



Defending a Country that Doesn't Exist with a Military that Isn't Allowed:

Japan-Taiwan Relations and Potential Defense Role

By **Steven F. Jackson**

Introduction

Taiwan isn't a country. Japan doesn't have a military. Israel doesn't have nuclear weapons. Russia isn't at war. Legal fictions abound in world politics, hiding inconvenient truths or harsh realities. The harsh reality is that conflict over Taiwan is on the horizon. Statements since 2022 by US President Biden have reinforced an implicit US security guarantee for the self-governing island democracy, such that there is little doubt that the United States will seek to defend Taiwan against an outright Chinese attack. The American commitment is real, but the United States cannot defend Taiwan alone. For that, it needs its allies to help and there is no ally more important for that task than Japan. The state visit of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to Washington in April 2024 further strengthened the US-Japan alliance



**Wilson
Center**



**Indo-Pacific
Program**

and brought the threat of China to Taiwan front and center: “We affirm the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of global security and prosperity” (White House 2024). And American journalists began to recognize Tokyo’s diplomatic importance: “Japan may be the U.S.’s most important ally” (Tharoor 2024).

This report will examine the evolution of Japanese defense and diplomatic policy, and informal relations with Taiwan in recent years, then will examine the rise of China and its determination to force a unification with Taiwan, by coercion or force if necessary. Next it will look at the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations, and the increased willingness to use Japan’s Self-Defense Force (SDF), and the potential contributions of the SDF to a conflict over Taiwan. This report argues that Japan is approaching an implicit commitment to the defense of Taiwan. But cautions are necessary; there are several factors that might cause Japan to waver in its implicit obligation or to be less effective than it could be.

The Japan Self-Defense Force: the Military that Isn't Allowed

Article 9 section 2 of the 1947 Japanese Constitution is well-known both in Japan and around the world for forswearing the possession of military forces and the right of war: “Land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.” Yet, Japan possesses a “Self-Defense Force” that has impressive land, air, and maritime capabilities: the Ground Self Defense Forces (陸上自衛隊/*Rikujō Jieitai*), Air Self Defense Forces (航空自衛隊/*Kōkū Jieitai*) and Maritime Self Defense Forces (海上自衛隊/*Kaijō Jieitai*). Its growing capabilities will be explored below.

The question of revising Japan's constitution and creating a formal military has been a central issue in Japanese politics since 1950 when US occupation authorities created the first “National Police Reserve” (警察予備隊/*Keisatsu Yobitai*) during the Korean War. Subsequent decades saw a constant political debate over the status of what in 1954 was renamed the “Self-Defense Forces,” or SDF (自衛隊/*Jieitai*), and whether their existence violated Article 9. The political Left in Japan argued that these forces did in fact violate the constitution, and urged their abolition, constraint, or limitation; whereas, the political Right argued either that they did not legally violate the constitution, or that the constitution itself needed to be either revised to allow these forces, or the formal interpretation of the constitution should be modified to accommodate Japanese forces.

In the early 2000s, Japanese public opinion continued the post-war self-conception of Japan as a “peace-loving power;” this was a sentiment shared with several other Western middle powers such as Canada, Germany, and elsewhere. The public desire for an active

security role in the Western alliance varied and, especially after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, declined. Japan, however, may be a partial exception beginning with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government of Koizumi Junichiro in 2001. Furthermore, the return of Shinzo Abe as Prime Minister of Japan at the end of 2012 following the almost complete collapse of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) allowed Abe, once his majority in the Diet was quite firm, to begin to return to a long-standing LDP priority, changing the interpretation of the Japanese constitution regarding the Self-Defense Forces, and more broadly an effort to create a foreign policy of Japan that would be more active in its use of military options (Rich, 2016a, 2016b). Japanese public opinion also seemed to be gradually changing to somewhat support the idea, although more hesitantly than Abe's group in the Diet: in 2006 fully 67% of Japanese surveyed opposed changing the constitution to allow a military and declaration of war; in 2013 that number was down to 56% (Pew Research Center, 2013, p. 4).

Initially, Japan's SDF was limited to activities in Japan and Japanese waters. As Japan experienced its “economic miracle” beginning in the 1960s and lasting until the early 1990s, pressure from its sole ally, the United States, grew to increase its responsibilities and spending. In January 1983, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone confirmed his predecessor's off-hand comment about Japan protecting the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) a full 1,000 nautical miles from Japan. This included a possible coverage of Taiwan: “The 1,000-mile SLOC defense concept became generally accepted as a genuine policy of Japan....the SLOC area was established as a zone which extends south from Tokyo to Guam, west from Guam to the Straits of Taiwan, and northeast

Defending a Country that Doesn't Exist with a Military That Isn't Allowed

from the Straits of Taiwan to Osaka. The extreme limits of this zone are approximately 1,000 nautical miles from Tokyo and the zone includes the most heavily used sea routes to Japan” (Morly, 1985, p. 27-28). In the 1996 Joint Declaration on Security with the United States, both sides stated the goal of bilateral cooperation in response to “situations that may arise in areas surrounding Japan and affect Japan’s peace and security,” which given its proximity would include Taiwan. However, as Yoshihide Soeya notes at this time, “no responsible policy makers in either Tokyo or Washington believes that a serious contingency calling for the invocation of the revised Guidelines was imminent over Taiwan, but the revised Guidelines theoretically apply to a Taiwan contingency, which the Japanese government has never denied” (Soeya, 2011, pp. 83-85). The spending issue was more difficult to change: Prime Minister Takeo Miki declared in 1976 a limit of defense spending at 1% of Japanese gross national product, roughly what it remained until 2021 (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2022).

This gradual movement toward overseas responsibilities was helped by the involvement of Japan’s SDF in a variety of international activities short of combat. In June 1992 the Diet passed the International Peace Cooperation Law to enable SDF troops to participate in UN Peace-Keeping Operations (PKOs) as a first step abroad that would be an “international contribution” (Soeya, 2011, p. 81). Japan has made a number of contributions to PKOs, in 1992 in Cambodia with GSDF as observers and engineers. After the 9/11 attacks in the United States, Maritime SDF units operated in the Indian Ocean from 2001 to 2010, and its anti-piracy patrols continue in the Gulf of Oman. In 2004, the Koizumi government sent a battalion of non-combatant troops to Iraq at American request, the “Japanese Iraq

Reconstruction and Support Group,” which lasted five years. But it is significant that none of these operations involved combat, allowing the continuation of the “peace-loving power” self-image of many Japanese.

The Republic of China/Taiwan: the Country that Doesn’t Exist

The Republic of China (ROC), Taiwan, has been losing recognition in the international community since the United Nations unseated Taiwan in 1971 and Nixon visited Beijing in 1972, sending the broad signal to friends, allies, and anyone else who cared that relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) were acceptable. But whereas the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic accepted dual recognition in 1970, and the Republic of Korea and Democratic People’s Republic of Korea did the same in 1991, neither the ROC nor the PRC did so. To recognize one was to terminate diplomatic relations with the other.

Japan recognized the PRC in September 1972 and converted its embassy in Taipei to an office of the Japan Exchange Association (日本交流協会/*Nihon kōryū kyōkai*) which functioned in much the same manner, but unofficially, and establishing a pattern that the United States would follow with the American Institute on Taiwan. The Exchange Association became a public interest incorporated foundation in 2012 and changed its name to the present version in 2017: the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association (日本台湾交流協会/*Nihon Taiwan kōryū kyōkai*—significantly including the name “Taiwan”), and Taiwan changed its unofficial embassy’s name from the Association of East Asian Relations (亞東關係協會/*Yà dōng guānxi xiéhuì*) to Association of Taiwan-Japan Relations (台灣日本關係協會/*Táiwān Riběn guānxi xiéhuì*)

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

Taiwan Nihon kankei kyōkai). But nomenclature aside, these functioned as embassies: representing interests, issuing visas, tracking political trends, and hosting cocktail parties.

Taiwan has long recognized that cultivating the policy makers and influential public of powerful countries is key to maintaining its existence as a quasi-state. Much of this attention has naturally been focused on the United States, and Taiwan’s stock in Washington is again rising just as China’s is dropping (Gramer, 2021). But Japan has long been a target for Taiwanese informal diplomacy, and unlike much of the rest of East Asia, Taiwanese views of Japan are not highly negative because of history. After martial law in Taiwan ended in 1987, anti-Japanese government propaganda was dropped, the affinity of Taiwanese for Japanese culture grew, especially among the youth of the island (Liff, 2022, p. 1079). “The Japanese and Taiwanese public enjoy one of the friendliest relationships between two societies. Opinion polls in Taiwan show that the Taiwanese’ best-loved country is

Japan, while Japanese also have a strong affinity toward Taiwan. The DPP [Democratic Progressive Party, the current ruling party] and its supporters are famous for their pro-Japanese stance...It is quite natural for Tokyo and Taipei to strengthen their relations after Tsai Ing-wen’s inauguration” (Matsuda, 2016). Tsai has tweeted in Japanese to her 1.7 million followers in that country, and when preparing for her 2016 electoral run in October 2015, visited Japan and announced her candidacy by painting an eye in a Daruma doll (達磨), a traditional Japanese custom for starting a political campaign (Ashley, 2021; Nojima, 2016).

Taiwan’s economy has become quite prosperous, and its per capita income about three times higher than that of the mainland: \$34,050 for Taiwan versus \$13,160 for China according to 2024 IMF estimates. (IMF 2024). Much like the mainland, foreign trade is a key factor. Table 1 shows the trade percentages in 2020.

Many countries have also invested in Taiwan, and Taiwan has done the same, as seen in Table 2.

Table 1 - Taiwan Trade with Select Partners, Item 2022

	Total (bn USD\$)	China %	Japan %	Hongkong %	USA %	<i>Integrated Circuits %</i>
Imports	\$412	19.4	12.1	0.67	9.95	19.6
Exports	\$542	22.4	6.45	12.1	15.2	41.2

Data Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2024.

