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***SPECIAL COMMENTARY:
DIVERGENT PATHS - TSAI IN THE U.S. & MA IN CHINA***

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Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen will visit the United States this week. The visit is part of an established practice dating back to the 1990s, whereby Taiwan presidents transit through the U.S. on their way to visit Central and South American allies. Such transits raise the profile of Taiwan while allowing engagement directly with friends, supporters, and U.S. government officials. Tsai's visit reinforces the relationship with the U.S. and fortifies her domestic position that our bilateral relationship is essential to Taiwan's health and well-being.

Former Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou of the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) is also currently visiting China, on a trip from March 27 to April 7. This is the first time a former Taiwan president has traveled to China since the Republic of China government retreated to Taiwan in 1949. To minimize the domestic political controversy surrounding his trip, Ma has specified that he will not visit Beijing or meet with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chairman Xi Jinping. Ma's visit to China coincides with President Tsai Ing-wen's visit to the United States and should be viewed through the prism of maneuvering by Taiwan's political parties ahead of the island's presidential election on January 13, 2024.

President Ma's visit follows the recent trip to China by KMT Vice Chairman Hsia Li-yan, who likely laid some groundwork for Ma's visit. Hsia's trip was framed as a party-to-party engagement. That has been the recent bedrock for engagement between the two sides, famously peaking in a 2015 meeting between Mr. Ma and Mr. Xi as heads of their respective parties.

Hsia and Ma's trips to China are directly connected to the 2024 presidential election. The KMT is making the case that improved ties with China should be a cornerstone of Taiwan's next administration, with the KMT the only party capable of delivering on that promise. That will be a crucial issue throughout 2023 as the KMT attempts to demonstrate its ability to engage directly and positively with Beijing.

That the Ma and Tsai visits take place sequentially is important; they paint a very different picture of what we can expect from each party should they successfully secure the Taiwan presidency next year.

America's evolving response to China has Taiwan at the epicenter. Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo and Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen have questioned the centrality of the U.S.-Taiwan commercial relationship. However, Taiwan's economic importance, geography, democracy, and military are essential players in the U.S. effort to counteract Chairman Xi's attempt to reconstitute Asia under his control.

President Tsai has been an important U.S. partner in that effort for 7+ years. However, we know less about her possible successor – the DPP's likely Presidential candidate Lai Ching-te – and any adjustments he may make to Taiwan's external relations. Yet Lai would likely maintain similar relationships with the U.S. and Japan, even if many of the personalities around him will be relatively new. The foreign policy and national security officials that have been indispensable to President



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Tsai's government are likely to retire, opening the door for a new stable of leadership.

The last KMT government under President Ma – along with the contemporaneous Obama government in the U.S. – pursued accommodationist policies toward China. That resulted in Chinese interests taking primacy, and precipitated a U.S. arms sale freeze from 2011 to 2015 that contributed mightily to the current military power imbalance in the Taiwan Strait. Both governments believed that accommodating China would curb its regressive behavior – a calamitous mistake.

The KMT's likely candidate for president is New Taipei City Mayor Hou You-yi. Hou enjoys strong support in his constituency and has positive and broad name recognition across the island. He is inclined to run as the KMT candidate if it's offered to him, but not on a short leash from the KMT old guard. To craft a more attractive platform to independents and younger Taiwan voters, Hou wants a more independent campaign that will allow him some mobility regarding legacy KMT positions – including on China policy.

The KMT will mount a significant campaign to secure the Taiwan presidency. The United States – both the Biden Administration and the Republican Presidential candidates – should consider what a KMT government would mean for U.S. policy. The KMT has many superb senior foreign and defense policy voices who would populate a KMT government and who are likely to argue for continuity in U.S. and Japan relations. However, the old guard party leadership, including Ma, will act as a counterweight. They are instead looking to re-ignite Taiwan-China engagement, possibly at the expense of America and its allies.

In the cauldron of America's own 2024 election, this could feel like Taiwan is pivoting away from the United States. Doing so would fuel negative voices emanating from Commerce, Treasury, and isolationist voices in Congress, all insisting that Taiwan is the problem. That would allow China to capitalize on perceived or real fissures in U.S.-Taiwan relations to the detriment of peace and security in the Taiwan Strait.

The U.S. is not a disinterested party. Who runs Taiwan and what policies they will pursue have real implications for American national interests. However, the U.S. should not repeat its September 2011 meddling in Taiwan's elections. If democracy is to be a cornerstone of American foreign policy, election outcomes must be respected even if there are concerns over the impact of a new government.

The U.S. and China visits this week illustrate how significant a shift we might expect if Taiwan voters take a different path than the one they have been walking over the past 7+ years.

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