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Questions about China dominate Taiwanese elections, says Nathan Batto

But not necessarily in the way you might think

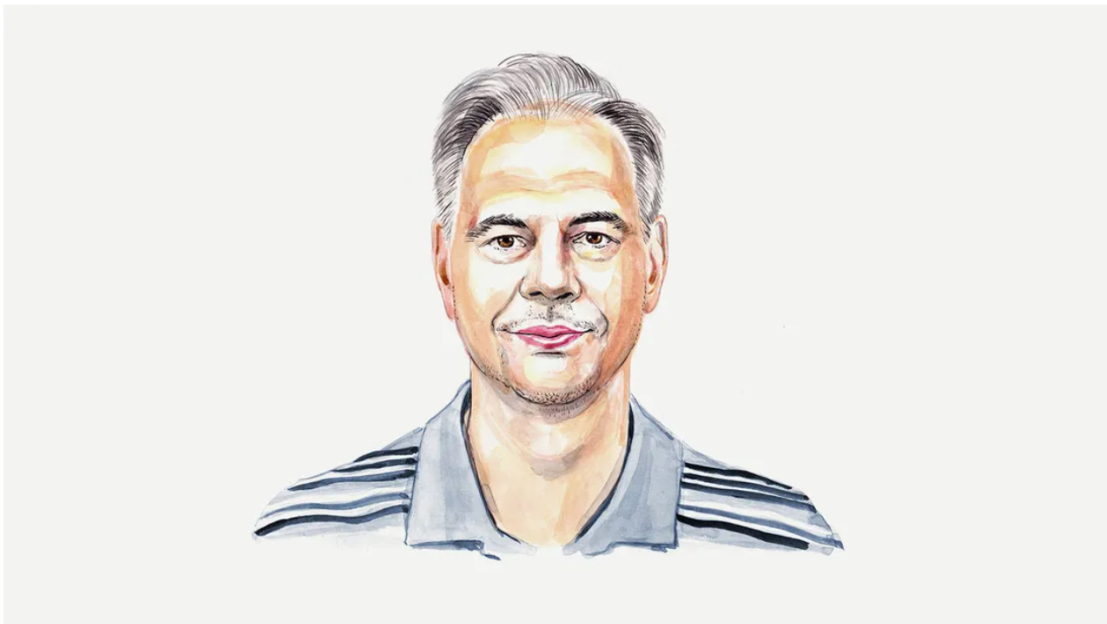


IMAGE: DAN WILLIAMS

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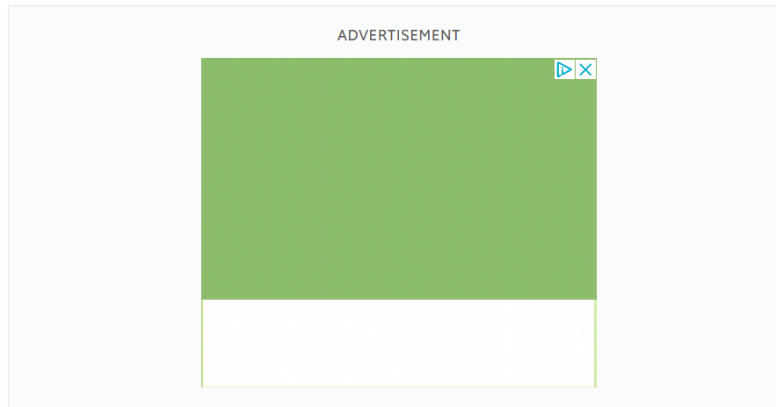
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WHEN OUTSIDERS think about Taiwan's elections, they often look for answers to the grand questions of the island's future: does this election indicate that Taiwan will move towards unification with China, or towards becoming a formally independent country? Meanwhile, people on the ground often note that surprisingly little of the political discussion is actually about China. Candidates usually spend most of their time talking about

other issues, such as nuclear power, high consumer prices, health-care spending and public housing. As a result, analysts often argue that Taiwanese voters have moved past questions about China and now care more about issues that affect their day-to-day quality of life.

Both types of observers are misguided. China is always at the heart of Taiwanese national elections, but the considerations are always more complex than simply unification or independence.

