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The U.S.-Japan Alliance and Taiwan

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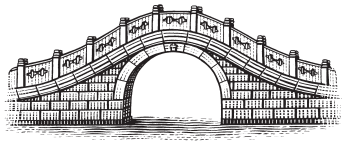

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KEYWORDS: JAPAN; U.S.-JAPAN ALLIANCE; TAIWAN; CHINA; SECURITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article analyzes the historical evolution of Japan's positions, posture, and policies relevant to a possible conflict across the Taiwan Strait, including the potential roles of the U.S.-Japan security alliance and Japan's Self-Defense Forces.

MAIN ARGUMENT

In April 2021, Japan's then prime minister Yoshihide Suga and U.S. president Joe Biden made global headlines when they jointly "underscored the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encouraged the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues"—the first such reference in a summit-level statement since 1969. This statement catalyzed a striking degree of public discussion in Japan and expressions of concern about cross-strait stability from Japanese leaders. It also elicited widespread, though often misleading or inaccurate, assertions overseas that Japan's position vis-à-vis a "Taiwan contingency" had abruptly or radically transformed. Especially given the proximity of Japan (and U.S. military bases in Japan) to Taiwan, soberly appreciating the complexity and incremental evolution of Japan's nuanced and intentionally ambiguous positions and policies, as well as its unique domestic constraints, is critical. Doing so is especially crucial for policymakers to accurately assess the status quo, manage expectations within and beyond the alliance, and ensure sound decision-making as the cross-strait deterrence challenge seems all but certain to deepen in the years ahead.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Japan's decades-old, intentionally ambiguous official posture toward a possible Taiwan Strait contingency has not radically changed. Any action Japan would take in a possible crisis will depend on top-level political judgments about the particular contingency's nature, how it began, how Taipei and Washington have responded, and the perceived threat to Japan itself.
- Ambiguity—by design—should not be misunderstood as apathy or ambivalence in Tokyo about democratic Taiwan's future or cross-strait peace and stability. Recent developments suggest a new sense of urgency and openness to deepen contingency and bilateral planning with Washington to enhance deterrence and to prepare options if deterrence fails. Though not originally motivated by a possible Taiwan contingency, Japan's national security and alliance reforms over the past decade have expanded the options for allied cooperation and Japan's potential role(s) in the event one occurs.
- Important constraints on Japan are still apparent. It remains an open question how—and how quickly—Japan's leaders could respond to use of force by China against Taiwan and what consequences any indecision could have on Japan's and the alliance's response or how a conflict plays out.

The past two years have witnessed a striking uptick of concerns among the United States and its major democratic allies that the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) may use its increasingly powerful military to force unification with democratic and self-governed Taiwan (officially, the Republic of China [ROC]). In addition to the potential implications that any attempt by Beijing to achieve unification through military force or other coercive means would hold for Taiwan's democracy, status, and 24 million people, the Taiwan Strait is also widely considered "the most dangerous flash point in the world for a possible war that involved the United States of America, China, and probably other major powers."[1] A top Biden administration official warned in 2021 that a military clash there would also "broaden quickly and […] fundamentally trash the global economy" in unpredictable ways.[2] In short, the regional and global stakes of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait are extremely high.

Since the Carter administration's 1978 decision to switch diplomatic recognition from the ROC government in Taipei to the PRC government in Beijing and to abrogate the 1954 U.S.-ROC mutual defense pact, the U.S. government's official policy has stopped short of making an unambiguous commitment to direct military involvement in the event of a cross-strait conflict. However, Washington remains Taiwan's de facto security guarantor. The U.S. government has long supported a "robust unofficial relationship" with Taipei, sold it defensive arms, and under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act considered any threat to its erstwhile treaty ally "of grave concern." It also "insists on the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences [and] opposes unilateral changes to the status quo by either side."[3] In December 2021 testimony, a high-ranking Pentagon official publicly stated that the PRC is the U.S. Defense Department's "pacing challenge and a Taiwan contingency is the pacing scenario," and that the department "remains committed to maintaining the capacity of the United States to resist the

[1] Robert D. Blackwill and Philip Zelikow, *The United States, China, and Taiwan: A Strategy to Prevent War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2021) ~ https://www.cfr.org/report/united-states-china-and-taiwan-strategy-prevent-war.

[2] Alex Fang, "Taiwan Conflict Would 'Trash' World Economy: Kurt Campbell," *Nikkei Asia*, May 5, 2021 ~ https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/US-China-tensions/Taiwan-conflict-would-trash-world-economy-Kurt-Campbell.

[3] U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Taiwan," Fact Sheet, August 31, 2018 ~ https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-taiwan; and *Taiwan Relations Act*, Public Law 96-8, 96th Cong., January 1, 1979, available at the American Institute in Taiwan ~ https://www.ait.org.tw/our-relationship/policy-history/key-u-s-foreign-policy-documents-region/taiwan-relations-act.

resort to force or other forms of coercion that may jeopardize the security of the people on Taiwan."[4]

For decades, fundamental to U.S. strategy toward Asia has been the United States' close mutual security treaty with Japan, whose westernmost territory is only 70 miles from Taiwan. The massive forward-deployed U.S. military presence on Japanese soil, especially in nearby Okinawa, all but guarantees that if U.S. leaders ever decide to defend Taiwan, they would want to access U.S. bases in Japan and Japanese support.[5] In fact, operational success may depend upon these two factors. As a November 2021 report to the U.S. Congress warned, China's rapidly improving military capabilities "have fundamentally transformed the strategic environment…[making it] less certain that U.S. conventional military forces alone will continue to deter China's leaders from initiating an attack on Taiwan."[6] The following month, Daniel Russel, a former senior director for Asia on the National Security Council, assessed that "the U.S. cannot successfully defend Taiwan without Japanese support."[7]

Against the backdrop of a rapidly changing balance of power and growing international concerns about the threat China poses to democratic Taiwan, and with the Biden administration asserting that U.S. allies would "take action" if Beijing seeks "to use force to disrupt the status quo,"[8] this article draws extensively on Japanese-language sources to analyze key questions concerning Japanese perspectives on the U.S.-Japan security alliance and a "Taiwan contingency," past and present. Though the Japanese government's nuanced positions, policies, and approaches—including the role its leaders see for the alliance—are often neglected in the U.S.-centric, English-language literature and policy discourse on deterrence and a potential crisis in the Taiwan Strait, they deserve more careful and mainstream attention. This is especially true in Washington today, as concerns about Taiwan and the balance

4 Ely Ratner, testimony to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, D.C., December 8, 2021 ~ https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120821_Ratner_Testimony1.pdf.

5 Jeffrey W. Hornung, "What the United States Wants from Japan in Taiwan," *Foreign Policy*, May 10, 2021 ~ https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/10/what-the-united-states-wants-from-japan-in-taiwan.

