



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Taiwan between continuity and change – what the arrival of Cheng Li-wun means for the Kuomintang and relations with China



When Cheng Li-wun assumed leadership of the **Kuomintang** (KMT), Taiwan's oldest and most organised opposition party, in early November, it appeared to be a routine leadership change. However, the timing makes this change more significant than it seems.

Taiwan is currently experiencing its most tense relationship with China in a decade, with ongoing military exercises in its vicinity and a defence budget that is increasing faster than ever.

In these circumstances, any change in the leadership of the KMT – a party that has historically maintained channels of cooperation with Beijing and has a complex relationship with its own political heritage from mainland China – carries broader political significance.

Cheng succeeded Eric Chu, who led the KMT from 2021 until the end of 2025. She is a lawyer, a long-time member of parliament, and a former journalist, known for openly engaging in political debate.

In her first speech after the election, she stated that "the Taiwan Strait is under the greatest military threat in thirty years" and that "maintaining communication with China is necessary to avoid a mistake that could have tragic consequences."

The message is not new, but it carries more political weight because it comes from someone whose party controls part of the parliament and can influence state policy.

Reducing danger without jeopardising independence

Unlike Eric Chu, who as KMT chairman balanced security cooperation with the United States and economic relations with China, **Cheng Li-wun** is more specific. She does not speak of yielding to Beijing but of regaining control over Taiwan's own decisions.

In her view, Taiwan must maintain military

readiness, but in a way that does not burden the economy, and re-establish communication with China – not because she trusts its intentions, but because she considers the risk of a breakdown in dialogue a greater threat than the dialogue itself.

Cheng Li-wun is an outspoken critic of President **Lai Ching-te**'s government and his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). She believes that such a policy keeps the country in a constant state of readiness, which, in the long run, drains the economy and society rather than increases real security.

No party has a majority, but the KMT, together with the TPP, controls the parliamentary agenda

In her opinion, defence without communication channels with Beijing is not a strategy but a way to increase risk.

That approach finds support among citizens who do not want rapprochement with China but believe that the constant rhetoric about war is leading the country to a standstill.

Cheng is trying to position herself precisely in that space – as a politician seeking a way to reduce danger without jeopardising Taiwan's independence.

The key political tool at her disposal is the parliament. **Taiwan's Legislative Yuan** has 113 members: the KMT holds 52 seats, the ruling DPP has 51, the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) has 8, and there are 2 independents.

No party has a majority, but the KMT, together with the TPP, controls the parliamentary agenda and the role of Speaker of the Assembly. This gives the opposition the ability to set the tone of debates and to block or direct legislative proposals.

Cheng Li-wun's alternative strategy

Cheng plans to use her position to review defence budget priorities. The ruling party intends to increase **defence spending** to almost five per cent of GDP while accelerating the modernisation of the armed forces.

Cheng believes such growth is not sustainable in the long term. In her view, investments should be directed towards ammunition, **coastal systems** and logistics, rather than expensive platforms whose use would be limited in the initial days of a conflict.

Cheng is not advocating weakening the military but a different approach to defence investment. Instead of continually increasing spending and procuring expensive American systems, she proposes allocating more funds to the domestic production of weapons, ammunition, and logistics.

If the KMT attempts to slow or halt projects that the US Department of Defence considers crucial to deterring Chinese pressure, Washington will certainly respond strongly

The idea is that Taiwan can maintain a deterrent capability without constant reliance on external suppliers. This signals the KMT's desire for greater independence in defence planning while also testing how willing the United States is to accept such a change.

The United States monitors developments in the Kuomintang and carefully analyses any moves that could affect defence cooperation.

Officials in Washington do not comment openly on intra-party relations in Taiwan, but they have made it clear that they expect existing contracts and programmes to continue without delay.

If the KMT attempts to slow or halt projects that the US Department of Defence considers crucial to deterring Chinese pressure, Washington will certainly respond strongly.