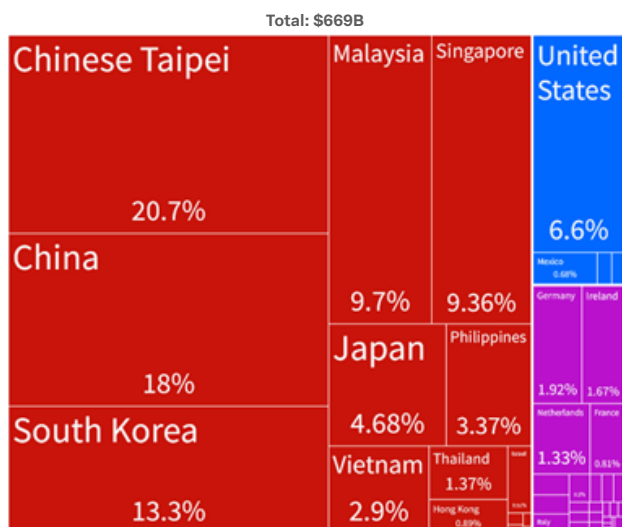
Table 2 - Foreign Direct Investment Positions to/from Taiwan, 2020 (mn US\$)

Country	FDI to Taiwan	FDI from Taiwan
China	\$1,677	\$42,683
USA	\$16,101	\$16,530
Japan	\$17,882	\$8,085

Data Source: IMF CDIS, 2024

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

Figure 1 - Exporters of Integrated Circuits by Economy, 2020



Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2022 (<https://oec.world/en/profile/hs/integrated-circuits>)

Of these investments, none is more important than in the advanced micro-chip manufacturing sector in Taiwan, which is the source of much of the world’s semi-conductors, as seen in Figure 1.

Taiwan (“Chinese Taipei” in the chart) is even more significant than it appears, since it is the source of the world’s most powerful computer chips. It does not take much convincing of leaders in Washington or Tokyo that Taiwan’s continued status is crucial to them.

The Rise of China and Its Ambitions

The rise of China’s economy is well-known. Following market-based economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, China was admitted to the World Trade Organization in 2001, and its previous “high” growth became extraordinary for the next two decades, moving it to the second-largest economy in the world, displacing Japan.

Trade has been an enormous part of China’s overall economic growth, and this gives Chinese leaders an additional tool for their foreign policy:

economic statecraft. It is the use of its immense economy, huge foreign trade, and burgeoning investments to promote its foreign policy agenda, through incentives, punishment, or a combination of both. China has not hesitated to use “popular” boycotts, commercial harassment, embargoes and the like when countries offend them. Japan has been the target of multiple such attempts, the largest and most effective of them being the curtailment of rare earth metals trade in 2010, and the boycotts related to the Japanese government purchase of two of the Senkaku islands in 2012 (Harrell, Rosenberg, and Saravalle, 2018). Other countries in the Asia-Pacific have suffered China’s wrath; Taiwan was among the first, though as Tanner (2007) noted, the effort was not as effective as Beijing had hoped. South Korea’s installation of a THAAD anti-missile system led to a Chinese boycott of Korean grocery stores, cosmetics, and tourism, but by 2017 it was clear that South Korea was not yielding and bilateral trade continued to grow (Wee and Kwaak, 2017). Norris (2016) found mixed effectiveness as well. Other research shows a

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

mixed effect of incentives such as investment and construction such as the Belt and Road initiative (Reilly, 2021). Access to the immense China market remains highly coveted prize for all exporters. And China knows it.

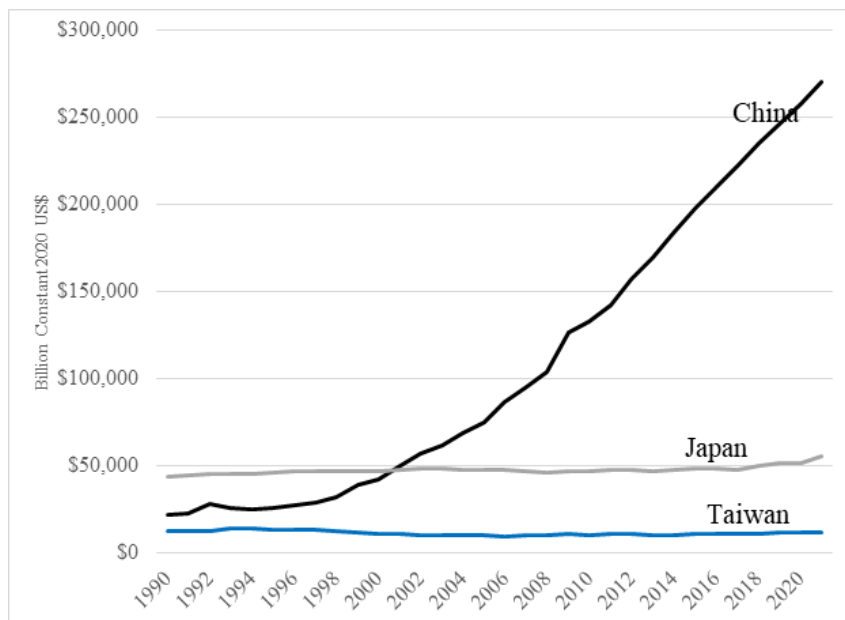
The rise of China’s military has gone hand-in-hand with its economic growth in the 21st century. Indeed, although its growth as shown in Figure 2 below appears to be quite dramatic, China has only once exceeded 2% of its GDP in military spending, and that was in 1992. Most of this growth has been in its navy and air force (PLAN and PLAAF respectively), the Rocket Force, and the newly-constituted Strategic Support Force (战略支援部队/*Zhànlüè Zhīyuán Bùduì*); the number of Ground Force personnel has actually shrunk in the last decade.

China has used its navy and Coast Guard to enforce its claim to the entire South China Sea within its ambiguously-defined “Ten Dashed

Line.” It has built up shoals and reefs into islands with harbors, airfields, and air defenses. And it has continued to intrude into the area around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands between the Ryukyus and Taiwan (discussed below). Its air force H-6 bombers (NATO reporting name: “Badger”) have regularly tested the Taiwanese Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), as well as pointedly flying through the Miyako Strait between the northern and southern Ryukyu Island chain of Japan.

All of this military activity has cost China a great deal more than the \$270 billion a year; it has cost it its international reputation, at least among the Western alliance. By 2017, China’s foreign policy became nicknamed “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy (after the movie “Wolf Warrior 2,” a particularly aggressive and nationalistic take on China’s role in Africa). The discovery of “re-education” camps in Xinjiang and heightened restrictions

Figure 2 - China, Japan, and Taiwan: Military Expenditures, 1990-2021



Data Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2022

Defending a Country that Doesn't Exist with a Military That Isn't Allowed

Table 3 - Pacific Allies' Unfavorable Views of China, 2013-2023

Country	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Australia	35%		33%	39%	32%	47%	57%	87%	85%	86%	87%
Canada	45%		48%	40%	40%	45%	67%	73%	73%	74%	79%
Japan	93%	91%	89%	86%	83%	78%	85%	86%	88%	87%	87%
S. Korea	50%	42%	37%		61%	60%	63%	75%	77%	80%	77%
Taiwan							61%		69%		
USA	52%	55%	54%	55%	47%	47%	60%	73%	76%	82%	83%

Data Source: Pew Research Center Global Indicators Database, 2023. Note: Australian surveys from 2013 to 2018 used a different methodology, and are no longer included in current Pew Research center data. These data have been taken from previous Pew publications.

on the ethnic Uighurs there shocked much of the world. Despite having agreed to allow Hong Kong its own political system, the 2019 crack down on protests and free elections there further alienated the western world from China.

The reaction to this combination of military expansion and domestic repression is reflected in Table 3, which shows the increasingly unfavorable opinion of China among the Pacific Rim countries allied or partners with the USA.

Of these publics, the Japanese has been the most consistently negative in their views of China, but now even Australia, for a long time positive in its views of China given the economic benefits it gained from Chinese trade, has turned negative.

Taiwan remains the elusive piece of China's reunification. The strategy of enticing Taiwan into China's orbit peaked in the 1990s when China was on its best behavior and sought to use the "One Country, Two Systems" policy as a way of bringing Taiwan into some sort of loose (but legal) association. Hong Kong was supposed to be the demonstration test case

of this after July 1, 1997. Twenty years later, the mainland crackdown on civil liberties and democracy in Hong Kong makes it clear that China is systemically incapable of tolerating political pluralism and democracy. Xi Jinping in particular has taken on reunification as his grand achievement in his third term as head of the Communist Party. With the 20th National Party Congress re-appointing Xi as its top leader in October 2022 and as president in March 2023, a clock on Taiwan has started ticking. Xi's address to the National People's Congress in March 2023 reinforced the mainland's determination to deal with Taiwan (Tan, 2023). Xi directed the People's Liberation Army to accelerate its readiness to act against Taiwan by 2027, though it is unclear whether they would invade (Hass, 2022; LeGrone, 2021). But it is clear that China is seeking at least to intimidate Taiwan by preparations for actions. As Pomfret and Pottinger (2023) point out in an alarmist but well-founded title, "Xi Jinping Says He Is Preparing China for War: the World Should Take Him Seriously."

This author assesses that Xi will want to accomplish a great achievement in the Spring of 2027 that would justify still another term as

Defending a Country that Doesn't Exist with a Military That Isn't Allowed

Secretary-General of the Party. He would be 74 years old at that time. With slowing economic and demographic growth, a host of debt issues, negative fallout from the “Zero Covid” policies, Xi is running out of great things to accomplish, and Taiwan is something that not even Mao Zedong grasped. Naturally, Xi would prefer to take Taiwan without fighting, by intimidation, harassment, or a blockade, (discussed below). But, if necessary, by invasion. Weather conditions in the region make April and September the best times to conduct an amphibious invasion, and thus April 2027 is the more likely time window, allowing Chinese forces to take the island and defend against a counterattack.