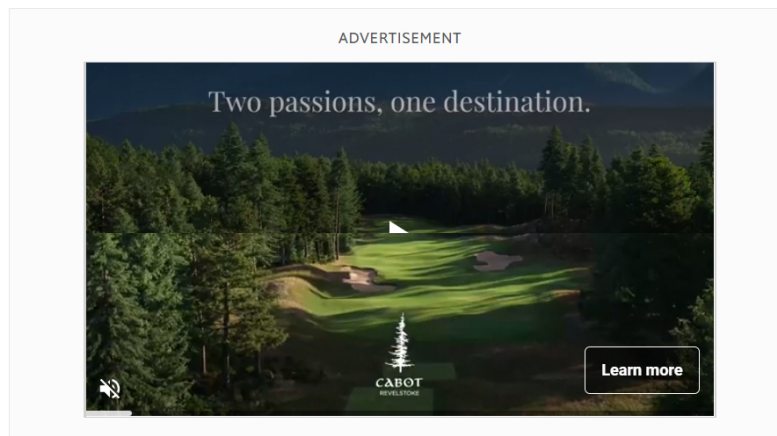


The dominant political cleavage in Taiwan is based on attitudes towards China. However, in this context, “China” does not necessarily narrowly refer to the People’s Republic of China (PRC). At the most basic level, Taiwan’s party system is built around national identity: do you think of yourself as Taiwanese, Chinese or both?

There are many different reasons why different people give different answers to this question, including when they or their ancestors came to Taiwan, their preferred language, their religious practices, their educational experiences, how they are treated when they travel abroad and how they feel about the history, literature and art of China. Those factors have, in turn, shaped answers to many more immediate political questions over the years, including the transition to democracy, military reform, education policy and budgetary priorities.

Of course, this cleavage is not based entirely on internal considerations. How to deal with the colossus across the Taiwan Strait is increasingly an existential question for Taiwan. As the PRC’s economic and military power grows, it becomes ever more critical for Taiwan to find the right blend of international diplomacy, cross-strait policy, national security and economic strategies to discourage aggression. Not surprisingly, though, people with exclusively Taiwanese identity and those with some degree of Chinese identity tend to give very different answers to questions about how best to respond to the challenges posed by China.

Taiwan’s two main political parties reflect this split over identity. The governing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has a strong Taiwanese identity and wants to keep the PRC at arm’s length, while the opposition Kuomintang (KMT), whose full name translates as the Chinese Nationalist Party, generally favours more exchanges and economic co-operation with the PRC.



The two parties are often caricatured by outsiders and each other: the DPP as radically pro-independence, and the KMT as radically pro-unification. A better description is that the DPP is against policies that might eventually lead towards unification and the KMT is against policies that might eventually lead towards formal independence.

In the short term, however, neither political elites nor the general public are clamouring for a swift resolution of Taiwan's status. There is a broad consensus on maintaining the status quo, though the two parties disagree on how best to do so. The DPP has stressed deterrence by building up Taiwan's military capacity and locating Taiwan squarely in the international community of democracies. The KMT has advocated appeasing the PRC by acceding to its precondition for the resumption of official engagements: acceptance of "One China", the principle that there is only one China and that both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to it.

The framing of the China question makes quite a difference. In the election of 2020 the discussion was about the suppression of freedom in Hong Kong and fears that such a tragedy might be repeated in Taiwan. This framing helped the DPP. In 2012 and 2016 the question was about the extent and speed of economic integration with China. This worked to the KMT's advantage in 2012, but four years later, in the wake of massive student protests against further trade agreements, it helped the DPP. This year many people are looking at the conflict in Ukraine, and their discussions about China are often about avoiding war, a framing heavily promoted by the KMT.

Of course, Taiwan faces many of the same economic and social problems that challenge other countries. Precisely because these issues are orthogonal to the main political cleavage, politicians tend to spend a disproportionate amount of time talking about them. Not everyone cares primarily about national identity, and even those who do want to be reassured that their side has a viable plan for everyday governance. This year candidates have spent a lot of time and energy discussing public housing, the low birth rate, inflation, health-care spending, energy policy and internet fraud.

The parties do not have clear, long-standing, opposing positions on these issues, so candidates have to educate voters about what they

plan to do and why it makes sense. When the candidates have similar positions on an issue, they argue about who would do a better job at it.

In this election the DPP has another factor to consider: voter fatigue. After eight years in power, the governing party finds itself attracting blame from opposition politicians for all of society's problems. They also insist that the DPP has become highly corrupt, though these accusations are poorly supported. Many people simply want a change.

In the end, the great majority of votes in this election will be determined by attitudes about China. But this will not be a referendum on unification or independence. Rather, national identity and judgments about the best way to maintain the status quo will be the most important considerations. ■

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