6 U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2021 Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C., 2021), 387.

7 "Japan, the U.S., and Economic and Security Policy Linkages in the Taiwan Strait," Program on U.S.-Japan Relations, Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, Harvard University, and Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership, event, December 13, 2021, available at YouTube ~ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SVjvPNZ4zI.

8 "U.S. and Allies Would 'Take Action' If Taiwan Attacked—Blinken," Reuters, November 10, 2021 ~ https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-allies-would-take-action-if-taiwan-attacked-blinken-2021-11-10.

of power have surged. After all, Japan is a critical ally and its choices are—and will inevitably remain—a crucial variable affecting U.S. options, cross-strait deterrence, and the course a contingency would take if deterrence fails.

This article is organized as follows:

- pp. 129–36 briefly introduce several recent developments motivating unprecedented mainstream attention in Japan on the risks of a cross-strait conflict, and critically engage recent claims of a radical shift in Japan's position on its possible involvement in a Taiwan contingency.
- pp. 136–44 examine the historical evolution of Japanese positions and policies as they relate to the U.S.-Japan alliance's applicability to the Taiwan Strait, highlighting several Cold War–era and 1990s-era decisions that carry important policy legacies for today.
- pp. 144–49 briefly explore several implications of the past decade's reforms to Japanese security policy and the alliance of relevance to a Taiwan contingency, including an overview of what post-2015 Japanese legal authorities suggest about the kind of role(s) Japan's Self-Defense Forces could conceivably play in the event of such a contingency.
- pp. 149–56 discuss major takeaways from the analysis, emphasize the importance of balanced and nuanced assessments of policy change versus continuity, and argue that although Japanese concerns about a cross-strait crisis have expanded, as have possible allied response options in the event of one, Japan's core positions and policies have not fundamentally changed. Not to be mistaken for ambivalence about democratic Taiwan's future or peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, the way in which Japan would respond remains deliberately ambiguous.
- pp. 156–60 offer conclusions from this analysis.

2021: A REVOLUTION IN JAPAN'S POSTURE VIS-À-VIS A TAIWAN CONTINGENCY?

Not So Fast: Japan's Own "Strategic Ambiguity" Remains

In April 2021, then Japanese prime minister Yoshihide Suga and U.S. president Joe Biden made global headlines when they jointly "underscored the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encouraged the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues"—the first such reference in a U.S.-Japan summit-level statement since 1969.[9] This landmark statement spearheaded an extraordinary cascade of similar statements involving

[9] "U.S.- Japan Joint Leaders' Statement: U.S.–Japan Global Partnership for a New Era," White House, Statement, April 16, 2021 ~ https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/16/u-s-japan-joint-leaders-statement-u-s-japan-global-partnership-for-a-new-era.

officials from the United States, Japan, and other major U.S. allies in Asia and Europe, including at the June G-7 summit in the United Kingdom—a historic internationalization and multilateralization of concerns about cross-strait peace and stability.[10]

Beyond its international effects, last year's Biden-Suga summit also catalyzed remarkably mainstream public discussions within Japan about the importance of democratic Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait to Japan's own national security and regional stability. These included high-profile statements and remarks by Japanese officials and influential politicians. That April, for example, Suga highlighted U.S.-Japan links as important for "maintaining deterrence and creating an environment for [the Taiwan issue's] peaceful resolution."[11] In June, Minister of Defense Nobuo Kishi stated that "Taiwan's peace and stability are directly connected to Japan" and that the cross-strait military balance is shifting in China's favor.[12] Several weeks later, Japan's 2021 defense white paper contained detailed coverage of cross-strait dynamics and noted an explicit link between the "stability of Taiwan's situation" and "both Japan's security and the stability of the international community." It further stated that Japan "must pay close attention to the situation with a greater sense of anxiety."[13]

In apparently unofficial but nevertheless global headline-making remarks at a private political fundraiser at a Tokyo hotel in July 2021, Japan's famously outspoken then deputy prime minister Taro Aso reportedly said that a major incident over Taiwan "may" constitute a "survival-threatening situation"—referring to one of three self-imposed, limiting conditions for Japan to exercise the UN-sanctioned right of collective self-defense. "If that happens," he said, Japan and the United States "must defend Taiwan together."[14] And though also not representing an official government position, Shinzo Abe, an influential and outspoken Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) heavyweight and long-serving former prime minister, made headlines in December when he argued that geographic proximity and economic reality all but guarantee

10 "Carbis Bay G-7 Summit Communiqué: Our Shared Agenda for Global Action to Build Back Better," G-7, June 13, 2021 ~ https://www.g7uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Carbis-Bay-G7-Summit-Communique-PDF-430KB-25-pages-3.pdf.

11 "Shusho, Chugoku e no anpojo no fuan" [PM Feeling Security Concerns about China] ~ *Yomiuri shimbun*, April 4, 2021.

12 "Japan Sees China-Taiwan Friction as Threat to Its Security," Bloomberg, June 25, 2021 ~ https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/06/25/national/japan-taiwan-kishi.

13 Ministry of Defense (Japan), *Boei hakusho* [Defense White Paper] (Tokyo, 2021), 52 ~ https://www.mod.go.jp/j/publication/wp/wp2021/pdf/wp2021_JP_Full.pdf.

14 "Taiwan yuji de shudanteki jieiken no koshi mo Aso shi" [Aso: Exercise of Collective Self-Defense in a Taiwan Contingency Too], *Jiji*, July 5, 2021.

that a "Taiwan contingency" would have profound economic and security consequences for Japan. He also emphasized the importance of U.S.-Japan cooperation, noting provocatively if vaguely, "A Taiwan contingency is a Japan contingency, as well as a Japan-U.S. alliance contingency."[15]

Given Japan's proximity to the Taiwan Strait, close security alliance with the United States (also Taiwan's de facto security guarantor), and extensive economic and other ties with China, Taiwan, and the United States, such statements rightly attracted global attention. Less clear is what policymakers and scholars should make of such developments. Most importantly, is it correct to infer, as many Western journalists, commentators, and scholars asserted last year, that Japan's Taiwan posture vis-à-vis a cross-strait conflict has undergone a "revolutionary" shift toward consensus and that "the Japanese security establishment appears willing to defend Taiwan"; that Tokyo has made a commitment and "abandoned its long-held ambiguity on the subject, affirming…that it would be ready to join the United States in a fight to defend the island"; or that Japan "has said it would join America in defending Taiwan against a Chinese invasion"?[16]

The short answer is no. The high stakes for regional and global peace and stability demand careful, historically grounded analysis of the Japanese government's nuanced public positions and associated policies. Important to point out is that Japan's posture remains ambiguous—by design—but this is not to suggest Japan's leaders are ambivalent about Taiwan's fate or about cross-strait peace and stability. Developments over the past year or so instead clearly indicate increasingly public discourse and mainstream concern in Tokyo about a cross-strait contingency, interest in expanding discussions with the United States and other democracies on how to support Taipei's international space in the face of growing PRC pressure, and efforts to send subtle deterrence signals to Beijing to support a peaceful resolution. And outside the security domain, Japan-Taiwan bilateral ties and cooperation,

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15 "Ribenguo yuanneigezonglidachen Anbei Jinsan gexia xianshang yanjianghui" [Online Speech by Japan's Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo], Institute for National Policy Research, December 1, 2021 ~ http://inpr.org.tw/m/404-1728-21567.php?Lang=zh-cn.

