

Implications markedly differ depending on result

What’s at stake in Taiwan’s January polls?

Analysis
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It’s difficult to overstate the geopolitical significance of Taiwan’s upcoming presidential and legislative elections.

When the self-ruled island’s 19 million eligible voters head to the polls on Jan. 13, they will not only decide who handles everyday domestic issues. Depending on the outcome, the closely watched vote could also have markedly different security and economic implications for the entire region.

At stake is how Taipei will manage relations with China over the next four years amid worsening cross-strait ties and a heightened risk of conflict between Washington and Beijing, the latter of which hasn’t ruled out seizing the island by force, despite growing indications that the U.S. may be willing to defend it.

The strategically located island is now considered the greatest potential flash point between China and the United States — Taiwan’s main weapons supplier and most vocal supporter — a point that was reiterated by Chinese leader Xi Jinping when he met U.S. President Joe Biden in San Francisco last month.

While a Chinese invasion of the island is unlikely anytime soon, Beijing remains concerned about what it sees as Washington’s attempt to gradually change the status quo by, for instance, strengthening security ties with Taiwan.

Exacerbating Beijing’s concerns is the island’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which is favored to win a third consecutive term. The traditionally independence-minded party maintains that China and Taiwan are separate entities and that the island is de facto independent — a position that clashes with Beijing’s view of it as a Chinese province.

Fueling the tensions is Beijing’s ongoing

military and economic coercion of the island, as well as the increasing militarization of the region. With dangerously close encounters at sea and in the air on the rise, there are growing concerns that a conflict could be triggered by a miscalculation, particularly as Washington and Beijing adopt firmer postures on Taiwan amid their intensifying geostrategic rivalry.

“The Taiwan election will influence the degree of risk perceived by the Asia-Pacific region, not only in terms of a possible war over the island, but also supply chain continuity, and a general worsening of Sino-U.S. relations that would be felt across the Asia-Pacific,” said Chase Blazek, East Asia analyst at U.S.-based geopolitics and intelligence firm RANE.

Whoever wins the pivotal election will face the daunting task of managing relations with both superpowers, a delicate balancing act, but one that also offers the new leader an opportunity to tamp down regional tensions.

Leading what has become a three-way race to succeed the DPP’s President Tsai Ing-wen, who will step down after eight years because of term limits, is her vice president and fellow party stalwart, Lai Ching-te.

As of early December, polls put the 64-year-old Lai several points ahead of the main opposition Kuomintang (KMT) candidate, New Taipei Mayor Hou Yu-ih, who has criticized the DPP for stoking tensions with China and called for returning to a policy of engagement with Beijing.

In third place currently is the Taiwan’s People’s Party (TPP) candidate, Ko Wen-je, a relative newcomer to national politics who is hoping to capitalize on voter dissatisfaction with both parties. Ko has sought to position his party in the middle of his two rivals, advocating a mix of deterrence and dialogue in dealing with China to avoid possible aggression and foster peace between the two sides.

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Families wait after being evicted from a squat in a disused industrial building not far from the Paris 2024 Olympic Athlete’s Village in Ile-Saint-Denis, near Paris, in April. REUTERS

Paris squatters evicted ahead of Games

LAYLI FOROUDI
PARIS
REUTERS

Camelia Toldea has packed her family’s suitcases ready for a quick exit from an abandoned building where she and dozens of other Roma live, fearful the squat will be next in a wave of evictions near Paris’ 2024 Olympic Games facilities.

Romanian-born Toldea, her husband and three children are among thousands of migrants, asylum-seekers and Roma caught up in evictions in the north Paris suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis that are aggravating the city’s homelessness problem ahead of the Games.

More than half of the structures being built or renovated for the Summer Games, which start in July, are located in Seine-Saint-Denis, including the under-construction Olympic Village.

Spreading east from the river Seine and home to more than 1.6 million people, Seine-Saint-Denis is the poorest department in France. With asylum-seekers and Roma taking shelter there, it has the largest number of squats and informally built slums of any

department in the country, according to a 2021 report by the housing authority.

