

DPP's U.S. Strategy in the Wake of the Nov. 29 Elections

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The landslide defeat of the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) in the Nov. 29 nine-in-one local elections surprised many Taiwanese and foreign observers. Conventional wisdom has it that the chances of the main opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) of winning the presidential election in 2016 have greatly improved. Yet this assessment fails to take into account the two factors absent from the local elections, i.e., the United States and China, which will surely constitute challenges to the DPP.

The China factor will come to the fore in 2016. Befitting the posture of a country that asserts “great power” status, China will wage a proxy battle through Washington. The brighter election prospects become for the DPP candidates, the more pressure will Beijing exert on the DPP via the United States. As the DPP presidential candidate will want to prevent a replay of the “lesson” that U.S. officials gave then presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen during a U.S. visit in 2011, his or her subjective perception of U.S. pressure will heighten this time. Stable or improved cross-strait relations are in the strategic interest of the United States. However, U.S. experts and certain members of the Washington policy-making circle also continue to maintain that acceptance and cooperation from Beijing are essential conditions. Therefore, the typical way of exerting pressure is to demand that Taipei explain how it intends to gain acceptance and cooperation from Beijing.

Based on the hypothetical premise that China does not trust the DPP, Washington has focused on demanding the DPP declare its stance on the “1992 Consensus.” U.S. experts have already defined the nine-in-one elections as local ones and the outcome unrelated to cross-strait ties, thus indirectly refuting that the Taiwanese public voted to support DPP cross-strait policy, effectively denying the existence of a “Taiwan Consensus.” In the coming year, Washington officials will therefore continue to bombard the DPP with the same questions they have been asking. Given the rapid development of cross-strait ties since 2008, U.S. pressure will not necessarily stop at the “1992 Consensus” so that the DPP will likely face even less palatable subjects.

In order to confront such foreseeable pressure, the DPP should launch preparations in three stages: First, it should establish discourse, then prepare offensive-defensive game plan, and finally tidy up loose ends. Unless the DPP radically changes its long-held stance, it is not expected to come up with a discourse that Beijing can readily accept. Yet, the DPP can maneuver to “counterbalance,” “divert” or “delay” pressure that cannot be eliminated through discourse alone, in order to work out language that the U.S. can understand and that will not trigger outright opposition.

1. Counterbalance: Some tactics to tune down the volume of criticism against the DPP have

been used and sometimes proven successful in the past. These would involve using the legislature to counterbalance the executive branch, playing off the opposition party against the ruling party or pitching hawkish scholars in the “blue camp” against pro-China “red” academics. However, the cultivation of allies requires great resources for reciprocation and long-term social networking; another requirement is a favorable political situation in the United States such as a weak president facing a dominant, opposition-controlled Congress and/or challenged by hawkish presidential candidates. Costly counterbalancing tactics also entail the risk of trading short-term gains for long-term losses as the U.S. administration has retaliated in the past by shutting down communication channels.

2. Diversion: Since cross-strait relations are not the single issue of concern for Washington’s Taiwan policy, it is possible to swap topics to disperse pressure. Taipei has tried using diplomacy, defense or trade issues to divert U.S. attention from cross-strait relations. Given that trade is farthest from cross-strait relations and has always listed high on the agenda for past Democratic administrations, trade-related issues have been played most frequently. Yet, if this approach is to produce obvious effect, the DPP must be prepared to make major concessions and risk public backlash at home. Furthermore, since Beijing has the deeper pockets, it can fight back with the same tactics on more fronts.

3. Delay: Another tactics to disperse pressure is trade time for maneuvering space. Since official exchanges between Taiwan and the U.S. are highly institutionalized, the party in power can use different exchange settings to sound out the U.S. position. However, the opposition DPP has

no such advantage. With no advance team to test waters, the presidential candidate’s only U.S. trip will inevitably be the showdown.

Given that it will be difficult to clinch victory through discourse and that any offensive and defensive measures can only reduce pressure, the DPP is expected to wrap up its efforts by carrying out damage control. The further away from voting day damage occurs the more time to recover and minimize its impact. However, rival candidates and those exerting pressure will also have more opportunities to wreak havoc.

The cash-strapped and under-staffed DPP has limited capability to manage external contacts and exchanges. As the ties between China and the United States deepen, it faces even stiffer obstacle. On top of that, the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party have long colluded to sabotage the DPP in Washington. Against this backdrop, the party is in no position to be optimistic. While the 2014 local election victory brought exultation, an uphill battle lies right ahead. **BT**

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