

## TAIWAN: Ex-president's mainland visit reflects 2024 election posturing

Former Taiwan president Ma Ying-jeou visited mainland China on 28 March, becoming the island's first current or former president to visit the mainland since the end of the China's civil war in 1949. During his tenure from 2008 to 2016, Ma oversaw improved cross-strait relations, but his Kuomintang (KMT) party lost the presidency in 2016 to current president Tsai Ing-wen. Tsai and her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) have benefited from rising anti-mainland sentiment, especially among younger voters. The Hong Kong protests in 2020 accelerated this trend, decimating public support for recreating a version of Hong Kong's "one country, two systems" arrangement in Taiwan.

Though Ma did not directly address domestic Taiwanese politics, his visit must be viewed in the context of presidential elections scheduled for January 2024. Amid pressure on Taiwan from mainland military exercises, propaganda, espionage, and attempts to influence or coopt local politicians, KMT leaders may see an opportunity to demonstrate that they can stabilize relations. Tsai has expressed willingness to meet with mainland leaders, but Beijing has ignored her, as her tough anti-mainland stance makes engagement a non-starter.

The KMT defeated the DPP decisively in local elections in November, marking the DPP's worst performance ever and granting KMT momentum ahead of the presidential contest. Tsai, who had centered DPP's election messaging around anti-mainland themes, resigned as party chair following the defeat. Term limits prevent Ma from standing for election, but he remains a senior KMT member.

During his visit, Ma appeared to seek a balance between conciliatory rhetoric towards the mainland and respect for the Taiwanese public's increasingly distinct sense of national identity. His first destination was the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum. Beijing and Taipei both view Sun as a founding father. Ma's comments that "People on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are Chinese people" drew attention, but Ma used a term that refers to Chinese ethnicity rather than nationality. As president, Ma met with Xi Jinping in Singapore in 2015, becoming the first Taiwanese leader to meet a Communist Party general secretary. On his latest trip, Ma met with the director of the mainland's Taiwan Affairs Office, Song Tao, but the choice of Wuhan for that meeting avoids the appearance of an official visit.

The timing of Ma's trip reinforces the perception that he aims to strike a contrast with the DPP. Tsai will visit Los Angeles next week, where she will meet US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. The Taiwan Affairs Office urged US officials not to meet with Tsai and promised "resolute countermeasures."

Such countermeasures will likely stop short of the massive military exercises that the People's Liberation Army conducted in response to then-House speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August. After initially announcing that he, too, would visit the island, McCarthy opted instead for a meeting in the US — reportedly at Tsai's request. This request apparently reflects Tsai's concern that another major provocation would further weaken the DPP's political standing. Nevertheless, even a more

**Gabriel Wildau**  
Managing Director  
+1 (347) 714-4962  
gabriel.wildau@teneo.com

limited mainland response could still serve to reinforce KMT criticisms of the DPP's more confrontational posture towards the mainland.

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**Gabriel Wildau**  
Managing Director  
+1 (347) 714-4962  
[gabriel.wildau@teneo.com](mailto:gabriel.wildau@teneo.com)

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