At least 60 squats in Seine-Saint-Denis were shut down in 2023, according to a tally based on administrative and court documents and interviews with more than 50 squatters, lawyers, prosecutors, social workers, activists and local politicians, in what advocates and some officials said appeared to be a policy aimed at beautifying the area for the sporting event.

The Seine-Saint-Denis branch of France’s interior ministry, known as the prefecture, said the squat evictions were not connected to the Olympic Games, but follow normal legal procedures. These were made faster by a new law passed in July that also imposes large fines and prison sentences for illegal occupation.

Last year, the prefecture said, there were just under 80 squat closures. The tally of 60 evictions this year is almost certainly an undercount, advocates said. The prefecture has not complied with a freedom of information ruling that it should provide data for squat evictions from 2018 to 2023.

The squat closures are pushing more vulnerable people into unstable living situations after the government reduced social hotel places used for emergency housing in the suburb by 1,000, roughly a 10% cut, according to Valerie Puvilland, operational director of Interlogement 93, the operator that manages emergency housing for the state in the Seine-Saint-Denis region.

At least 3,000 people can be identified as having been affected by the squat closures. Some are ending up on the streets of Seine-Saint-Denis and other Paris districts, while others were sent to distant parts of France, advocates and squatters said.

“The Olympic Games are adding additional pressure because there are fewer hotels renting rooms for social cases,” said Lea Filoche, the deputy mayor of Paris in charge of housing, citing decisions by some hotels to be ready for an influx of visitors. The number of hotels affected could not be independently confirmed.

Of 32 closed squats for which an address could be located, 13 were within 2 kilometers of a main Olympic site in the 236-square kilometer Seine-Saint-Denis according to the tally.

One — an old cement factory a stone’s throw away from the future athletes village

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Three matters loom for north Hokkaido to face issues of Rapidus, seafood and “2024 problem” **REGIONAL, PAGE 3**

ISSN 0289-1956 © THE JAPAN TIMES, LTD., 2023

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Suika Game: How a projector app went viral

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The sequence goes from cherry to strawberry, grapes and satsuma orange, and then to persimmon, apple, pear, peach, pineapple, melon ... and finally watermelon.

If you immediately recognize what this means, you’re no doubt a big fan of Suika Game — which translates as Watermelon Game — a ¥240 or \$2.99 puzzle video game on the Nintendo Switch that went viral this year.

Currently, it’s ranked No. 1 in Nintendo Switch software downloads, topping Dragon Quest Monsters: The Dark Prince as well as Super Mario Bros. Wonder. In addition, Suika Game was the top-trending phrase on YouTube in 2023, according to Eviry, a market research firm focused on the platform.

The Tetris-like game involves the player stacking various fruits in a box without them overflowing, similar to a popular video game in China called Big Watermelon. To prevent the cute-looking fruits from overflowing, the player must match two of the same fruit, making them form the next biggest fruit in



the cycle, until ultimately a watermelon is created.

Players need to be strategic in placing the fruits, as they can’t predict which fruit will drop after the next, or if a nearby fruit will pop when a merger happens. Game reviewers often describe the game as “addictive.”

“It’s like a mix of Tetris and 2048 but with adorable fruit,” Julia Lee wrote in an October review on games website Polygon. “There’s

An Aladdin X staff member plays Suika Game on its home projector in Tokyo on Friday. Suika Game was originally developed for the company’s line of home projectors.
KANAKO TAKAHARA

more to it than just dropping the same fruit on to each other.”

But what is surprising is that Suika Game was developed by home projector startup Aladdin X to be installed on its products.

Tao Cheng, the Chinese founder of Aladdin X’s predecessor popin, which was a University of Tokyo venture startup, wanted his three children to spend more time together as a family with the projector — whether that was watching movies or YouTube or playing games — instead of everyone holed up in their rooms on their smartphones and tablet computers.

“We wanted to make the time spent with family more valuable,” said Takehiro Okamoto, a senior manager at Aladdin X.

Suika Game was one of about two dozen apps that the company developed — from one teaching hiragana to another for yoga classes.

To make the game available to a wider audience, Aladdin X made Suika Game downloadable on the Nintendo Switch in December 2021.

Suika Game only registered some 2,000

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