16 Ryan Ashley, "Japan's Revolution on Taiwan Affairs," War on the Rocks, November 23, 2021 ~ https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/japans-revolution-on-taiwan-affairs; Andrea A. Fischetti and Antoine Roth, "Japan's National Security Posture and Stability in Taiwan," Sino-Japanese Review, July 28, 2021 ~ https://www.tokyoreview.net/2021/07/japans-national-security-posture-and-stability-in-taiwan; and "Japan Pledges to Defend Taiwan If China Attacks," *Times* (United Kingdom), July 7, 2021 ~ https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/japan-would-defend-taiwan-if-china-invaded-says-deputy-pm-l7dnhdfn0.

though officially "unofficial" and nongovernmental, are extensive and increasingly robust.[17]

But Japan's official, decades-old, core government positions—especially concerning Taiwan's ambiguous status, whether possible future PRC aggression against Taiwan would fall within the scope of the U.S.-Japan alliance, and how Japan might respond—have not fundamentally changed. Recent claims to the contrary, since severing diplomatic ties with Taipei in 1972, the Japanese government has never unambiguously and publicly committed to backing the United States if the PRC attacks Taiwan, much less to "defending Taiwan" independently if Washington chooses to sit out the fight. Nor, importantly, has Tokyo ever said it would not do so. Framing Japan's posture as a simplistic binary—"would" or "would not"—misleadingly oversimplifies a complicated reality.[18] Rather, long-standing Japanese policy holds that whether and how Japan or the allies jointly respond will depend on political judgments based on the actual contingency's specific nature and catalyst. Repeated authoritative government statements last year reaffirmed this position.

Nevertheless, as detailed below, major reforms to Japan's national security institutions and policies, especially over the past decade (albeit most well before 2021), have incrementally expanded the roles that the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), and the U.S.-Japan alliance, effectively play in cross-strait deterrence, if indirectly, and could conceivably play in a conflict if deterrence fails. There is also some anecdotal evidence that internal discussions specific to a Taiwan contingency, perhaps even including some preliminary planning, are deepening. Nevertheless, it is critical to carefully distinguish between what is known publicly about what Japan *could* do (legally, constitutionally, or otherwise) and unfounded assertions about what it *would* do. The "could" versus "would" distinction is necessary for separating signal from noise. The two terms are not interchangeable.

That Japan has not publicly pre-committed to any particular course of action if war occurs in the Taiwan Strait should not be surprising. Even long-standing and far more publicly forward-leaning U.S. policy, often referred

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17 Adam P. Liff, "Japan, Taiwan, and the 'One China' Framework after 50 Years," *China Quarterly* (forthcoming).

18 At the other extreme, some media reports, misinterpreting a nuanced statement by Prime Minister Suga, misleadingly asserted categorically that "there is no possibility of Japanese forces being committed to any military contingency surrounding Taiwan." See "Japan Troops Won't Get Involved If China Invades Taiwan, PM Yoshihide Suga Says," *South China Morning Post*, April 21, 2021 ~ https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3130423/japan-troops-wont-get-involved-if-china-invades-taiwan-pm.

to as "strategic ambiguity" or "dual deterrence," is officially noncommittal.[19] In both cases, this ambiguity is by design. The shared intent of the allies' respective policies has been to deter destabilizing actions by either Beijing (e.g., use of force) or Taipei (e.g., a *de jure* declaration of independence) that could upset an already precarious cross-strait détente while simultaneously trying to maintain mutually beneficial, stabilizing ties with both governments and encourage a peaceful resolution.

That said, despite a basically shared objective, the allies' past and present policies toward Taipei and the extent and nature of their security engagements with it differ in important ways. History, geography, and domestic factors are all key variables. For example, unlike Washington, which had a mutual defense treaty with the ROC from 1954 to 1979, during the Cold War Tokyo never made any security commitment to Taipei or stationed forces on Taiwan. Since Tokyo switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1972, Japan's National Diet has never passed legislation remotely similar to the U.S. Taiwan Relations Act, nor has it actively engaged in military cooperation with or sold defensive weapons to Taiwan.[20] Furthermore, as discussed below, Japanese official statements, policies, and potential responses to a crisis must take into account the extensive domestic political, legal, and constitutional constraints on JSDF operations in a regional contingency (i.e., one in which Japan itself has not suffered an armed attack), and which do not apply in the U.S. case. This includes a potential cross-strait conflict scenario, even one in which the U.S. military becomes involved.

What Then Explains the Shifting Discourse in Japan since 2021? Three Major Developments

To say that much recent commentary overreaches in claiming radical change in Japan's publicly ambiguous posture concerning a possible cross-strait contingency is not to say that the past decade has not witnessed significant developments affecting thinking in Tokyo (and likewise Washington) about the U.S.-Japan alliance's possible role. The confluence of several of these in 2021 was particularly important in focusing Japanese leaders' attention on cross-strait peace and stability.

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[19] Richard Bush, "The U.S. Policy of Dual Deterrence," in *If China Attacks Taiwan*, ed. Steve Tsang (New York: Routledge, 2006), 30–45.

[20] Adam P. Liff, "A 'Taiwan Relations Act' for Japan?" Wilson Center, Asia Dispatches, February 25, 2021 ~ https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/taiwan-relations-act-japan.

First, two developments last year contributed to increasing focus among Japanese policymakers, politicians, commentators, and scholars on the military balance of power objectively shifting in Beijing's favor and heightened concerns in Tokyo about the robustness of Taiwan and U.S.-centered cross-strait deterrence. First, high-profile testimonies in March 2021 by Admiral Philip Davidson, the then current head, and Admiral John Aquilino, the then nominee head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, sounded an alarm about both the potentially short time horizon before Beijing may attempt a forceful unification with Taiwan and the possibility of Beijing's success.[21] The second development occurred when China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) engaged in live-fire drills, exercises, and increased air sorties near Taiwan that were largely unprecedented in scope, scale, and frequency. Thus, these military activities also occurred near Japan's southwestern islands—including the contested Senkaku Islands (around a hundred miles from Taiwan), which Japan administers but which Beijing also claims under the name Diaoyu. Both developments were widely reported in Japanese media and amplified by prominent defense experts and Taiwan-friendly voices within and outside the government.

