

Taiwan's Opposition Weighs Shelving Drive for Independence

By Debra Mao and Adela Lin Aug 20, 2014 1:53 PM GMT+0800 3 Comments Email

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Taiwan's main opposition party is rethinking its stance on independence from China in a bid to win back the presidency it lost in 2008.

A proposal with the backing of at least 40 party delegates calls for a freeze on the independence clause in the [Democratic Progressive Party](#)'s platform. Maintaining that stance could cost the party 5.75 percentage points in the 2016 election, according to a study by a former DPP government official to be published this month. In 2012, DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen lost by 6 percentage points.

The debate highlights how China's economic embrace has ratcheted up the cost of confrontation for Taiwan's leaders. Anti-mainland rhetoric is no longer the vote-winner it was in 2000, when the DPP's Chen Shui-bian began eight years as president, during which his independence push drew threats of invasion from the mainland.

"If you go to the headquarters of the DPP and ask, 'Do you have a friend or relative doing business in [China](#),' more than 70 percent would say yes," said Alexander Huang, a professor of strategy and war-gaming at Taiwan's Tamkang University, who isn't a DPP member. "It is a relationship to be managed skillfully, you cannot cut it off. No matter who is in power in Taipei, China will be the number one trading partner, that is the reality."

Tone Change

The 40 senior party members, or about 10 percent of the DPP's party congress, are seeking to halt discussion of a clause in the party's charter that refers to building a Taiwanese republic, and establishing a separate state from China. The clause has been in the party's platform for more than two decades.

The proposal reflects concerns that its rhetoric makes a relationship with China, its main trading partner, impossible. Trade almost doubled to \$197.2 billion since Chen left power and the Kuomintang's Ma Ying-jeou became president in 2008 with a pledge of closer ties with China.

The stakes are high for the opposition party ahead of mayoral elections scheduled for November. With Ma's [approval rating](#) hovering at 14 percent, up from a record low of 9 percent in 2013, a DPP return to power is within reach, said Chen-yuan Tung, the mainland affairs official in Chen's government who authored the study on the DPP's electoral gap.

Extreme Rhetoric

Tung, a professor at National Chengchi University, counted the number of voters in the 2012 presidential elections who said they voted for Ma instead of Tsai, the DPP chairwoman, because of "cross-strait issues."

According to a Chinese-language online prediction [exchange](#) founded in part by Tung, the odds are now 55 to 45 for a DPP victory in 2016.

"Pointed and extreme rhetoric should be avoided," Tung said in an Aug. 8 interview, referring to pro-independence remarks by members of the opposition. He said the pro-independence stance prevents the DPP from having meaningful interaction with the Chinese government, which in turn raises public concerns of regional instability.

Taiwan has governed itself since 1949, when Chinese Communist party Chairman [Mao Zedong](#) forced the Kuomintang general Chiang Kai-shek to retreat to the island during a civil war. China still aims more than 1,200 missiles at Taiwan, according to a Pentagon report this year, and under Chinese law, the [People's Liberation Army](#) is mandated to invade if Taipei declares independence.

New Pragmatism

The island's sovereignty was once such a hot-button issue that [Richard Nixon](#) in 1960 assailed [John F. Kennedy](#) for refusing to commit to a nuclear defense of the Chiang government's rights to Kinmen and Matsu, outlying Taiwan islands which were also claimed by China.

"A freeze would be part of the new pragmatism we see in the DPP," said William Stanton, Director of the Center for Asia Policy at National Tsing Hua University in [Taiwan](#). "It's motivated by the desire to do whatever is necessary to defeat" the ruling Kuomintang party, he said.

Tsai said in a statement last week the party would "work on creating new ways of communicating and interacting" with China to promote peaceful ties. She asked a party committee to review the 40 lawmakers' idea. Former DPP lawmaker Julian Kuo, who led the bid to freeze discussion of independence, said the purpose is to appeal to undecided voters in 2016, when Taiwan elects a new president.

Die-Hard Supporters

Tsai has said Taiwan's independence remains a pursuit and an ideal for the DPP and called accusations that it has hindered her party's ability to manage cross-strait relations a "myth." DPP spokeswoman Hsu Chia-ching said the party's position on cross-strait relations has evolved over time and that Taiwan is already a sovereign and independent country.

A poll from Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council this year showed the percentage of people who want to maintain the status quo in Taiwan indefinitely has grown to 28.2 percent from 19.3 percent in 2000. At the same time, the percentage of those demanding independence immediately was 6.6 percent, within the 3 percentage-point margin of error from the previous figure of 5.8 percent. Some 8.4 percent wanted cross-strait unification when asked this year, compared to 21.4 percent previously.

Concern that Taiwan is getting too close to China -- and losing its autonomy -- boiled over in March, when riot police cleared thousands of demonstrators from Taiwan's cabinet compound with water cannons and batons after they stormed the premises to protest a cross-strait trade deal.

What's also not clear is how much support the DPP candidate would lose from within the party if it gave up its stance on independence. The DPP risks losing "die-hard" supporters if it changes its charter, said Huang of Tamkang University.

"China means opportunity and China also means challenge and danger," Huang said.

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