Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Lai Ching-te starts four difficult years—how will Taiwan's new president deal with China?

Following his inauguration in Taipei tomorrow, Taiwan's newly elected president, Lai Ching-te, will take over one of the hottest leadership positions in the world.

Over the next four years, all the influential players on the global stage will closely monitor his policies, and his decisions will also determine the fate of one of the most complex crisis spots.

In the January elections, President Lai ensured the continuity of the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) policy of independence for the island.

However, his party has lost its majority in parliament, which will be important for policy-making regardless of Taiwan's extensive powers and presidential system.

President Lai will undoubtedly continue the pro-independence policy of his predecessor, Tsai Ing-wen, from her two consecutive terms in office.

However, the successor will have a major challenge implementing this policy in a situation where China has drastically increased its aggressiveness towards the island, including constant military pressure.

Unrealistic expectations

Following the January elections and the securing of a new presidential mandate for the pro-independence DPP, there were widespread expectations, even fears, that Taiwan would embark on a path of confrontation with China.

Beijing's activity in supporting the pro-Chinese forces in Taiwan has contributed to this, which clearly shows how great the ambition of the Chinese authorities is to dethrone the sovereigntists after many years of rule.

However, there are many indications that President Lai's term in office, which begins tomorrow, will be far less "confrontational" than was perhaps expected in the days following his victory in January.

> One of the important new circumstances in Taiwanese politics is deep division of the electorate on the island

One of the important new circumstances in Taiwanese politics is the already-mentioned deep division of the electorate on the island.

The result of the parliamentary elections, in which the pro-Chinese Kuomintang achieved the best individual result, obliges the new president to address this division, regardless of the fact that the president will form the executive administration independently and the KMT's rivals cannot create a parliamentary majority on their own.

In addition, Lai's DPP lost the majority in parliament in the January elections, which it had held since 2016. This is also an important trend in the political mood that the president must take into account.

No extreme solutions

One of the most important guidelines for the new president in shaping policy, especially with regard to China, which is by far the most important issue, is the attitude of the majority of citizens towards this issue.

As it turned out, the island of 23 million inhabitants is not at all susceptible to extreme political solutions.

An extensive survey before the January elections showed that only around 6% of citizens want the island's immediate independence, and the same number want the completely opposite option: immediate unification with China.

The remaining 88% of Taiwan's inhabitants are supporters of the status quo. Although they experience it in different ways, they have provided political leaders with clear

instructions on the direction of their future work.

> In recent years, the status quo has delivered economic success to Taiwan and its population, as well as significant defence investments

In recent years, the status quo has delivered economic success to Taiwan and its population, as well as significant defence investments that the former president, Tsai Ing-wen, had pushed.

This combination of stable and high economic growth and a sense of increasing security against the threat from across the strait has clearly given the vast majority of Taiwanese a strong sense of the right policy, and they will not want anything to change radically in the next four years.

Economy before security

On the other hand, the widespread expectation, particularly among young people, that President Lai should prioritise addressing economic and social issues over the threats and security issues in relations with China will trouble him.

There is a long list of economic concerns that respondents in the survey say the new president should solve first, including high rents, a lack of business opportunities, and poor incomes among the under-30 demographic.

> Taiwan's new president's character, temperament, and political philosophy indicate that the island will approach relations with China pragmatically

In the end, Taiwan's new president's character, temperament, and political philosophy indicate that the island will approach relations with China pragmatically as the most important issue.

Lai Ching-te (65) has been active in politics for a long time. Since his election to parliament in 1996, he has held the offices of Prime Minister and Vice President of Taiwan. He owes this to his talent, skills, and composure in public communication, where he rarely overreacts.

Seven years ago, he described himself as a "pragmatic worker for Taiwan independence," a motto that would become the trademark of his politics and lead him to the top.

Chinese options

Pragmatism will probably dominate his policy in the next four years, even before the pursuit of independence, because Lai Ching-te is anything but a "suicide politician."

After tomorrow's inauguration, he will have reason to think about his second term. The chances of him winning will be directly proportional to how pragmatically he tackles Taiwan's challenges.

As a supporter of his predecessor's "no surprises" status quo, President Lai could potentially challenge Beijing's increasingly aggressive policy towards Taiwan during the Xi Jinping era.

Taiwan drastically increased its military capabilities during the previous DPP government and President Tsai's two terms in office

Although Chinese leader Xi Jinping has emphasised his impatience with the Taiwan issue and his desire not to leave it unresolved for future generations, Beijing has many other reasons not to resolve the issue hastily, especially not by military means.

On the one hand, Taiwan drastically increased its military capabilities during the previous DPP government and President Tsai's two terms in office, thereby strengthening deterrence against a possible Chinese invasion.

President Lai will undoubtedly continue his predecessor's policy that Taiwan should not try to beat China in a possible invasion, but rather set the price China would have to pay for taking over the island unbearably high.

Lai Ching-te, known for his advocacy of independence, possesses the flexibility to engage in significant pragmatic concessions with Beijing, unlike other leaders in Taiwan, without facing negative consequences in internal politics.

Under these circumstances, Beijing can also find its interests rather than wait for 2028, which is considered the first date for the possible takeover of power in Taipei, which will be favourable to Beijing.