Second, the historic Biden-Suga summit statement in April 2021 gave high-profile and bilateral attention to "the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" in a lengthy paragraph criticizing China—by name—for what the allies perceive as coercive policies and "unilateral attempts to change the status quo." The statement also called for Japan to "bolster its own national defense capabilities to further strengthen the Alliance and regional security," to "enhance deterrence and response capabilities," and "to deepen defense cooperation across all domains."[22] A decade of worsening Japanese threat perceptions vis-à-vis China, especially owing to the latter's more active assertions of its claim to the Senkakus, had already contributed to major shifts in JSDF force posture toward southwestern Japan and a historic expansion of JSDF legal authorities and U.S.-Japan defense cooperation during the 2014–16 period.[23] As discussed below, although a possible Taiwan contingency was not a primary motivator of these reforms,

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21 Brad Lendon, "Chinese Threat to Taiwan 'Closer to Us Than Most Think,' Top U.S. Admiral Says," CNN, March 24, 2021 ~ https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/24/asia/indo-pacific-commander-aquilino-hearing-taiwan-intl-hnk-ml/index.html.

22 "U.S.- Japan Joint Leaders' Statement."

23 Adam P. Liff, "Japan's Defense Reforms under Abe: Assessing Institutional and Policy Change," in *The Political Economy of the Abe Government and Abenomics Reforms*, ed. Takeo Hoshi and Phillip Y. Lipscy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 479–510. See also Jeffrey W. Hornung, *Japan's Potential Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2020), especially chap. 8.

they nevertheless carry major implications for cross-strait deterrence and the JSDF's and alliance's *potential* roles in the event of one. As reflected in the Biden-Suga statement, these general trends have heightened U.S. expectations for Japan to contribute more to regional security.

Third, there has been a worsening of authoritarian China's image among most major democracies, exacerbated since 2020 by Beijing's historic crackdown in Hong Kong, handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, and external measures widely seen outside China as coercive toward its neighbors (including but not limited to Taiwan). These developments have amplified calls in Japan for greater solidarity among "like-minded" democracies and to accelerate the years-long expansion of "unofficial" political, economic, and people-to-people ties with Taiwan as part of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" vision. Although calls for greater support for Taiwan as a fellow democracy and for closer Japan-Taiwan cooperation, importantly, generally stop far short of explicit calls for military cooperation (much less a defense commitment to Taiwan), friendly people-to-people ties and increasingly robust legislative exchanges have reshaped the broader context in which Japanese leaders and the public react to perceived threats from Beijing to Taiwan's democracy and effective autonomy.[24] In September 2021, for example, LDP politician Fumio Kishida—then without a government post but just one month prior to his election as prime minister—highlighted Taiwan's significance "on the front lines of the clash between authoritarianism and democracy," noted the necessity of U.S.-Japan cooperation to address associated challenges, and called for robust discussions about a Taiwan contingency.[25]

In sum, 2021 witnessed a remarkable mainstreaming of political and public discourse in Japan about Taiwan, cross-strait peace and stability, and Japan-Taiwan relations. Especially outside Japan, however, much of the commentary on these issues unfolded with insufficient historical baselining and recognition of the long-standing nuances and ambiguities of Japan's Taiwan policy, especially concerning a possible cross-strait conflict and the unique domestic political, legal, and constitutional constraints that would inevitably factor into the leadership's response, even in a scenario in which the country's U.S. ally decided to defend Taiwan. One consequence has been

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24 Adam P. Liff, "Japan, Taiwan, the United States, and the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific,'" in "Essays on the Rise of China and Its Implications," ed. Abraham M. Denmark and Lucas Myers, Wilson Center, 2021 ~ https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/ASIA-210304%20-%20The%20Wilson%20China%20Fellowship%20report%20-%20web.pdf.

25 "Kishida shi, misairu geigeki noryoku no kochiku kento mo, WSJ ni kataru" [Kishida Talks to WSJ about Missile Interception Capability Too], *Wall Street Journal* (Japanese edition), September 7, 2021.

a noisy discourse that often skews toward simplistic binaries and sometimes confuses more than it enlightens.

To critically assess whether Japan's, and by extension, the U.S.-Japan alliance's posture vis-à-vis a possible Taiwan contingency did in fact undergo the transformative change in 2021 that many outside Japan asserted, a necessary first step is to establish a historical baseline and describe the status quo *ex ante*, with careful attention paid to Japanese-language sources and perspectives.

JAPAN, THE U.S.-JAPAN ALLIANCE, AND A "TAIWAN CONTINGENCY" IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Cold War Roots and Contemporary Legacies

Following the effective end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 and throughout the early Cold War, important and formative differences were apparent between the Japanese and U.S. governments' perspectives on, policies toward, and relations with the ROC government in Taiwan. These different approaches carried important legacies for the future, including today. Most fundamentally, although in 1952 Japan's newly sovereign and U.S.-aligned government recognized the anti-communist ROC government in Taipei as "China" under significant U.S. pressure, Japan never made any security commitment to the ROC nor deployed forces to Taiwan. In fact, throughout the Cold War, the Japanese government repeatedly resisted U.S. efforts even to hold robust bilateral discussions on potential allied cooperation in any regional contingency.

Postwar Japan's approach to Taiwan in the early Cold War stood in stark contrast to that of the U.S. government, which in response to perceived PRC aggression in 1954–55 (aka the "first Taiwan Strait crisis") signed a mutual defense treaty with the ROC and stationed U.S. forces there. In January 1955, Congress passed the Formosa Resolution authorizing President Dwight Eisenhower to employ the U.S. military "for the specific purpose of securing and protecting Formosa and the Pescadores against armed attack."[26] Although then, and during a second cross-strait crisis in 1958, Japanese leaders expressed both their concerns about the threat to East Asia's peace and stability and their hope for a peaceful resolution, they basically judged that Japan had

[26] "Joint Resolution by the Congress," January 29, 1955, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957,* vol. 2, *China,* U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian ⇝ https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v02/d56.

neither an interest in, nor the ability to actively play, a meaningful role.[27] Coupled with the heavily militarized U.S. administration from 1945 to 1972 of 450-mile-long, archipelagic Okinawa Prefecture, whose westernmost point is only approximately 70 miles from Taiwan, throughout the early Cold War, Tokyo generally saw a possible cross-strait conflict primarily as a concern for Washington and its treaty ally Taipei, not as an issue for Japan.