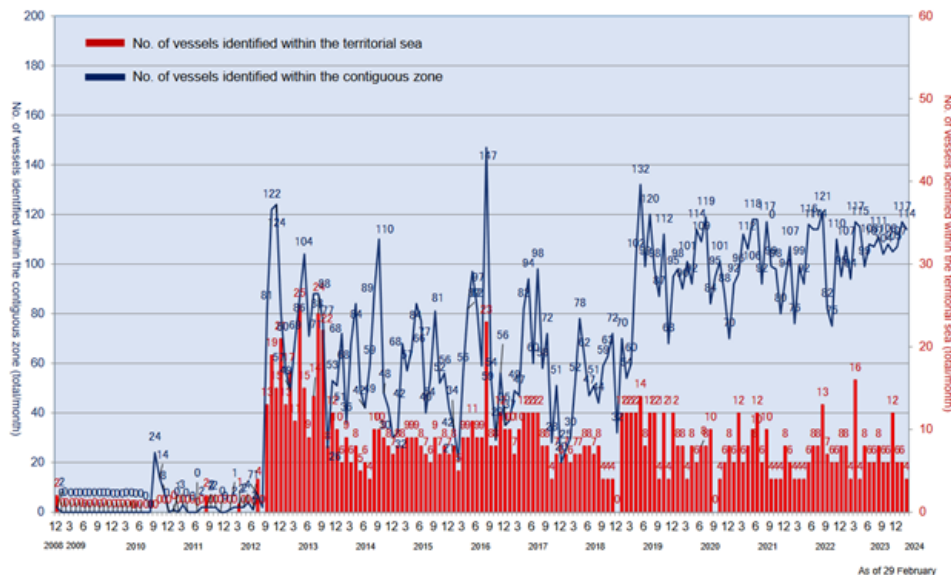
The Deterioration of Sino-Japanese Relations

The rise of China and the assertiveness it began to exhibit late in the 2009-10 period was characterized by the Japanese Foreign Ministry’s

annual *Diplomatic Bluebook* as “the increasingly severe security environment in East Asia” (厳しさを増す東アジアの安全保障環境/*Kibishi-sa o masu Higashiajia no anzen hoshō kankyō*), though it was hesitant to attribute the problem to any particular country until 2012 when it began to be explicit in attributing problems to China.

The serious deterioration of Japan-China relations in the 21st century began in September 2012 over the ownership of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands off the northeast coast of Taiwan. The small, uninhabited Senkaku islands (尖閣群島/*Senkaku-guntō*), called the Diaoyu islands (钓鱼岛/*Diaoyudao*) in Chinese, ought to be a minor territorial dispute between Japan and China, but it is often used as a focusing lens of poor Sino-Japanese relations. The most important incident of many came in 2012 when the Japanese government purchased three of the islands from private owners, which the Chinese government regarded as an unacceptable change in the

Figure 3 - Chinese Vessel Intrusions in Senkaku Islands, 2008-2024



Source: Japan Coast Guard, 2024 (MOFA Japan)

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

status of the islands. The crisis helped to bring down the DPJ government of Noda Yoshihiko in the September 2012 general election, which the LDP won, and Shinzo Abe became Prime Minister, initially soothing the issue, but not resolving it. Throughout 2013 and 2014 this issue and Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 continued to vex relations between Japan and China (see Zhao, 2017, pp. 82-86; Takagi, 2017, pp. 115-117). Sino-Japanese relations reached a limited *détente* in 2015 and improved enough for Abe to make a state visit in 2018, but the fundamental issues and tensions between the two countries remain. Chinese provocations near the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands have increased. This limited *détente* notwithstanding, Chinese vessels, both fishing boats and Chinese Coast Guard, continue to intrude into both the territorial waters around the Senkakus (12 nm from land) and the contiguous zone (24 nm from land). Figure 3 shows the numbers from 2008 to 2021.

Chinese oil drilling vessels have also begun creeping up to the median line that divides the Chinese and Japanese exclusive economic zones north of the Senkakus, an area in which both countries committed to working cooperatively in 2008, but China has installed its own drilling platforms in 2015 and 2016 (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2022).

The Japanese Response: From Hedging to Edging to Walking Openly

Japan has taken a number of steps, at first slowly, and now quite openly acknowledging its military and moving toward a confrontational stance vis-à-vis China and an implicit defense of Taiwan. These include administrative changes, increased spending on defense, diplomacy and

cooperation with extra-regional partners, and a growing relationship with Taiwan.

Several administrative changes are reinforcing the steps taken in this direction, such as the elevation of the Ministry of Defense from an agency to a full ministry in 2007 (from 防衛庁/*Bōei-chō* to 防衛省/*Bōei-shō*), the creation of a National Security Council in 2013 (国家安全保障会議/*Kokka-anzen-hoshō-kaigi*), and promulgation of new conditions whereby the SDF may use force. This “Legislation for Peace and Security” was passed in September 2015 “in light of the increasingly severe security environment surrounding Japan, it became necessary for Japan to reconstruct the legal basis for security” (MOFAJ, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2016*, p. 17). The key element of the new legislation was that it allowed the SDF to be used “When an armed attack against Japan occurs or when an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan occurs and as a result threatens Japan’s survival and poses a clear danger” (MOFAJ, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2016*, p. 18). There is little doubt that the United States, Japan’s only treaty ally, would qualify in this regard. The status of Taiwan, however, is less clear and will be discussed below.

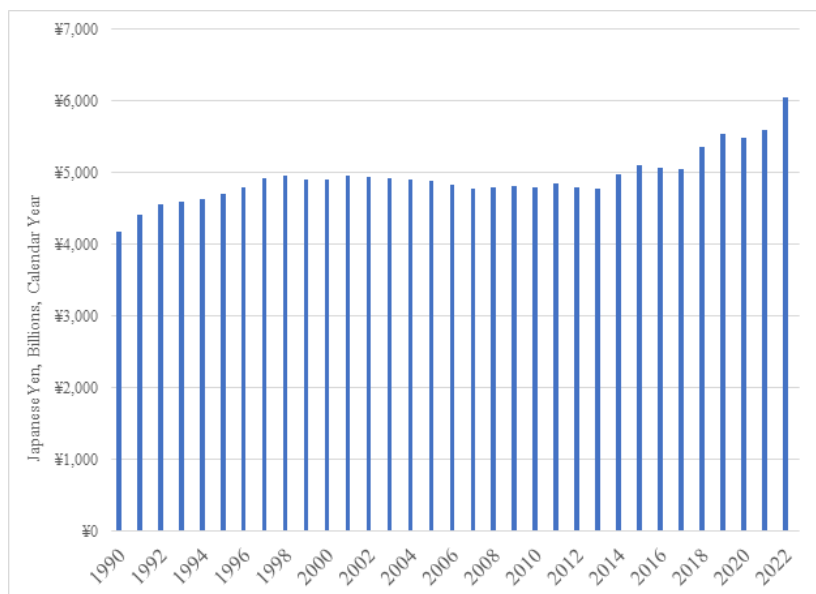
Defense Spending

Japan has been spending more money on its SDF as well. Figure 4 shows both the US dollar amounts as calculated by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). In contrast to the late 1990s to the 2013 period, Japanese spending has gone up by over 18% in constant dollar terms.

Recent comments by Prime Minister Kishida at the May 2022 “Quad” meeting hint at a “substantial increase of its defense budget” (White House, 2022). That was confirmed in the

Defending a Country that Doesn't Exist with a Military That Isn't Allowed

Figure 4 - Japan Defense Spending in Yen, 1990-2022



Data Source: SIPRI, 2022

December 2022 National Security Strategy: in FY2027, Japan’s defense and defense-related spending would increase to 2% of GDP (MOFAJ, *National Security Strategy of Japan 2022*, 20).

Japan has moved from strict bilateralism toward what might be characterized as “soft multilateralism.” What is now called “The Quad” (日米豪印 (クアッド)/*Nichibei Gō shirushi (Kuaado)*) was originally Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s 2012 concept of a “Security Diamond” involving the USA, Japan, Australia, and India. The Australian government dropped out for a period (2009-2017), but Abe kept up efforts at multilateral cooperation in the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” a term he invented. Abe also urged the Trump administration to reconsider its trade policies and especially the refusal to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade deal that was proposed by the Obama Administration. Abe helped push the TPP into the Comprehensive and

Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a grouping that includes US allies (though not the United States) and partners in the region but does not include China (or Taiwan). Japan hosted the summit for the Quad in 2022. Prime Minister Kishida also hosted the G7 summit in his hometown of Hiroshima in May 2023. It may be said that during America’s obsession with the Middle East and division during the Trump Administration, quiet Japanese leadership has kept the Western alliance moving forward.

Japan has also been exploring greater defense cooperation with the Philippines, Tokyo and Manila held a “2+2” (Foreign and Defense Ministers of each) meeting in April 2022. This meeting would lead to a formal agreement on military visits and exchange of defense equipment (Yamaguchi, 2022). In February 2023, the United States announced an agreement providing for US military basing rights in northern

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

Luzon in the Philippines, a key area controlling the southern part of the Luzon Strait opposite Taiwan. The trilateral summit in Washington in April 2024, and a variety of agreements arising from that, furthered Japanese defense multilateralism.

The Camp David trilateral summit of US President Biden, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, and Prime Minister Kishida was one of the most important steps in the diplomacy of those three nations toward institutionalizing multilateralism along the historically difficult Tokyo-Seoul “leg” of the relationship. It still has a long way to go, but both Kishida and Yoon are recognizing the bigger picture in East Asia: “Unity between Tokyo and Seoul will be critical in deterring aggressions by China. While Beijing has criticized the Camp David summit as a strategy to encircle and contain China, the ultimate success of the trilateral will be measured in its ability to prevent coercive Chinese action in the first place” (Goto 2023).

Japan has also begun to reach out to other powers visiting the region, such as the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Canada, France, and Germany, each of which has sent warships through the South China Sea and the East China Sea and docked in Japan in September 2021 as part of joint exercises. The National Security Strategy of Japan indicated that this was more than good diplomacy: “Japan will build a multilayered network among its ally and like-minded countries, expand it, and strengthen deterrence. Thus, while utilizing frameworks such as the Japan-US-ROK, and Japan-US-Australia, Japan will enhance security cooperation with Australia, India, the ROK, European countries, ASEAN countries, Canada, NATO, EU, and others.” (MOFAJ, National Security Strategy of Japan 2022, p. 13). Prime Minister Kishida met with NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg in March 2022,

the first such visit in four and a half years, and the Foreign Minister of Japan, Hayashi Yoshimasa attended NATO’s Foreign Ministers’ meeting for the first time in April 2022. Japan’s chief of staff of the joint staff General Yamazaki Koji attended the NATO Military Committee in Chiefs of Defense Section in May 2022 as well (Nemoto, 2022).

