

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had been eagerly anticipating Taiwan's presidential and legislative elections this year ever since President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) 2016 victory upset its plans, and it has worked hard since then to frustrate Tsai's efforts to improve the nation's economy and forge cross-strait dialogue.

Its "united front" efforts have let slip the dogs of war to infiltrate, distort and manipulate in an attempt to see the reins of government in Taiwan returned to the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), which Beijing regards as far more amenable to its cause.

Taiwanese voters on Saturday last week once again thwarted Beijing's plans, sending a clear message that, on the level of cross-strait relations at least — the scale of the presidential victory was not reflected in the party vote in the legislative elections — they preferred the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) vision over that of the KMT, and felt more comfortable under Tsai's stewardship than what the KMT's candidate was offering.

The results should have been a confirmation that 2016 was not simply an inconvenient blip, and was a true representation of the Taiwanese public will. It would be reasonable for Beijing to adjust its calculations accordingly.

However, as the legislative elections showed, the KMT has retained its core voter base. Some of its supporters hope for unification, others remember the heyday of Taiwan's economic miracle under the KMT before China opened its market to the world, associating the KMT with economic prosperity.

Yet as time goes on, the proportion of the electorate that remembers this heyday will shrink, just as the proportion of the electorate that has known nothing but life in a democratic system, and who identify with Taiwan over China, increases.

If the CCP wants to win Taiwanese hearts and minds, and was hoping for the KMT's assistance, time is trickling away.

In addition to the aforementioned “natural independence” effect, the CCP has to accept that the DPP will continue to be the ruling party, at least in the short term.

Not only does Beijing have another four years of a Tsai presidency to contend with, it should prepare for the possibility that vice president-elect William Lai (賴清德), her natural successor within the DPP, could succeed her as president. The former Tainan mayor is more openly pro-independence than Tsai, and he enjoys broad support within the party.

After four years of rejecting dialogue with Tsai because of her refusal to enter talks with the so-called “1992 consensus” as a prerequisite, Beijing might now be wise to soften its approach and compromise on its demands, but it appears to be in no mood to do so yet, judging by the reaction yesterday of China’s Taiwan Affairs Office.

Office spokesman Ma Hsiao-kuang (馬曉光) told a Beijing news conference that the CCP would continue to insist on the “1992 consensus” as a prerequisite to dialogue.

Advocating Taiwan independence was the greatest threat to cross-strait peace and stability, and Beijing was determined to frustrate these efforts, he said, citing word-for-word parts of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s (習近平) speech to the opening of the CCP’s 19th National Congress on Oct. 18, 2017.

Nobody should obstruct the peaceful and stable development of cross-strait relations, he said, without a hint of irony.

Finally, he reiterated Beijing’s contention that Taiwan belongs to all Chinese, including the Taiwanese, and Taiwan’s future was for all Chinese people to decide together.

One could hope that Ma’s rhetoric was merely the opening sally in anticipation of engaging in pragmatic dialogue. Unfortunately, nothing the CCP has done in the past suggests that this is likely.

PRC's stance unchanged by election

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