By the 1970s, rapidly changing Cold War geopolitics—especially accelerating U.S.-China rapprochement—significantly reduced fears of a cross-strait conflict. President Richard Nixon's historic 1972 visit to the PRC and Tokyo's and Washington's subsequent decisions to switch diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1972 and 1979, respectively, greatly lowered U.S.-PRC tensions. Against this backdrop of improving U.S.-PRC relations, the Carter administration's unilateral abrogation of the U.S.-ROC mutual defense pact and withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Taiwan—conditions for normalizing ties with Beijing—further alleviated Japanese concerns. In short, by the second half of the Cold War (1970s–1980s), a "golden age" of extensive U.S.-Japan-PRC strategic alignment against Moscow coupled with significant economic cooperation had arrived.[28]

Nevertheless, during the Cold War the United States did attempt to convince Japan to discuss allied cooperation in a hypothetical regional contingency, including one involving Taiwan. But these efforts bore little fruit. As Michael Green has described it,

> The United States squeezed an official expression of support from Japan for the U.S. defense commitment to Taiwan only once—in the 1969 Nixon-Sato communique—when negotiating pressure to secure the return of Okinawa led the Japanese government to concede that "maintaining peace in Taiwan region is also an important element in Japan's national security."[29]

Importantly, as discussed below, even in this extraordinary instance, then prime minister Eisaku Sato's statement of support related to the

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27 Author's review of dozens of Diet meeting records from 1954–55 and 1958 from Kokkai Kaigiroku Kensaku Shitsutemu [National Diet Minutes Archive] ~ https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp. Beyond the question of leaders' political will and judgment about national interests, the capabilities of the recently established JSDF were extremely limiting. So, too, were, the unique constraints on these forces' development and employment under the government's interpretation of the (U.S.-drafted) 1947 constitution's Article 9 "peace clause," which, *inter alia*, prohibited "offensive" capabilities and using force unless Japanese territory was under attack.

28 Ezra F. Vogel, Yuan Ming, and Tanaka Akihiko, eds., *The Golden Age of the U.S.-China-Japan Triangle, 1972–1989* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

29 Michael J. Green, *Japan's Reluctant Realism: Foreign Policy Challenges in an Era of Uncertain Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 88–89.

United States' security commitment to Taiwan. Neither he nor the Japanese government made any commitment to Taiwan itself, much less referenced the possibility of U.S.-Japan cooperation or a JSDF role in a cross-strait conflict.

A decade later, negotiations over the 1978 Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation, which for the first time laid down how the allies might actually cooperate in a conflict, focused narrowly on the case of a direct attack on Japan itself (for example, a Soviet invasion). The Japanese government successfully resisted U.S. pressure to include a response to a regional contingency.[30] Instead, the guidelines merely called vaguely for future consultations and "studies" on cooperation "in the case of situations in the Far East outside of Japan which will have an important influence on the security of Japan."[31]

In short, the Cold War ended without the allies having ever carried out robust consultations on cooperation in a potential Taiwan contingency. Japan's leaders effectively parried U.S. requests to do so. This was not because they were ambivalent about Taiwan or cross-strait peace and stability per se. Rather, it was because they saw a possible cross-strait conflict as primarily a U.S. or U.S.-ROC/Taiwan concern—not one in which the JSDF would play any role. More generally, Japanese negotiators resisted U.S. efforts even to discuss, much less formally commit Japan (or the JSDF) to a role in, any regional contingency.

Nevertheless, three Cold-War-era alliance-related developments carry important legacies for thinking about possible U.S.-Japan cooperation in a potential Taiwan contingency today.

The "Far East" clause of the 1960 U.S.-Japan security treaty. The first development is Article VI of the 1960 revision of the U.S.-Japan mutual security treaty, which is still in effect today. The clause reads: "For the purpose of contributing to the security of Japan and the maintenance of international peace and security in the Far East, the United States of America is granted the use by its land, air and naval forces of facilities and areas in Japan."[32] Though Tokyo and Washington defined "the Far East" (*kyokuto*) vaguely and not geographically, they stipulated that it "roughly" includes areas north of the

30 Kokkai Kaigiroku Kensaku Shitsutemu, April 26, 1979; and Sado Akihiro, "Nihon no anzen hosho seisaku to Taiwan" [Japan's Security Policy and Taiwan], *Chukyo hogaku* 51, no. 2–3 (2017): 188.

31 "The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation," Ministry of Defense (Japan), November 27, 1978 ~ https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11591426/www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/us/anpo/pdf/19781127.pdf.

32 "Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of America," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) (Japan), January 19, 1960 ~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html.

Philippines, Japan, and surrounding areas, including South Korea and those "under the Republic of China's control" (aka "the Taiwan area").[33] Notably, Article VI refers only to potential operations by U.S. forces in Japan—it says nothing about a JSDF role in a regional contingency, much less commits Japan to one. Furthermore, an exchange of diplomatic notes in 1960 committed Washington to engage in "prior consultation" (*jizen kyogi*) before, *inter alia*, deploying U.S. forces in Japan for combat operations in a regional (read: a non–"defense of Japan") contingency.[34] The Japanese government's official position today continues to assume the U.S. government has committed not to act against Tokyo's wishes, though whether that implies a potential veto is ambiguous.[35]

The 1969 Nixon-Sato communique's "Taiwan clause." Second is the aforementioned clause from Nixon and Sato's 1969 joint statement that reads: "The Prime Minister said that the maintenance of peace and security in the Taiwan area was also a most important factor for the security of Japan."[36] Importantly, this statement directly links Japan's security to "peace and security in the Taiwan area." That said, as noted above, historical context is important for interpreting its long-term significance. This conspicuously unilateral, single sentence—the only reference to "the Taiwan area" in a twentieth-century U.S.-Japan joint statement—was a concession by Tokyo amid intense negotiations over the reversion of U.S.-occupied Okinawa to Japanese administration; the U.S. side sought reassurance that it would be able to use its bases there in the event of a cross-strait contingency. As with Article VI, the clause related only to whether Tokyo might respond positively if Washington expressed a desire to deploy the U.S. military from bases in Japan for combat operations in a regional contingency. It neither explicitly referenced nor implied the JSDF playing a direct or indirect role supporting U.S. forces. If the JSDF were mobilized in a contingency, it was to be in defense of Japan itself, not Taiwan.[37] Furthermore, Japanese leaders agreed to include this single sentence assuming a cross-strait conflict was unlikely.

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33 "Nichibei anpo taisei Q&A" [Japan-U.S. Security Treaty Q&A], MOFA (Japan), February 26, 1960 ~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/usa/hosho/qa/03_2.html.

34 "Exchanged Notes, Regarding the Implementation of Article VI of Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of America," January 19, 1960, in Joyakushu 38-9, *Japan's Foreign Relations—Basic Documents* vol. 1, 963–65, available from the World and Japan Database ~ https://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/docs/19600119.T2E.html.