More Explicit Relations with Taiwan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFAJ) noted the close but unofficial relations of Japan and Taiwan in 2021: “For Japan, Taiwan is an extremely crucial partner and an important friend, with which it shares fundamental values such as freedom, democracy, basic human rights and the rule of law, and enjoys close economic relations and people-to-people exchanges” (MOFAJ, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2021*, pp. 66-67).

The *2021 Defense White Paper of Japan* made a number of statements that would have been difficult to imagine in 2009:

China has further intensified military activities around Taiwan including Chinese aircrafts’ entering the southwestern airspace of Taiwan. In the meantime, the United States has demonstrated a clear stance of supporting Taiwan in military aspects, such as transits by US vessels through the Taiwan Strait and weapon sales. *Stabilizing the situation surrounding Taiwan is important for Japan’s security and the stability of the international community.* Therefore, it is necessary that we pay close attention to the situation with a sense of crisis more than ever before (MODJ *Defense of Japan 2021*, 19, emphasis added).

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

Previous equivalent paragraphs in the MODJ yearbook contained no mention of relevance to Japan (MODJ, *Defense of Japan 2020*, 18).

In 2023, the MOFAJ Diplomatic Bluebook noted the Chinese actions around Taiwan with significant concern:

China has not denied the possibility of the use of force, and it has been intensifying its military activities in the sea and airspace surrounding Taiwan, including the launch of ballistic missiles into the waters near Japan in August. Concerns about the peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait are growing rapidly not only in the Indo-Pacific region, including Japan, but in the international community as a whole. China's current external stance and military activities are a matter of serious concern to Japan and the international community. It is unprecedented and represents the greatest strategic challenge to ensuring the peace and security of Japan and the peace and stability of the international community, as well as to strengthening the international order based on the rule of law, to which Japan should respond with its comprehensive national power and in cooperation with its allies, like-minded countries and others (MOFAJ 2023 *Diplomatic Bluebook 2023*, 5).

The phrase "Japan should respond with its comprehensive national power" though ambiguous, does seem to be signaling a Japanese response to Chinese provocation.

Statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFAJ) note the relative affinity of Taiwanese for Japan:

The sentiments of Japanese and Taiwanese citizens toward each other are generally favorable. In a survey conducted in February 2019 by the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association, a private Japanese agency, 70% of Taiwanese respondents said they "felt close to Japan" or "relatively felt close to Japan." Reflecting such favorable sentiments toward Japan, the number of visitors to Japan from Taiwan in 2019 exceeded 4.89 million, marking a record high and demonstrating close people-to-people exchanges... (MOFAJ, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2021* p. 67)

The *National Security Strategy of Japan (2022)* went further in characterizing Taiwan:

Japan's basic position regarding Taiwan remains unchanged. Taiwan is an extremely important partner and a precious friend of Japan (大切な友人である / *taisetsuna yūjindearu*), with whom Japan shares fundamental values, including democracy, and has close economic and personal ties. Peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait is an indispensable element for the security and prosperity of the international community, and Japan will continue to make various efforts based on its position that the cross-strait issues are expected to be resolved peacefully (MOFAJ, *National Security Strategy of Japan 2022*, p. 15).

Defending a Country that Doesn't Exist with a Military That Isn't Allowed

The internal politics of the LDP has influenced its China policy for almost as long as the party has existed, with both pro-Taiwan and pro-Mainland factions, and more recently variants of “hawks” and “doves.” The LDP has governed Japan since 1955 with only two periods of opposition government, from 1993 and 1994, and again from 2009 to 2012. The party is formally factionalized and different factions have slightly different foreign policy tendencies, though the cabinet and prime minister seek to establish a consensus view between “hawks” and “doves.” The latter have been eclipsed in recent years with China’s increasingly aggressive actions toward Taiwan and Japan, and in the September 2021 LDP leadership race no doves were to be found: “While the LDP’s once-powerful contingent of China doves have often kept candidates for the party’s top spot in check, this year’s election looks to be a different beast, with the top contenders staking out hawkish positions on Japan’s powerful neighbor...it’s becoming increasingly clear that Japan’s shift toward a more hard-line approach to its dealings with China are unlikely to change, even as the country’s leader does” (Johnson, 2021a). One of the former “doves” who has since become more “hawkish” is Prime Minister Kishida: “While serving as Foreign Minister from 2012 to 2017, Kishida prioritized moderation and balance in Japan’s dealings with China and was widely considered a dovish counterbalance to the more hardline Prime Minister Abe Shinzo... Nevertheless, on winning the Liberal Democratic Party’s leadership contest in September 2021, Kishida pivoted to a more hawkish position... With the Japanese public growing increasingly skeptical of China in the face of regular military provocations, this hawkish consensus is likely to continue to grow in influence” (Ashley 2021; Fischetti and Roth, 2021).

It is worth noting that one of the other contenders for the LDP leadership/Prime Minister’s post, Sanae Takaichi, was a prominent “China hawk” and held a videoconference with Tsai Ing-wen in September 2021, a sign of the movement within the LDP toward Taiwan: “It is extremely rare for a Japanese politician, especially a contender for the LDP presidency and in this case a possible prime minister, to hold a meeting with senior Taiwanese officials, let alone the island’s leader...In recent months their ties have grown closer than ever, with Tokyo having become far more vocal in the public sphere about its concerns over China’s assertiveness, especially its actions near the self-ruled island and in the East China Sea” (Johnson, 2021b). The LDP established a “Taiwan Policy Project Team” in early 2021 for talks between legislators (not government officials) in foreign policy and defense areas. Rumors of a “Japan Taiwan Relations Act” patterned after the American 1979 law authorizing defensive arms sales to Taiwan, however, seem unlikely (Liff, 2021).

By 2021, concerns about the situation in the Taiwan Strait was becoming much more mainstream in Japanese politics: “Worsening frictions across the Taiwan Strait throughout 2021 did focus Japanese media, politicians, and policymakers on the risks and potential impact on Japan of a possible conflict—perhaps to an unprecedented degree” (Liff and Hass, 2022). The *Diplomatic Yearbook* in 2021 came out and named the place that doesn’t exist: “Amidst these circumstances and starting with the mention of Taiwan at the Japan-US ‘2+2’ in March 2021, there has been consensus on the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and on encouraging the peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues” (MOFAJ, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2022*, p. 49). In July 2021,

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

the then-Deputy Prime Minister Tarō Asō made a speech that some interpreted to be a commitment to the defense of Taiwan, but which was actually more conditional than reports.¹

Another report in December 2021 reported that the United States and Japan had held talks about joint cooperative actions in case of an attack on Taiwan, though based on anonymous Japanese government sources (Kyodo, 2021). Also in December, then-former Prime Minister Abe publicly stated that “A Taiwan emergency is an emergency for Japan and also for the Japan-U.S. alliance” (“Abe Says Taiwan Emergency...”, 2021). Asō (also a former prime minister and now vice-president of the LDP) made his point clear in August 2023 in Taipei, where he is reported to have said, “There has never been a time like now when Japan, Taiwan, the United States and like-minded countries need to resolve to put into action a strong deterrence. This is a resolve to fight” (Takahashi 2023). He also spoke in January 2024 of a Taiwan crisis as a “threat of national existence for Japan,” a key phrase about the conditions whereby the SDF might be allowed to engage in combat. When asked about these comments, the Chief Cabinet Secretary, the top government spokesperson, declined to answer, and Asō is well known in Japanese politics as someone who is an “unreliable narrator” and who is sometimes called the “King of Absurd Comments” (Li 2024).

Other analysts see these as steps toward implicitly committing Japan to the defense of Taiwan. As Ryan Ashley, a US Airforce Intelligence

officer wrote in late 2021, “While no formal changes in security policy or diplomatic legalities are likely, Tokyo is signaling that it is willing to support Taiwan’s sovereignty, up to and including joining a military defense of the island against Chinese attack.” The shift toward more forward thinking about Taiwan is at least partly attributed to the increased willingness of American and European states to engage with Taiwan. Japan also recognizes the common interests of the two countries: “Japan now actively seeks to promote closer defense ties with liberal and democratic states in Asia as an act of strategy. Within this framework, Taiwan is a top candidate for closer relations as a fellow island democracy close with the United States and facing threats from China” (Ashley, 2021).

Public opinion in Japan is beginning to back a greater Japanese role in the Taiwan straits. The high Japanese disapproval of China in general has already been noted. Following President Biden’s joint statement with then-Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga in April 2021, a poll by Nikkei/TV Tokyo asked the Japanese public whether they supported Japan’s engagement in stability in the Taiwan Strait, and 74% supported it, with 13% opposing (Nemoto and Iwata, 2021).

This movement toward an increasing concern about Chinese actions against Taiwan in 2021 did not, however, amount to a clear commitment of Japanese action against China should war break out. Just as American policy toward Taiwan was founded on “strategic ambiguity,” so was Japan’s, something that the news media

¹ The reported phrase by Asō was “台湾で大きな問題が起きれば、存立危機事態に関係するといってもおかしくない、日米は台湾を防衛しなければならない” (*Taiwan de ōkina mondai ga okireba, sonritsu kiki jitai ni kankei suru to itte mo okashikunai, Nichibeī wa Taiwan o bōei shinakereba naranai*). This might be translated as “If a big problem were to occur in Taiwan, it can be said that it would be an existential crisis, then Japan and the United States must defend Taiwan.” https://www.excite.co.jp/news/article/Economic_93454/.

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

often mistook given the movement involved. As Adam Liff, one of the most careful western analysts of the Japan-Taiwan relationship notes, “Throughout 2021, top Cabinet officials, including the prime minister and chief Cabinet secretary, repeatedly reaffirmed the basic ambiguity at the heart of Japan’s decades-old posture: Japan wishes to see a peaceful resolution through direct dialogue between Beijing and Taipei, and does not pre-commit to any particular course of action if war breaks out” (Liff and Hass, 2022).

