" with the goal of direct communication between the military commanders of the 2 armies.



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The reactivation of military-to-military communication is a factor in deterring Beijing from the aggressive actions of its navy and aviation towards Taiwan, which were frequent when this communication was non-existent.

In the conversation with the US president, the Chinese leader emphasised that Taiwan is "the biggest, most potentially dangerous issue in US-China relations". This was followed by the Chinese expectation that the US would refrain from, as they call it, a "hollowing out" of policy towards Taiwan.

Practically, this expectation is primarily related to the US refraining from supplying weapons to Taipei and partly to the visits of high-ranking US officials to Taiwan.

As expected, Biden responded with the US desire to maintain the status quo on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, which is against Beijing's strategy of "certain" reunification of Taiwan with the mainland.

Chinese military actions directed at Taiwan threatened the status quo, which seems to have been removed in favour of Taiwan's security after the San Francisco summit.

However, the stabilisation of relations, clearly achieved in the conversation between the 2 leaders, is still fragile from Taiwan's point of view, given that the presidential and parliamentary elections are scheduled in less than 2 months, from which both the US and China have significant expectations.

## Elections as a turning point

President Biden asked China to respect the democratic process in Taiwan ahead of the January 13 election. It is an appeal to Beijing not to interfere with the free expression of citizens' will but also a kind of rebuke considering that this interference has been ongoing, with a lesser or greater intensity.

Beijing is keen to **change the leadership of Taiwan**, where the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has been in power for 8 years, and its presidential candidate and current vice president of Taiwan, Lai Ching-te, remains by far the most probable candidate to win.

Beijing needs a China-friendly person leading Taiwan, and to that end, it has been lobbying opposition leaders to join forces and oppose the favourite from the ruling DPP more effectively.

### China uses a carrot-and-stick strategy to influence the pro-Chinese leaders on the island

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island, from business privileges or increased tax controls in their companies in China.

But the effort has not been successful for now. Last Saturday, an attempt by the 2 leading opposition parties, both pro-China - the Kuomintang and the Taiwan People's Party - to agree on who will provide a joint presidential candidate backed by the entire opposition failed.

That, however, will not discourage Beijing from continuing to influence the outcome of Taiwan's January election, primarily through propaganda underlining the benefits of reintegration with the mainland.

They will not refrain from subversive measures aimed at discrediting the credibility of the ruling DPP, such as trade restrictions that would portray the ruling party to voters as unable to resolve issues with Beijing.

The elections in Taiwan next January and in the US next November will be challenging regarding stabilising initial relations between the US and China, from which Taiwan has high expectations.

The US would not want the relations between the 2 sides of the Taiwan Strait to worsen after January 13, even though it has no political favourite in the election race in Taiwan, and it declaratively wants only respect for the democratic process.

Considering that this would occur 10 months before the US presidential election, it would be a significant setback and even a reversal of Joe Biden's China strategy, which advanced in San Francisco.