35 "Nichibei anpo taisei Q&A."

36 "Joint Statement of Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato and U.S. President Richard Nixon," November 21, 1969, available from the World and Japan Database ~ https://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/docs/19691121.D1E.html.

37 Kokkai Kaigiroku Kensaku Shitsutemu, December 16, 1971.

Prime Minister Sato even noted that an armed attack against Taiwan "cannot be foreseen."[38]

Those important caveats aside, according to Sato himself, in the 1969 "Taiwan clause" Japan had for the first time identified an "external armed attack" against the ROC as "a threat to the peace and security of the Far East, including Japan's." He called abstractly for Japan's government to factor that judgment into any response to a U.S. request to use U.S. forces in Japan to uphold Washington's treaty commitment to Taiwan.[39] Sato's framing again makes clear that during the Cold War, Tokyo primarily saw Taiwan's defense through the lens of the U.S.-ROC alliance, not as a contingency in which the JSDF had a role to play directly or indirectly.[40]

Nevertheless, the 1969 Taiwan clause was historically significant. It constituted Japan's political—though not legal—statement of interest in cooperating with Washington for regional peace and stability. It implied a reduced likelihood of Japan opposing through the "prior consultation" mechanism a potential U.S. effort to deploy U.S. forces from Japan in a Taiwan contingency.[41]

From a contemporary perspective, the Taiwan clause demonstrates that government acknowledgments in recent months of a link between "the Taiwan area" and both Japan's security and regional stability have a more than half-century-old precedent. However, its timing also raises questions about its lasting legacy. After all, in 1969, both Japan and the United States still maintained diplomatic relations with the ROC, and the U.S.-ROC mutual defense agreement remained in effect. Just three years later, however, Tokyo switched diplomatic recognition to the PRC, effectively ending official ties with Taiwan. And in 1979, Washington followed suit, additionally abrogating the U.S. defense commitment to Taipei that had been central to Sato's linkage of an "external armed attack" against the ROC and "the peace and security of the Far East, including Japan's." It would not be until vastly different geopolitical circumstances 36 years later, in 2005, that the United States and Japan would jointly mention the Taiwan Strait in a statement.

The Japanese government's official 1972 positions on Taiwan's status and "peaceful resolution" of cross-strait frictions. As noted above, in September

38 "Sato Eisaku soridaijin enzetsu" [Speech by PM Sato Eisaku], MOFA (Japan), November 21, 1969 ~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/1970/s44-3-1-2.htm#a5.

39 Ibid.

40 Sado, "Nihon no anzen hosho seisaku to Taiwan," 180.

41 Kuriyama Takakazu, "Sato-Nikuson kyodo seimei" [Sato-Nixon Joint Statement], in *Gaiko shogenroku* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2010), 75.

1972 Tokyo formally recognized Beijing "as the sole legal government of China," effectively ending diplomatic relations with Taipei. However, Tokyo did not recognize Beijing's claim that Taiwan is part of the PRC.[42] Japan's vague 1972 position on Taiwan's status carries three important contemporary legacies, of which the first two have implications for potential U.S.-Japan security cooperation in a cross-strait conflict. First, this position enabled Tokyo to successfully resist significant pressure from Beijing (and from within Japan) to use U.S.-PRC rapprochement and Japan-PRC diplomatic normalization as an opportunity to reinterpret or revise the 1960 U.S.-Japan security treaty to exclude Taiwan from "the Far East's" geographic scope.[43] Second, it facilitated the government's subsequent adoption of an official, if neutral, position that expresses "hope for the issues relating to Taiwan to be resolved peacefully through direct talks between concerned parties on both sides of the Strait."[44] By the government's own admission, these twin 1972 positions remain core pillars of Japan's Taiwan policy 50 years later.[45] Lastly, even if their relationship remains officially unofficial and nongovernmental, Tokyo's vague position has allowed Japan-Taiwan bilateral ties and practical cooperation to expand significantly over time, albeit—as noted below, and in stark contrast to the U.S.-Taiwan case—almost entirely outside the domain of security/military affairs.[46]

Post–Cold War Allied Concerns about a Regional Contingency and Contemporary Legacies

The Soviet Union's 1991 collapse eliminated both the primary geostrategic rationale motivating the post-1972 U.S.-Japan-PRC golden age of strategic cooperation and the armed invasion scenario upon which the only Cold War–era Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation (in 1978) had focused. Together with a 1993–94 war scare on the Korean Peninsula due to North Korea's nuclear program, this transformed regional reality motivated the

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42 Yinan He, "The Bitter Legacies of the 1972 Sino-Japanese Normalization Talks," Wilson Center, Sources and Methods, March 13, 2017 ~ https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/the-bitter-legacies-the-1972-sino-japanese-normalization-talks.

43 Kokkai Kaigiroku Kensaku Shitsutemu, October 17, 1978; and "Bei Chu seijoka de, anpo henshitsu wa tozen" [Alteration to Security Treaty Because of U.S.-China Normalization Is Natural], *Yomiuri shimbun*, December 22, 1978.

44 Fujita Naotaka, "Taiwan mondai no 'heiwateki kaiketsu'" ["Peaceful Resolution" of Taiwan Issue], *Asahi shimbun*, May 24, 2021.

45 "Yoku aru shitsumonshu" [FAQ Collection], MOFA (Japan) ~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/comment/faq/area/asia.html#10.

46 Liff, "Japan, Taiwan, and the 'One China' Framework after 50 Years."

Clinton administration in the United States (1993–2001) to undertake major reviews of U.S. strategy toward East Asia.[47] This effort was already well under way before the PLA commenced large-scale military exercises to intimidate rapidly democratizing Taiwan, especially on the eve of its first direct presidential election in March 1996. However, the 1995–96 "third Taiwan Strait crisis"—the first since 1958—contributed to growing calls for both Japan and the U.S.-Japan alliance to contribute more explicitly to regional stability. Of particular concern for Japan, the 1996 crisis included PLA missile tests that splashed down only several dozen miles from Japanese territory and prompted concerns in Tokyo about whether and how Japan could effectively evacuate its citizens in the event of a war. Notably, Washington deployed two aircraft battle groups to the area (one reportedly without informing Tokyo in advance).[48]

Though the third Taiwan Strait crisis ended peacefully, one consequence was to expose how poorly prepared the alliance was for a regional contingency, especially one across the Taiwan Strait.[49] Decades of Japanese government resistance to robust alliance discussions about regional contingencies, the 1978 guidelines' effective punting on future consultations and "studies" about allied cooperation beyond a strict defense of Japan scenario, and an apparent U.S. belief that overwhelming conventional superiority meant the United States did not need Japan's help deterring China all present as factors in the allies' failure to coordinate effectively. As the U.S. deputy chief of mission in Tokyo during the crisis later reflected: "There were no discussions whatsoever during the China-Taiwan crisis on how the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty would be applied or how both countries would respond in terms of the treaty."[50] Even after the crisis was over, the allies remained reluctant to jointly comment on it publicly. For example, although the landmark April 1996 U.S.-Japan Joint Declaration on Security—released just a few weeks after the last and most provocative round of PLA exercises—recognized the urgency of U.S.-Japan cooperation in a regional contingency, it referred only to the Korean Peninsula and did not mention Taiwan or the Taiwan Strait.[51]

Nevertheless, the combination of the Soviet Union's collapse, the 1993–94 North Korean nuclear crisis, and the first major military crisis

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47 Joseph S. Nye, "The Case for Deep Engagement," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1995, 97.