Ukraine War and After

Almost all of this occurred before February 24, 2022, when the world changed. Japan reacted quickly and decisively against the Russian Federation, imposing sanctions along with the United States and European Union, freezing Russian assets held in Tokyo, cutting off SWIFT banking access, and freezing Russian officials’ assets as well. As then-Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi stated, “If the international community somehow allows or condones Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, it might send a wrong message that such actions can be tolerated in other parts of the world, including the Indo-Pacific... Ukraine may be East Asia tomorrow” (Hudson 2022). Prime Minister Kishida has repeated the phrase many times, most recently before the US Congress in April 2024. RAND analyst Jeffrey Hornung summarized the sea-change that came from Ukraine to Japan:

Russia’s war in Ukraine, which marks the return of naked, World War II-style aggression to Europe, is surely another such inflection point. But there is a second, less-noticed shift taking place right now that has at least as much power to alter history: the return of Japan as a major geopolitical actor. In the

span of only one month from mid-December 2022 to mid-January of this year, Japan revised large parts of its post-1945 security posture and replaced it with a new strategy that—if implemented—would create a more robust and forward-leaning Japan. Tokyo’s policy shifts may signal a Japan that is not only more willing and capable of involving itself in geopolitical issues beyond its own narrow, defensive interests but also more likely to act in ways commensurate with its strategic position, regional interests, and economic might (Hornung 2023).

Prime Minister Kishida personally visited Kyiv on March 21, 2023, joining the other G7 leaders who had done so previously. His visit, moreover, occurred at the same time as a meeting between Russian President Putin and Chinese President Xi, upstaging their meeting and reinforcing another perspective on the linkages between the Ukraine war and East Asia (Dooley & Kim, 2023).

The *National Security Strategy of Japan*, published in December 2022 (after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan) said, “China has been intensifying its military activities in the sea and airspace surrounding Taiwan, including the launch of ballistic missiles into the waters around Japan. Regarding peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, concerns are mounting rapidly, not only in the Indo-Pacific region including Japan, but also in the entire international community” (MOFAJ, National Security Strategy 2022, 8).

Prior to the Quad meeting in Tokyo in May 2022, President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida discussed potential Japanese responses to an action by China against Taiwan, and in the press conference specifically said about the US and

Japanese position on Taiwan: “We affirmed that our two countries’ basic position on Taiwan remains to be unchanged; and underscored the importance of peace and stability of Taiwan Straits, which is an indispensable element for peace and prosperity of the international community; and called for peaceful resolution of Cross-Strait issue.” Kishida also went further and said, “And I stated my determination to fundamentally reinforce Japan’s defense capabilities and secure substantial increase of its defense budget needed to effect it.... I have said that includes what is called ‘enemy base strike capability’” (White House, 2022).² These will be several hundred US-built Tomahawk cruise missiles, with a 1,000km range, these missiles can strike locations in eastern China (Reuters, 2023). The implications for security in East Asia are important: “The prospect of a Japan that can strike back in response to an attack, at long range and on its own, would represent a significant new variable for potential adversaries in Pyongyang and Beijing, and one that would help to reinforce deterrence” (Johnstone, 2023). Only the United Kingdom has equivalent missiles among US allies.

How Japan Can Help

Japan’s potential contributions to the defense of Taiwan naturally depend on the nature of a Chinese move on Taiwan. These range from economic coercion, cyber attacks, maritime harassment—which may not rise to the status of warfare, to a blockade, missile strikes, seizure of outer islands, and an all-out invasion, which would clearly be open warfare. From China’s perspective, the lower-level actions would have

the advantage of making it challenging for any Japanese government to rally public opinion in favor of the risky response this might entail. The lower-level actions would also be possible to implement quickly, with less possibility of detecting their preparation. But they may not achieve China’s ultimate objective of controlling Taiwan.

Preparations for various high-level military actions by China, however, could be detected prior to initiation, but broadly speaking two different variants could be launched, one of which would be purely focused on Taiwan itself: cyberattacks on communications, missile strikes on key infrastructure, the rapid seizure of a harbor and a lightning campaign to paralyze the government, seize Taipei, destroy the means of reinforcing the Taiwanese armed forces, and then repelling any counter-invasion. The latter two elements would require Chinese naval assets to break out from what is known as the First Island Chain through the Ryukyu Island chain, most likely through the Miyako Strait and the Luzon Strait north and south of the Philippines to surround Taiwan and destroy or blockade its ports on the eastern side of the island: Hualien, Suao, and Keelung. If done quickly enough, this might create a *fait accompli* that the United States and other countries would have to accept. Of course, Russian President Vladimir Putin doubtlessly had a similar plan for Ukraine in February 2022 that did not go well. United States Forces in Okinawa and other forces in the region—including Japanese—could be moved fairly rapidly into position to help defend Taiwan and thus threaten to widen the war before a shot was fired. Thus, the second variant is a broader Chinese

² The “enemy base strike” (敵基地攻撃能力/*teki kichi kōgeki nōryoku*) debate in Japan is a long-running discussion of how far the Self-Defense Forces could legally go to ensure the safety of Japan. The statements about this are summarized at length in Schoff, Anderson, and Song, 2020.

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

Table 4 - Major East Asian Naval Assets, 2021

	China	Taiwan	Japan	USA overall
tactical subs	53	4	22	53
aircraft carriers	2		4	11
cruisers	3		4	24
destroyers	36	4	35	68
frigates	45	22	6	21

Data Source: IISS, *The Military Balance*, 2022, pp. 51-52, 257-258, 277-278, 309.

attack that would hit American forces in Japan in the first salvo, then using anti-access/area denial weapons to prevent US naval forces especially aircraft carriers from intervening. That would mean a direct attack on Japanese soil, since American forces are overwhelmingly located in Okinawa. This would doubtlessly result in a war between China and the United States and Japan, but the geostrategic risk would improve the tactical situation from the Chinese point of view, and possibly convince the government in Taiwan to bow to the inevitable, and the United States to consider simply accepting an East Asia dominated by a rising power.

Forces in the Region

Taiwan’s naval forces are modest at best, and its submarines and principal surface combatants are outdated. Japan, however, brings a modern fleet of destroyers and air-independent propulsion diesel-electric submarines to the potential fight, and four ships that are legally defined as “helicopter destroyers” or “multipurpose destroyers” but which are light aircraft carriers, including the Izumo-class (いずも型護衛艦/*Izumo-gata-goei-kan*) which is being modified to

allow for F-35B short takeoff and vertical landing. Japan has excellent anti-submarine warfare capabilities, an air force with F-15 J fighters, and is in the process of acquiring F-35s, America’s most advanced fighter. Further, it has decades of invaluable experience training and operating with United States armed forces, weapons system interoperability, shared intelligence and doctrine. That does not mean that US-Japan cooperation in the event of a Chinese action against Taiwan would be smooth and effortless. Analysts Jeffrey Hornung of RAND and Christopher Johnstone of CSIS have closely examined a wide variety of potential complications and limitations of the SDF-US Military cooperation (2023). Nevertheless, in any Chinese attack on Taiwan, Japan would be the first US ally which could respond.

Japan’s most important contribution is its location. Figure 5 shows the key location of SDF forces in the Ryukyu Island chain which constitutes Okinawa Prefecture, of which the city of Naha on the island of Okinawa is the major city. It is also home to American and Japanese bases. The US 7th fleet is headquartered in Yokosuka, near Yokohama, but with a forward base in Sasebo, north of Nagasaki on the

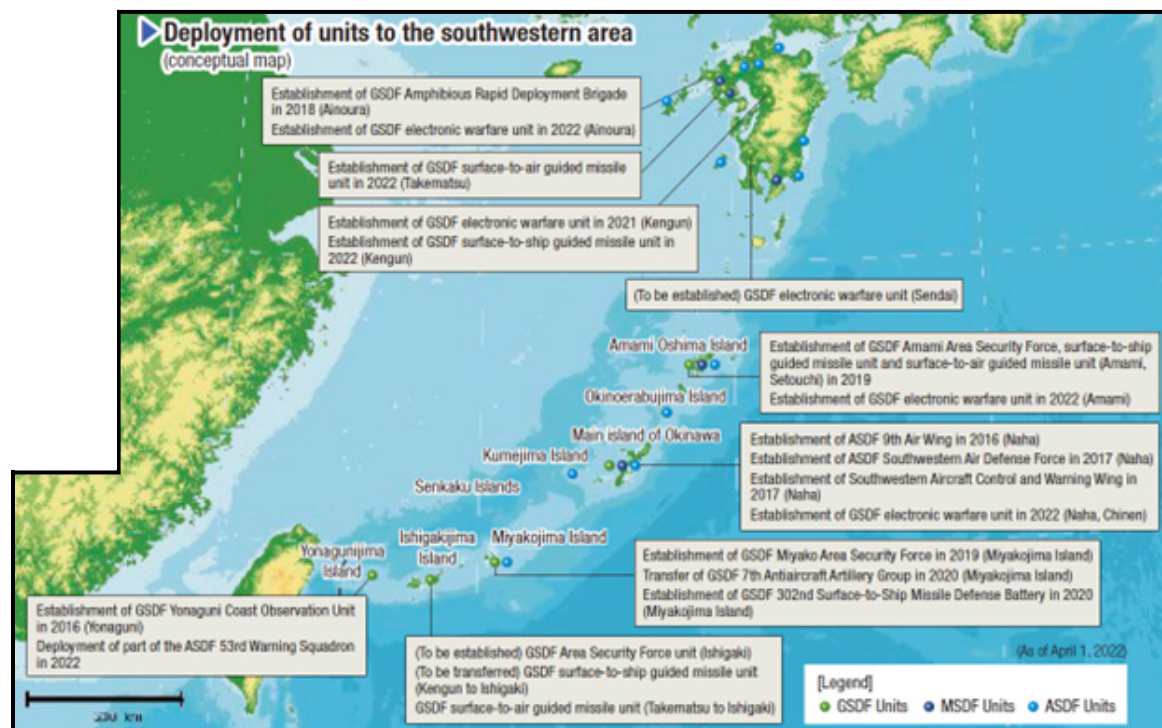
Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

southern island of Kyushu. Japan Self-Defense Forces facilities are nearby in all cases; it would be almost impossible for China to seek to strike at American bases in Japan without potentially hitting Japanese bases or civilians.