Cheng is aware of this, which is why she

emphasises in her statements that reviewing costs does not mean abandoning cooperation but rather adapting it to Taiwan's real capabilities.

Shedding the label of a 'pro-Chinese' party

China reacted immediately to the election of Cheng Li-wun. President Xi Jinping sent her a congratulatory message in which he reiterated his expectation that the Kuomintang would adhere to the "1992 consensus"—a framework Beijing regards as the basis for dialogue on Taiwan's future. The essence of that message is not congratulations but a request.

Beijing sees the new leader as an interlocutor through whom it can assess Taiwan's readiness for political contacts.

For Cheng, this carries a real risk: if she shows too much willingness to cooperate, she will be accused of pandering to China; if she refuses contact, she will lose the argument that a policy of dialogue reduces the danger of conflict.

Cheng insists on "technical" and "non-political" forms of cooperation as the first steps towards calming tensions

Domestically, the KMT has long tried to shed the label of a "pro-Chinese" party. Cheng knows that any move, which can be interpreted as a concession to Beijing, will be used against her.

That is why she insists on "technical" and "non-political" forms of cooperation – civil aviation, health, fisheries – as the first steps towards calming tensions. This approach avoids symbolism and achieves functionality.

Within the party, Cheng must ensure discipline. The KMT is traditionally diverse, with an older conservative wing more inclined towards a relationship with China and younger

generations emphasising Taiwan's independence within the status quo. Her ability to bring the two factions together will be crucial for the party's stability.

If successful, the KMT could once again become a political force that decides key state issues.

Maintaining balance under pressure from both sides

The further development of the situation depends on how well Cheng can maintain a balance between domestic politics, Chinese expectations, and the international context. If she tries to open channels with Beijing too quickly, she risks losing public support and arousing Washington's suspicions.

If she is too cautious, her policy will lose its meaning and be considered a rhetorical change without real substance. Beijing is likely to offer limited economic and cultural contacts in the coming months to test the KMT's willingness to cooperate.

The next presidential and local elections in 2028 will be the moment when it will be seen whether the policy of calming tensions pays off

Whether China turns that strategy into dialogue or pressure will depend on how Cheng reacts. Her actual political space will also be measured by the domestic calendar – the next presidential and local elections in 2028 will be the moment when it will be seen whether the policy of calming tensions pays off or disappears under pressure from both sides.

If that period saw the stabilisation of military activities around Taiwan, the continuation of trade without new sanctions, and a minimal number of incidents at sea, she would be able to claim that she had succeeded in introducing a more realistic approach.

If, however, China continues its military pressure and the United States maintains a hard line, her "active stability" policy could be declared a failure.

Between Chinese pressure and American support

Taiwan remains caught between two powers that view it through the lens of their own interests. The DPP has developed a policy based on deterrence and close cooperation with the United States.

The KMT is now seeking to reintroduce the concept of risk control through dialogue. There is no guarantee that this approach will succeed, but it represents an attempt to keep Taiwan safe without ever-increasing costs and constant tensions.



The KMT is now seeking to reintroduce the concept of risk control through dialogue – Taiwan Strait

Cheng Li-wun leads the Kuomintang at a time when Taiwan is searching for a viable policy between Chinese pressure and American support.

Her role is not to change the direction of the country's foreign policy, but to showcase the possibility of conducting politics without constant confrontation.

If she succeeds in restoring technical contacts with China, maintaining cooperation with the United States, and retaining the trust of the domestic public, the KMT will once again become a relevant political force.

If she fails, the party will remain in opposition without real influence, and her leadership will be remembered as a period of wasted efforts.

For now, Cheng is acting cautiously and without unnecessary statements. She is maintaining relations with Washington, refusing concessions to Beijing, and avoiding political advantage through rhetoric.

She aims to slow the pace of confrontation and reduce the risk of misunderstandings that could escalate into a more serious incident.

Her policy is streamlined and focused on risk management, not political symbolism. Under the current circumstances, this is probably the most realistic approach Taiwan can take.