48 For the seminal post-mortem on the crisis from a Japanese and U.S.-Japan alliance perspective in English translation, see Yoichi Funabashi, *Alliance Adrift* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1999).

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 398.

51 "Japan-U.S. Joint Declaration on Security Alliance for the 21st Century," MOFA (Japan), April 17, 1996 ~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/security.html.

across the Taiwan Strait since the 1950s prompted extensive consultations about U.S.-Japan security cooperation beyond a strict defense of Japan scenario. The public result of greatest consequence was the first-ever revision in 1997 of the 1978 Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation. Though not legally binding, the 1997 guidelines expanded the alliance's mandate beyond peacetime deterrence and an armed attack against Japan to include Japan potentially providing facilities; rear-area support, such as supply, transportation, and maintenance "primarily in Japanese territory"; and intelligence gathering, surveillance, and minesweeping to U.S. forces operating in "areas surrounding Japan that will have an important influence on Japan's peace and security." Japan's 1999 legislation, which enshrined key aspects of the 1997 guidelines in domestic law, defined such "situations in areas surrounding Japan" as those "which could lead to a direct attack on [Japan] if no action is taken."[52]

The implications for a Taiwan-related contingency were left ambiguous, however. To avoid upsetting Beijing and give Japan flexibility in a crisis, neither the bilateral guidelines nor Japan's 1999 domestic legislation contained any reference to Taiwan, the Taiwan area, or the Taiwan Strait. Furthermore, the allies defined the guidelines' scope vaguely, as "not geographic but situational."[53] Though Tokyo successfully resisted pressure from Beijing to explicitly exclude a Taiwan contingency, signals from Japan's political leaders were mixed. In 1997, the then LDP secretary-general reportedly told PRC counterparts that the guidelines' focus was a Korean Peninsula contingency and that the Taiwan Strait was an issue for U.S.-PRC relations, not Japan-PRC relations. Fearing that Beijing would misinterpret this LDP representative's statement as the official Japanese government position, however, Japan's chief cabinet secretary publicly suggested that the guidelines *could* include a cross-strait conflict.[54] Behind closed doors, Japanese diplomats also reportedly sent similar signals to Beijing.[55] In the end, the government's public position on

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52 "The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation," Ministry of Defense (Japan), September 23, 1997 ~ https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11591426/www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/us/anpo/pdf/19970923.pdf; and Shugiin [House of Representatives (Japan)], *Shuhen jitai nisaishite wagakuni no heiwa oyobi anzen o kakuhosuru tame no sochi nikansuru horitsu* [Law on Measures to Ensure Japan's Peace and Security in the Event of a Situation in Surrounding Areas], Law no. 60, 1999 ~ https://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb_housei.nsf/html/housei/h145060.htm.

53 "The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation," September 23, 1997.

54 Funabashi, *Alliance Adrift*, 399–400; and Kajiyama Seiroku, "Anpo rongi no kyoko o haisu" [Reject Fictions of the Security Debate], *Bungeishunju* 77, no. 6 (1999): 160–73.

55 Tanaka Hitoshi and Soichiro Tahara, *Kokka to gaiko* [Nation and Diplomacy] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2005), 160–61.

the guidelines' applicability to a Taiwan Strait contingency was impressively vague: "It couldn't be said that Taiwan wasn't included."[56]

The revised guidelines achieved what Washington had for decades sought but which Tokyo had long resisted: a framework for possible cooperation in a regional contingency, including, at least theoretically, one involving Taiwan. Importantly, however, the guidelines were not legally binding, nor a pledge, promise, or treaty. Accordingly, they did not commit either country to respond to a potential PRC attack on Taiwan or to play any specific role, separately or together, if one occurs. As a young LDP lawmaker named Shinzo Abe explained in 1999, Japan's goal was "*senryakutekina aimaisa*" (strategic ambiguity) and "to avoid an extreme worsening of diplomatic ties [with China] that would come from being more specific."[57] This approach mirrored the Clinton administration's explicit but also deliberately ambiguous message to Beijing that the U.S. response to a threat to Taiwan would "depend on the circumstances."[58]

THINKING ABOUT THE U.S.-JAPAN ALLIANCE AND A TAIWAN CONTINGENCY TODAY

A lot has changed in the region and across the Taiwan Strait since the late 1990s. China's surging economic growth, investment in military modernization, and military buildup have transformed the cross-strait and regional balance of power to a degree which is openly acknowledged by Japan's current defense minister.[59] For example, whereas Taiwan's and China's respective defense budgets were roughly equivalent at the time of the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis—both less than one-fourth than that of Japan and one-twentieth that of the United States—today Beijing spends roughly twenty times as much as Taiwan and five times as much as Japan.[60] Though the United States still spends significantly more than China, its military power and commitments are globally distributed, which the recent deployment of U.S. troops to reinforce NATO throws into sharp relief. In contrast, developing the ability to coerce or use military force to subjugate Taiwan and to deter, delay, or defeat possible U.S. aid to the island has guided China's rapid military

56 Funabashi, *Alliance Adrift*, 399–400.

57 Kokkai Kaigiroku Kensaku Shitsutemu, April 1, 1999.

58 Joseph Nye, then U.S. assistant secretary of defense, quoted in Funabashi, *Alliance Adrift*, 395.

59 Kokkai Kaigiroku Kensaku Shitsutemu, November 19, 2020.

60 Stockholm International Peace Research, SIPRI Military Expenditure Database ~ https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex.

modernization.[61] China's leaders deem full reunification with Taiwan to be the "greatest and final obstacle" for achieving "national rejuvenation." This ambition permeates contemporary rhetoric in the Chinese Communist Party, including major speeches by Xi Jinping.[62]