In short, this report assesses that Japan is likely to contribute to the military defense of Taiwan in case of a direct attack. Japanese policy has been moving in that direction, opposition parties in the Diet are in disarray, “dovish” factions within the LDP have either been silenced or become

bellicose, and the Biden administration has continued to focus on the threat to Taiwan and allied cooperation to protect it. With Yonaguni island only 111 km (68 miles) away from Taiwan, the prospect of a Chinese takeover would mean that Japan’s Ryukyus would be next. Chinese semi-official sources in 2012 have questioned the legitimacy of Japan’s ownership of the island chain and noted that China was the Liuqiu Kingdom’s (琉球國) suzerain power before Japan was. It is not clear whether this is a serious

Figure 5 - Establishment Status of Major Units in Kyushu/Southwestern Region (since 2016, conceptual diagram)



Source: MODJ 2022, 265.⁹

3 It is worth noting in the map above, that several of these new major units have been announced since 2021: the surface-to-air missile installation in Takenatsu, the electronic warfare unit and surface-to-ship guided missile unit in Kengun, another electronic warfare unit in Sendai, Kyushu, another electronic warfare unit in Naha, Chinen, the transfer of surface-to-ship units from Kengun (Kyushu) to Ishigaki (southern Ryukyus) and another from Takematsu, and a airborne warning unit to Yonaguni.

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

territorial assertion, but given disagreements between Tokyo and the Prefectural government in Naha, Japanese leaders might have reason to worry (Wu D., 2011; Perlez, 2013; Bradsher, 2013).

Why Japan Might Not...

Not Quite an Invasion

If Chinese missiles hit Japanese islands in a first strike, the question of war will likely be resolved. If, however, China's maritime forces announce a blockade of the island, possibly for spurious reasons calling it a "quarantine" (a term the world remembers from the Cuban Missile Crisis), the situation will be much more difficult politically. Islands' tactical advantage—no land access—is also their strategic vulnerability: the need to import. Analyses of just such a quarantine scenario such as by Martin, Gunness, DeLuca, and Shostak, (2022) and Blackwill and Zelikow (2021) point out the considerable difficulty of responding to acts short of war. Furthermore, with over 90 offshore patrol ships (Gady, 2017), the Chinese Coast Guard alone could initiate at least a partial blockade and force the United States to take the first overt hostile act against a Chinese government vessel, "relinquishing the initiative" in Schelling's words (Schelling, 1966, pp. 43-49) This would be a challenge to Japan to support its ally after the ally fired the first shot, against a Coast Guard—not a navy—vessel.

Taiwanese Declaration of Independence

Neither the United States nor any of its allies recognize Taiwan as an independent state, and "the I-word" is well-known to be anathema to China. Neither the KMT nor the DPP governments in Taiwan in the 21st century have issued such a declaration, though President Chen Shui-bian (2000-08) used a variety of deliberately provocative terms. President

Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP party has been more studied and circumspect, but her term in office will end in May 2024, and her successor will be William Lai Ching-te (賴清德), also of the DPP, who has made provocative statements about independence in the past but has toned down his rhetoric in recent years. Lai has wasted no time reaching out to Japanese legislators, welcoming two Diet members in February 2024, a month after his election ("President-elect Lai..." 2024). A Taiwanese declaration of independence is something the United States has opposed as a needless incitement to Chinese action, and likewise Japan. What China will do if this happens is clear: it would take military action, as it has announced on multiple occasions. What the United States would do is less clear, and what Japan would do is less clear still. Tokyo would not act without a clear decision by Washington, but even if there were a quick decision in the White House, that does not mean there would be an equally expeditious choice in the *Kantei*.

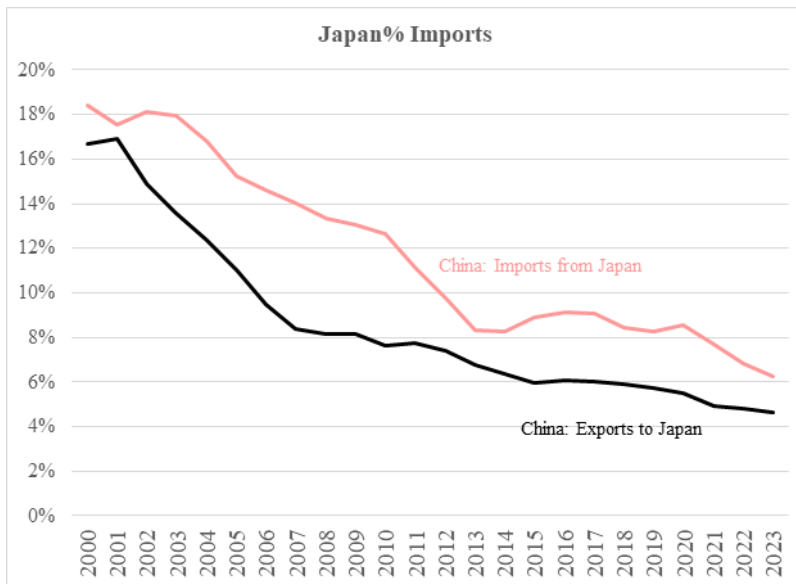
Economic Ties that Bind...Japan's Hands

It is worth remembering that the Russian Federation in February 2022 had an economic footprint far smaller than that of China, and far less trade thanks to the sanctions on it after its 2014 invasion of Crimea. China is not Russia in that regard, and its economic connections to Taiwan, Japan and the United States are very deep. And in the case of Japan, increasingly asymmetric. Figure 6 shows China's imports and exports from/to Japan as a percentage of China's total trade from 2000 to 2023:

China imports more from Japan than it exports to Japan, but in the long term both lines are going down; Japan is not as important to China's trade as it was in the 1980s and 1990s when it was a much higher as a proportion of what was then a much lower total.

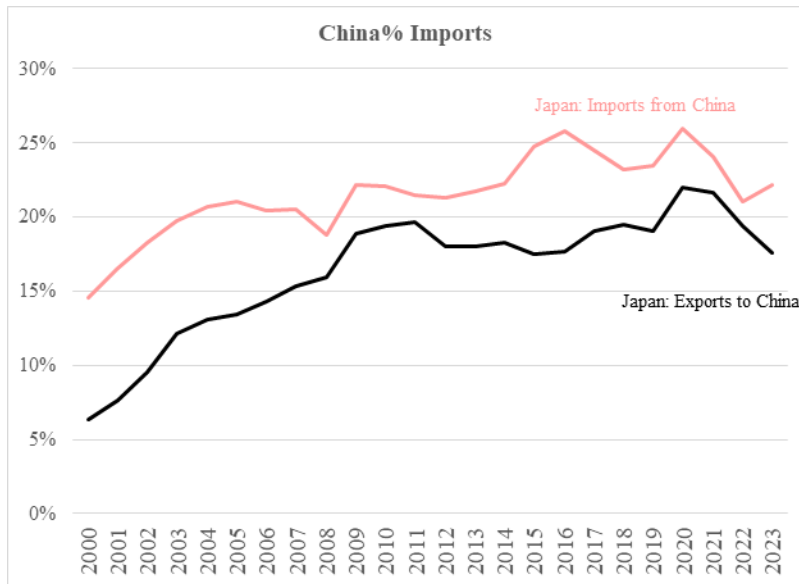
Defending a Country that Doesn't Exist with a Military That Isn't Allowed

Figure 6 - China: Trade with Japan as Percent Total Trade, 2000-2023



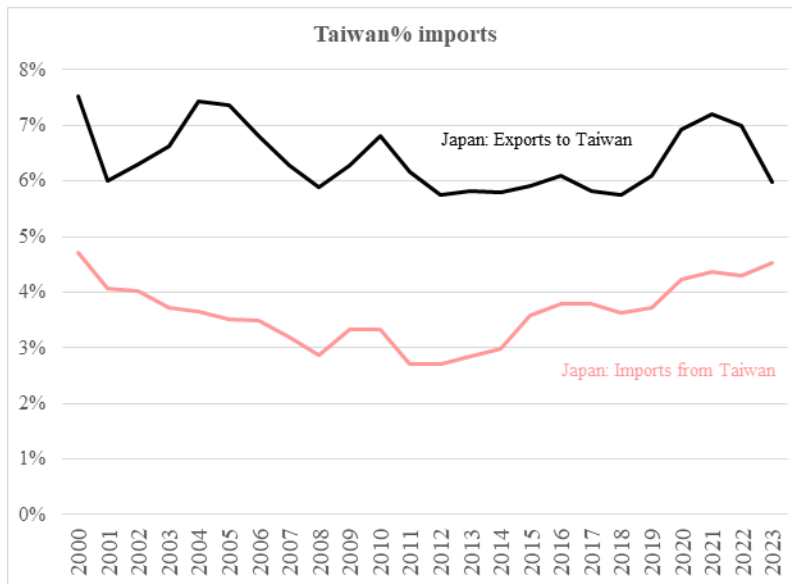
Data Source: IMF DOTS 2024

Figure 7 - Japan: Trade with China as Percent Total Trade, 2000-2023



Data Source: IMF DOTS 2024

Figure 8 - Japan: Trade with Taiwan as Percent Total Trade, 2000-2023



Data Source: IMF DOTS 2024

Figure 7, on the other hand shows the Japanese perspective, and it is the opposite: Japan’s trade with China has increased as a proportion of its overall trade, with over a quarter of its imports coming from China:

Finally, we look at Japan’s trade relationship with Taiwan in Figure 8.

The disturbing implication of this is that Japan’s trade with China is much more important than its trade with Taiwan. Japan exports to Taiwan are 6% of its total; to China is 17.5%. Its imports from Taiwan are only 4.5% of Japan’s total imports, and those from China are 22%.

For China, the ideal strategy would be to use its economic statecraft to both threaten and entice Japan to waver in its commitment to Taiwan. If on the eve of an action, China secretly signals to Tokyo that Japan will not be struck if it stays neutral, Japan’s leadership will have a tough

choice to make. To be sure, if an actual combat scenario were to break out, it seems unlikely that Japan would stay neutral for the sake of trade. But China’s leaders might seek a unification by persuading Taiwan that its friends are unwilling to sacrifice their economies for their sake.

Russian Distraction

Japan shares a maritime border—and a border dispute—with Russia: the Northern Territories/ Kuril Islands dispute north of Hokkaido. Russian forces, both naval and air, have recently and in cooperation with China, flown near their common border, and in 2020 the Air SDF has intercepted Russian aircraft approaching Japanese ADIZ on 258 occasions (MODJ, 2021, pp. 253-254). Demonstrations, mobilization, and incidents near Hokkaido might have the effect of diverting Japanese attention and forces from its far southwest to the far north. Russian land forces’

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

credibility has been seriously tarnished by its actions in Ukraine, but its Far Eastern naval and air assets could still provoke a diversion that would reduce the focus and effectiveness of Japan's response to an action against Taiwan.

