

Taiwanese nationalism is on the march. The status quo is about to change, predict Malcolm Cook and Craig Meer.

Taiwan's fiercely contested presidential election in March proved that the old status quo between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) is unsustainable. For the people of Taiwan, the cross-strait status quo is now a remnant of a bygone era, and increasingly less viable domestically as a convenient legal fiction for maintaining the peace.

The US-sponsored division of sovereignty that emerged from the Chinese Civil War in the 1940s laid the roots of the status quo. Until recently, this division has been upheld with a series of political and military claims and compromises crafted between Beijing, Taipei and Washington.

Beijing claims jurisdiction over Taiwan, threatens to use force if it formally declares independence (backed up by some 500 ballistic missiles aimed at the island), and insists that all countries that recognise the PRC hold to a one-China policy. Taiwan retains a constitution that refers to the island as a liberated province of the Republic of China (RoC), and proclaims that one day it will reunite with the mainland under a framework called the Guidelines for National Reunification. Washington formally recognises the PRC, but provides Taiwan with defensive weaponry and possibly direct military assistance under the Taiwan Relations Act.

The absence to date of a cross-strait hot war suggests that the status quo is fundamentally stable. Beijing and Taipei's shared support for reunification and one China, until recently, had been a conceptual bridge linking the two sides of the strait. US President George Bush's rebuke last December of Taiwanese President Chen's plan to conduct a 'defensive referendum' on the mainland military threat contained more than a hint of disbelief. Why would Chen even conceive of burning the conceptual bridge spanning the strait? Even sophisticated analyses wrote off the plan as irresponsible wedge politics, designed to mobilise Chen's support base ahead of the poll and reverse his sagging popularity.

But leaders do not operate in a vacuum. They must respond to popular political trends. After more than two decades of democratisation, Taiwan is no longer home to a serious reunification debate. Local politicians now appeal to a constituency that is extremely protective of its de facto independence vis-à-vis communist China. All the major political parties on the island, including Chen Shui-bian's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the once supreme Kuomintang (KMT), espouse views on cross-strait relations that are a variation on the independence theme rather than an alternative to it. The bridge is burning.

There is a simmering ethnic dimension to this political shift that Chen's recent campaign sought to exploit. Taiwan is home to a majority of native-born Taiwanese and to the descendants of those who fled to the island with the remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's mainland government in the 1940s, so-called mainlanders.

Historically, ethnic Taiwanese have been disenfranchised politically, and have been more likely to favour a fundamentalist interpretation of the independence goal, including juridical independence from China. Mainlanders have traditionally controlled the commanding heights of the RoC state, and while refusing to negotiate with the PRC on reunification, have been more likely to hold onto some vision of a non-communist one China. The ongoing resolution of the political imbalance between the two ethnic groups that has accompanied Taiwan's democratisation has led to today's call for independence.

How these national identity issues pan out in survey data is difficult to interpret. While around 70 per cent of Taiwanese still support the status quo in general—this figure shows remarkable consistency over nearly three decades—this is heavily contingent on the likelihood of a Chinese attack. Some surveys put the current demand for complete legal independence, minus the

Chinese military threat, at more than 50 per cent of the population. This sentiment is new in Taiwan, and is gathering momentum.

The 50 per cent figure has an uncanny parallel. Chen Shui-bian triumphed on 20 March against the KMT's Lien Chan with 50.11 per cent of votes cast. This is the DPP's best result ever. In 1996, the DPP presidential candidate only won 21 per cent of the vote. In 2000, Chen only won 39 per cent. In the past, Chen's campaign strategy of putting Taiwan nationalism at the forefront would have guaranteed defeat. However, this time, Chen's emotive call to *ai Taiwan* (love Taiwan) drowned out Lien's message of tactful conciliation towards Beijing. We can expect the DPP to run a similar campaign for the legislative elections in December.

The socio-political forces in Taiwan that gave rise to the ballot in the first place will not go away. Beijing, Washington, and its allies, must think seriously and creatively about how to manage cross-strait relations in a post-status quo era. Either that or gird themselves for conflict.

Malcolm Cook is Asia Pacific program director at the Lowy Institute for International Policy and Craig Meer is a postdoctoral fellow at the Academia Sinica, Taiwan