Political shifts in Japan

There are a number of reasons and scenarios that might shake the Japanese commitment to defend Taiwan that appears to be firm at the time of this writing (April 2024). Assuming a three-year window of probable Chinese action against that island, there is an election that might cause Tokyo to back away from the implicit commitment. The Japanese Diet has an election coming up. The House of Representatives election must occur before October 31, 2025, but as with most parliamentary systems could (and probably will) be called before that. The House of Councilors (the less powerful upper house) election in July 2022 for half of its seats gave the LDP a modest increase in its seats. Much could happen between now and then that might cost the LDP votes, but it is seldom a good idea to bet against the LDP in Japanese politics. Prime Minister Kishida, however, is very unpopular due to an LDP faction's fund-raising scandal, and an election for LDP leadership in September may see him replaced (Sieg 2024), possibly by his current foreign minister, Yōko Kamikawa, who is also a member of the Kishida faction (Matsuyama 2024). The political views of the Japanese public may also waver when faced with the real possibility of SDF casualties and destruction of Okinawa, as opposed to images of it in peacekeeping or disaster assistance duties (Li 2024).

One tiny potential wrinkle for the LDP that might affect its foreign policy is its coalition partner, the Komeito Party (公明党/*Kōmeitō*). Although it has been a junior partner in the LDP government,

it does differ from the LDP's new embrace of security priorities. Two scholars who have studied the party's role note that "The most significant differences between the two parties are on security policy. At its founding, Komeito was committed to absolute pacifism, and in its early years it rejected the constitutionality of Japan's Self-Defense Forces and the US-Japan Security Treaty. As the party transformed into a more conventional political player, it softened its opposition to these pillars of Japanese national security." And it has influenced recent foreign policy in Japan: "Komeito forced...Shinzo Abe's administration to accept that collective self-defense would be permitted only in a limited number of circumstances. It has also thwarted the push by the LDP to replace Article 9, the postwar constitution's famed 'peace clause' with more permissive language" (Harris and McLaughlin, 2021). Nevertheless, even without the Komeito votes in the Diet, the LDP has a majority, and of the other opposition parties in the 465-seat House of Representatives, none has even 100. Japanese elections could, but probably won't affect its Taiwan policy. Furthermore, Komeito leaders dismissed questions about Tarō Asō's provocative statements in August 2023 (Takahasi 2023).

Re-election of Donald Trump

Japanese media is increasingly obsessed by the prospect of Donald Trump being re-elected president in 2024, to the point that the term "If Trump [is re-elected]" (もしトラ/*moshi Tora*) has become a meme: a Google search for the term in Japanese yielded 916,000 hits on April 13, 2024 (Lee 2024; author search). President Biden's approval ratings are low and have been getting lower. The potential for a second Trump presidency is a real one, and thus the potential for wild shifts of policy, both foreign and domestic. One policy area that was

fairly consistent with Trump, however, was a visceral dislike of China. But aside from taking a congratulatory phone call from Tsai Ing-wen right after his inauguration, it is difficult to determine what his Taiwan policy would be, and whether his second administration would treat Japan any better than it did in the first. The strong anti-China bias of a second Trump Administration might be offset by its isolationist “America First” policies, leaving allies guessing rather than knowing what the White House will do in the event of an action against Taiwan. When asked about defending Taiwan, Trump refused to answer, saying it would compromise his “negotiating position,” and then complaining about Taiwanese chip manufacturing harming American business. Former Trump officials have written that he dismissed Taiwan as tiny (Moriyasu, Satoh, and Chau 2024).

Failures of transition leaders communications

Just because it is likely that the LDP will remain in power for the next five years does not mean a clear transmission of prior commitments made by successive Japanese prime ministers, and the turnover in the *Kantei* usually is fairly often (Koizumi and Abe being exceptions). The United States and Japan have a variety of security consultation committees such as the Security Consultative Committee (“2+2” Meeting) and the Security Subcommittee, but the former is led by political appointees who may change (particularly on the Japanese side) and the latter does not have designated leaders. Given that the assurances and commitments regarding Taiwan have (and continue) been deliberately ambiguous and often expressed between the top leaders, a new Prime Minister/ministers may be unaware or “unaware” of predecessors’ commitments and conditionalities. This could easily lead to delay or hesitation during the crucial period in an all-out Chinese assault.

Conclusion

The assessment in this report of Chinese action against Taiwan within three years is not one the author enjoys considering. But it is a very real possibility. Visits by Taiwanese politicians to the United States and of US leaders to Taiwan are likely to continue, and that will produce the same firestorm of Chinese criticism that Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit produced. The election of another DPP president in Taiwan has further enraged China’s president, and his hosting of former Taiwanese president Ma Ying-jeou during the US-Japan-Philippines summit was clearly meant to upstage the Washington event, but also to imply that there are Taiwanese with whom Beijing is willing work, even though they may not be president.

The world is in conflict in 2024, and the potential for more conflict in the Indo-Pacific looms. It is at times like these that the United States should remember it has allies, and in the next three or more years, Japan will be the most important one.

Steven F. Jackson is a fellow with the China Environment Forum at the Wilson Center.

References

- “Abe Says Taiwan Emergency is Japan Emergency.” (2021, Dec. 2). Nippon.com <https://www.nippon.com/en/news/yjj2021120100874/>
- “Special Report: Taiwan.” (2023, March 11). *The Economist*.
- Ashley, R. (2021, November 23). Japan’s Revolution on Taiwan Affairs. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/japans-revolution-on-taiwan-affairs/>
- Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. (2022, September 29). China Installs a New Hydrocarbon Platform in the East China Sea. <https://amti.csis.org/china-installs-a-new-hydrocarbon-platform-in-the-east-china-sea/>
- Blackwill, R. D. & Zelikow, P. (2021). *The United States, China, and Taiwan: A Strategy to Prevent War*, Council Special Report No. 90. Council on Foreign Relations.
- Bradsher, K. (2013, May 8). Okinawa piques Chinese papers. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/09/world/asia/okinawa-piques-chinese-papers.html>
- Central Intelligence Agency [CIA]. (2022). CIA World Factbook. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/>
- Council on Foreign Relations. (2023). Constitutional Change in Japan. CFR Infoguide. <https://www.cfr.org/japan-constitution/>
- Dominguez, G. (2023, Feb. 10). Concerns over China drive Tokyo and Manila Closer Together. *Japan Times*. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/02/10/national/japan-philippines-closer-security-ties/>
- Dooley, B. & Kim, V. (2023, March 21). Japan’s Prime Minister Becomes Latest G7 Leader to Visit Ukraine. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/21/world/europe/japan-kishida-ukraine.html>
- Dziedzic, S. (2022, Oct. 22). Prime Minister Anthony Albanese Meets with Japan’s Fumio Kishida to Sign Landmark Joint Security Declaration. Australian Broadcasting Corporation. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-10-22/japan-pm-in-western-australia-signs-national-security-deal/101565784>
- Excite News. (2021, July 8). 台湾問題「当事者間対話での平和的解決を期待」 (*Taiwanmondai `tōjisha-kan taiwa de no heiwa-teki kaiketsu o kitai*) [Taiwan issue Expecting a peaceful solution through dialogue between the parties]. Excite News. https://www.excite.co.jp/news/article/Economic_93454/
- Fischetti, A. A. & Roth, A. (2021, October 6). Japan’s new Prime Minister: from China Dove to China Hawk. *Tokyo Review*. <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2021/10/japans-new-prime-minister-from-china-dove-to-china-hawk/>
- Gady, F.-S. (2017, May 8). China Coast Guard ‘Monster’ Ship Completes Maiden Patrol in South China Sea. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/china-coast-guards-new-monster-ship-completes-maiden-patrol-in-south-china-sea/>
- Goto, Shihoko. 2023. “The Rocky Road to Consolidating Camp David’s Gains.” *Asia Dispatches*, Wilson Center (blog post), August 21. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/rocky-road-consolidating-camp-davids-gains>

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

- Gramer, R. (2021, May 6). As US Hardens Line on Beijing, Taiwan's Stock Rises in Washington. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/06/taiwan-united-states-china-competition-tensions-diplomacy/>
- Harrell, P., Rosenberg, E., Saravalle, E. (2018). *China's Use of Coercive Economic Measures*. Center for a New American Security.
- Harris, T., & McLaughlin, L. (2021, November 4). The Small Pacifist Party That Could Shape Japan's Future. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/04/komeito-ldp-japan-elections-defense-policy-china/>
- Hass, R. (2022, Nov. 28). Time is Taiwan's Most Critical Asset, Brookings Institution Order from Chaos Blog post. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/11/28/time-is-taiwans-most-critical-asset/>
- Hornung, J. W. & Johnstone, C. B. (2023 Jan. 27). Japan's Strategic Shift Is Significant, but Implementation Hurdles Await, War on the Rocks blog. <https://warontherocks.com/2023/01/japans-strategic-shift-is-significant-but-implementation-hurdles-await/>
- Hornung, J. W. (2020). *Japan's Potential Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency*. RAND Corporation.
- Hornung, J. W. (2023, Feb. 6). Japan Returns to Geopolitics, *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/06/japan-china-taiwan-russia-geopolitics-defense-security-strategy/>
- Hudson, J. (2022, May 6). Confronting Russia Will Deter China, Says Japanese Defense Minister. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/05/06/ukraine-japan-china-russia/>
- IMF. "IMF Data Mapper: GDP per capita, current prices." <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO/ADVEC/WEOWORLD/TWN/CHN>
- International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS]. *The Military Balance, 2021*. IISS.
- International Monetary Fund [IMF]. Coordinated Direct Investment Survey [CDIS]. Database. <https://data.imf.org/?sk=40313609-F037-48C1-84B1-E1F1CE54D6D5>
- International Monetary Fund [IMF]. Direction of Trade Statistics [DOTS]. Database. <https://data.imf.org/?sk=9D6028D4-F14A-464C-A2F2-59B2CD424B85>
- Japan Coast Guard. (2024). Trends in China Coast Guard and Other Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Senkaku Islands, and Japan's Response. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [MOFAJ]. https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e_000021.html
- Johnson, J. (2021a, September 20). LDP Contenders Put China in Crosshairs in Bid to Win Votes. *The Japan Times*,. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/09/20/national/politics-diplomacy/ldp-presidential-candidates-china-stances/>
- Johnson, J. (2021b, September 21). LDP Leadership Contender Sanae Takaichi Holds Rare Talks with Taiwan President. *Japan Times*. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/09/21/national/politics-diplomacy/takaichi-taiwan-tsai-ldp/>
- Johnstone, C. B. (2022, Dec. 8). Japan's Transformational National Security Strategy, Center

Defending a Country that Doesn't Exist with a Military That Isn't Allowed

for Strategic and International Studies, Commentary. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-transformational-national-security-strategy>

Kyodo. (2021, December 23). Japan, US Draw Up Plan for Taiwan Emergency – Kyodo. Reuters,. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/japan-us-draw-up-joint-operation-plan-any-taiwan-emergency-kyodo-2021-12-23/>

LaGrone, S. (2021, June 23). Milley: China Wants Capability to Take Taiwan by 2027, Sees No Near-term Intent to Invade, US Naval Institute News. <https://news.usni.org/2021/06/23/milley-china-wants-capability-to-take-taiwan-by-2027-sees-no-near-term-intent-to-invade>

Lee, Michelle Ye Hee. 2024. “If Trump’: Japanese Readies for the Return of a Quixotic American President.” *Washington Post*, April 6. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/04/06/japan-donald-trump-moshi-tora/>

Li, Zhuoran. 2024. “No, Japan Will Not Defend Taiwan.” *The Diplomat*, March 18. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/no-japan-will-not-defend-taiwan/>

Liff, A. P. & Hass, R. (2022, January 20). Japan-Taiwan Relations: a Look Back on 2021 and Look Ahead to 2022. Brookings: Order from Chaos. Blog. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/01/20/japan-taiwan-relations-a-look-back-on-2021-and-look-ahead-to-2022/>

Liff, A. P. (2021, February 25). A ‘Taiwan Relations Act’ for Japan? Wilson Center: Asia Dispatches. Blog.. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/taiwan-relations-act-japan>

Liff, A. P. (2022). Japan, Taiwan and the One China Framework after 50 Years, *The China Quarterly*, 252, (December 2022), 1066–1093.

Martin, B., Gunness, K., Deluca P. &, Shostak, M. (2022). *Implications of a Coercive Quarantine of Taiwan by the People’s Republic of China*. RAND.

Matsuda, Y. (2016, Feb. 11). Japan-Taiwan Relations in the New DPP Era. *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, no. 334.

Matsuyama, Shino. 2024.”Kamikawa rises in polls as most suitable for next prime minister,” *Asahi Shimbun*, Feb. 28. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15181220>

Ministry of Defense of Japan [MODJ]. (2020). *Defense of Japan* [English]. Tokyo: Ministry of Defense. https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2020/DOJ2020_EN_Full.pdf

Ministry of Defense of Japan [MODJ]. (2021). *Defense of Japan* [English]. Tokyo: Ministry of Defense. https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021_EN_Full.pdf

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan [MOFAJ]. (2022, December 16). *National Security Strategy of Japan* [provisional translation]. <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf> (English-provisional translation). (Japanese version: <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-j.pdf>, accessed February 3, 2023).

Moriyasu, Ken, Ryohtaroh Satoh and Thompson Chau. 2024. “Would a Trump Presidency Change China’s Calculations on Taiwan?” *Nikkei Asian Review*, Jan. 20. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/U.S.-elections-2024/Would-a-Trump-presidency-change-China-s-calculations-on-Taiwan>

Nemoto, R. (2022). Japan’s Top Uniformed Officer to Attend 1st NATO Military Chiefs Meeting. *Nikkei Asia*, May 17. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-s-top-uniformed-officer->

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

to-attend-1st-NATO-military-chiefs-meeting

Nemoto, R., & Iwata, N. (2021 April 26). 74% in Japan Support Engagement in Taiwan Strait: Nikkei Poll. *Nikkei Asia*. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/74-in-Japan-support-engagement-in-Taiwan-Strait-Nikkei-poll>

Nojima T. (2016, July 1). A New Administration in Taiwan: Prospects for Relations with Japan. *Nippon.com*. <https://www.nippon.com/en/column/g00372/>

Norris, W. J. (2016). *Chinese Economic Statecraft: Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control*. Cornell University Press.

Observatory of Economic Complexity [OEC]. 2024. MIT. Chinese Taipei. <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/twn>

Perlez, J. (2013, September 7). China looks West as it bolsters regional ties. *New York Times*,. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/08/world/asia/china-looks-west-as-it-strengthens-regional-ties.html>

Pew Research Center Global Indicators Database. (2022). <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/indicator/24>

Pomfret, J. and Pottinger, M. (2023, March 29). Xi Jinping Says He Is Preparing China for War: The World Should Take Him Seriously. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/xi-jinping-sayshe-preparing-china-war>

“President-elect Lai Envisions Deeper Taiwan-Japan Relations.” 2024. *Taiwan Today*, February 20. <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=2,4&post=248758>

Reilly, J. (2012). China’s Unilateral Sanctions. *The Washington Quarterly*, 35(4), 121-133.

Reilly, J. (2021). *Orchestration: China’s Economic Statecraft Across Asia and Europe*. Oxford University Press.

Reuters. (2023 Feb. 14). Japan Plans to Bulk Order US Tomahawk Missiles by March Next Year. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/japan-plans-bulk-order-us-tomahawk-missiles-by-march-next-year-2023-02-14/>

Rich, M. (2016a, July 11). Japan election, a landslide for Abe, could allow a bolder military. *New York Times*,. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/12/world/asia/japan-election-shinzo-abe.html>

Rich, M. (2016b, August 30). Japanese government urges another increase in military spending. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/31/world/asia/japan-defense-military-budget-shinzo-abe.html>

Rich, M. (2017, May 3). Shinzo Abe announces plan to revise Japan’s pacifist constitution. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/03/world/asia/japan-constitution-shinzo-abe-military.html>

Sang, H. T. & P. V. Tim. (2021, November 5). How could Japan’s Taiwan policy under Kishida go? *Commonwealth Magazine (Taiwan)*. <https://english.cw.com.tw/article/article.action?id=3113>

Schelling, T. C. (1966). *Arms and Influence*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Schoff, J. L., Anderson, H. & Song, D. (2020). Tracking Japan’s Military Strike Debate. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Carnegie Asia Program*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/programs/asia/japan-military-strike-debate/>

Defending a Country that Doesn’t Exist with a Military That Isn’t Allowed

Sieg, Linda. 2024. "Japan's Scandal-ZRidden Politics Threaten to Claim Another PM." *Foreign Policy*, March 26.

Soeya, Y. (2011). A 'Normal' Middle Power: Interpreting Changes in Japanese Security Policy in the 1990s and After. In Yoshihide Soeya, Masayuki Tadokoro, and David A. Welch (Eds.), *Japan as a 'Normal Country'? A Nation in Search of Its Place in the World* (pp. 72-97). University of Toronto Press.

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI]. (2022). Military Expenditure Database. <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

Takagi, S. (2017). Japan and the Rise of China: From Affinity to Alienation. *Uneasy Partnerships: China's Engagement with Japan, the Koreas, and Russia in the Era of Reform*. Edited by Thomasingar, 97-126. Stanford University Press.

Takahashi Kosuke. 2023. "Former Japan PM's 'Resolve to Fight' Remark Over Taiwan Causes Ripples at Home and Abroad." *The Diplomat*, no. 106 (September). <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/former-japan-pms-resolve-to-fight-remark-over-taiwan-causes-ripples-at-home-and-abroad/>

Tan, C. K. (2013, March 13). Xi urges China to advance tech self-reliance, Taiwan unification. *Nikkei Asia*. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-People-s-Congress/Xi-urges-China-to-advance-tech-self-reliance-Taiwan-unification>

Tanner, M. S. (2007). *Chinese Economic Coercion Against Taiwan: A Tricky Weapon to Use*. RAND Corporation.

Tharoor, Ishaan. 2024. "Japan May Be the U.S.'s Most Important Ally." Op-Ed. *Washington Post*, April 12. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/04/12/japan-united-states-ally-defense-relationship/>

Wee, S.-L., and Kwaak, J. S. (2017, September 29). China's harsh words mask a trade boom with South Korea. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/29/business/china-south-korea-trade.html>

White House. (2022, May 23). Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan in Joint Press Conference. White House Press Office. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/05/23/remarks-by-president-biden-and-prime-minister-fumio-kishida-of-japan-in-joint-press-conference/>

White House. 2024. "Joint Vision Statement from the Leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the United States." White House Briefing Room, April 11. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/11/joint-vision-statement-from-the-leaders-of-japan-the-philippines-and-the-united-states/>

Wu D. (2011). Qing dai Zhong Liu guanxi gaishu [Overview of China-Ryukyu relations during the Qing dynasty]. *Hotan shifan zhuanke xuexiao xuebao*, 30(1), 10-11.

Yamaguchi, M. (2022, April 9). Japan, Philippines Seek Pact to Further Defense Cooperation. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-philippines-japan-europe-china-f640db9ed03defa9e4a3394ad201afdc>

Yomiuri Shimbun. (2022, December 17). New security policy set to boost Japan's position on defense spending ranking, *The Japan News* (The Yomiuri Shimbun). <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/defense-security/20221217-77988/>





Zhao, S. (2017). Beijing's Japan dilemma. Thomasingar, ed. *Uneasy Partnerships: China's Engagement with Japan, the Koreas, and Russia in the Era of Reform*. Stanford University Press, 2017, 70-96.

Defending a Country that Doesn't Exist with a Military That Isn't Allowed






Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004-3027

Wilson Center

-  wilsoncenter.org
-  [woodrowwilsoncenter](https://www.facebook.com/woodrowwilsoncenter)
-  [@thewilsoncenter](https://twitter.com/thewilsoncenter)
-  [The Wilson Center](https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-wilson-center)

Indo-Pacific Program

-  wilsoncenter.org/program/indo-pacific-program
-  [IndoPacificProgram](https://www.facebook.com/IndoPacificProgram)
-  [@WC_IndoPacific](https://twitter.com/WC_IndoPacific)