Meanwhile, Taiwan's 1990s democratization necessitates that any cross-strait *modus vivendi* today be acceptable to its diverse electorate, which is deeply skeptical of Beijing. Though neither major political party in Taiwan considers Taiwan part of the PRC, Beijing has particular contempt for the left-of-center Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which has been in power 14 of the past 21 years (2000–2008 and since 2016) and basically rejects the idea of both sides of the strait being part of even a nebulously defined "one China."[63] This changed political, economic, and strategic context challenges Tokyo's traditional approach across multiple fronts.[64] And Beijing is watching Japan's response closely: a study published in a journal affiliated with the PRC's Ministry of State Security cautioned that the PRC "should be on high alert" (*gaodu jingti*) about deepening Japan-Taiwan ties.[65]

Though after Prime Minister Sato's unilateral statement within the 1969 Nixon-Sato communique the allies avoided joint comment on cross-strait issues for decades, that had changed long before the Biden-Suga statement attracted global attention last year. At the 2005 U.S.-Japan foreign and defense ministerial "2+2" dialogue, worsening cross-strait frictions during the two terms of Taiwan's first DPP president Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008) led the allies to list "encourag[ing] the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait through dialogue" as a "common strategic objective."[66] After cross-strait tensions relaxed considerably under Kuomintang president Ma Ying-jeou (2008–16), the 2011 U.S.-Japan 2+2 joint statement "welcomed

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61 M. Taylor Fravel, "Shifts in Warfare and Party Unity: Explaining China's Changes in Military Strategy," *International Security* 42, no. 3 (2018): 37–83, 51.

62 See, for example, Xi Jinping, "Zai 'gao Taiwan tongbao shu' fabiao 40zhounian jinianhui shang de jianghua" [Speech at the 40th Anniversary Commemoration of the "Message to Compatriots in Taiwan"], Xinhua, January 2, 2019.

63 Yu-jie Chen, "'One China' Contention in China-Taiwan Relations: Law, Politics and Identity," *China Quarterly* (forthcoming).

64 Liff, "Japan, Taiwan, and the 'One China' Framework after 50 Years."

65 Zhang Ruiting, "Anbei dierci zhizheng shiqi RiTai anquan guanxi" [Japan-Taiwan Security Relations during Abe's Second Term], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* 12 (2019): 46–55, 61.

66 "Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee," MOFA (Japan), February 19, 2005 ~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/scc/joint0502.html.

the progress to date in improving cross-Strait relations" while reiterating the earlier call for "peaceful resolution [through dialogue]."[67]

Since Ma left office, by most objective measures cross-strait stability has worsened, and not only because of a changing power balance. Despite DPP president Tsai Ing-wen's (2016–present) moderate and pro–status quo orientation, the PRC has refused to engage in even quasi-official dialogue and has employed an increasingly diverse coercive toolkit toward Taiwan, escalating its pressure significantly since 2020. These deepening cross-strait frictions have combined with Beijing's post-2020 crackdown in Hong Kong and the longer-term deterioration of U.S.-PRC and Japan-PRC relations to catalyze changes in Japanese and U.S. discourse about the urgency of more proactively supporting cross-strait peace and Taiwan's democracy and effective autonomy. In this far more volatile context, Biden and Suga's summit call for "peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" and a "peaceful resolution" takes on additional significance.

Key Security Alliance–Related Developments over the Past Decade: Implications for a Taiwan Contingency

During Shinzo Abe's second prime ministership (2012–20), Japan's government accelerated major reforms to national security–relevant institutions, policy, and posture. Together with Washington, Tokyo strengthened the U.S.-Japan alliance and expanded the scope of possible cooperation in a conflict scenario—including one not necessarily involving a direct attack on Japanese territory. Alongside efforts by Japan to bolster and reposition JSDF capabilities, the allies have deepened interoperability, coordination, planning, training, exercises, and cooperation across the full spectrum of possible conflicts over the past decade. Though the causes of these efforts are overdetermined, they include a basic consensus on Japan's worsening regional security environment and shifting domestic politics, including the replacement of the highly ideological socialist opposition from the Cold War period with a more moderate, pragmatic center-left.[68]

Of arguably greatest significance for thinking about possible U.S.-Japan allied cooperation in a Taiwan contingency today are three developments from the past decade: (1) the 2015 revision of the Guidelines for Japan-U.S.

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67 "Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee—Toward a Deeper and Broader U.S.-Japan Alliance: Building on 50 Years of Partnership," MOFA (Japan), June 21, 2011 ~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/pdfs/joint1106_01.pdf.

68 For an overview and post-mortem of these reforms, see Liff, "Japan's Defense Reforms under Abe."

Defense Cooperation, (2) the "peace and security legislation" passed by the Diet in 2015, and (3) major shifts in JSDF force structure and posture toward Japan's southwestern islands in the East China Sea to bolster deterrence vis-à-vis the Senkakus. The latter included Japan standing up amphibious forces for the first time since 1945, procuring F-35Bs and longer-range missiles, and deploying advanced radar, missile, and other capabilities on its remote southwestern islands—i.e., those nearest the Senkakus (and which also happen to be relatively close to Taiwan).[69] As was the case in the 1990s, neither the 2015 guidelines nor Japan's security legislation refers specifically to Taiwan or the Taiwan Strait, nor do they obligate either ally to play any role in a regional contingency in which Japan itself has not been attacked. In short, what role, if any, either party would play—separately or together—in the event of a cross-strait conflict will still inevitably depend on the specifics of the contingency and political judgments about the appropriate response.[70]

Though these post–2012 reforms to Japan's security policy and the alliance were not motivated at the time primarily by concerns about a possible Taiwan contingency—indeed, key decisions were made during the 2008–16 period of relative calm under President Ma—they nevertheless significantly expanded the options now available to Japanese leaders and the allies in the event of one. Of particular significance, in 2014 the Cabinet "reinterpreted" a decades-old constitutional prohibition on the UN Charter–sanctioned right of collective self-defense to allow limited exercise under three conditions for use of force unique to Japan: a "clear danger" (*meihakuna kiken*) must threaten Japan's "national survival" (*kuni no sonritsu*); a lack of alternative ways to address the threat; and a limitation of Japan's use of force to the "minimum necessary." Inter alia, the reinterpretation opened the door for the JSDF to potentially use force 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."[71]

Public attention in 2014–15 focused on how this reinterpretation expanded options for Japan to possibly use force to support the United States

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69 Liff, "Japan's Defense Reforms under Abe." For a concise and general (not Taiwan-specific) overview of alliance obligations, expectations, and Japan's post-2015 legal permissions, interpretations, and JSDF restrictions, see Hornung, *Japan's Potential Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency*, chap. 8.

70 Tsuchiya Takahiro, "Shin 'Chuka chitsujo' shita no Nichi Bei domei to Taiwan yuji" [U.S.-Japan Alliance and a Taiwan Contingency under a New "Chinese Order"], Japan Institute of International Affairs, March 16, 2021 ~ https://www.jiia.or.jp/column/post-61.html.

71 "Japan's Security Policy," MOFA (Japan), April 12, 2016 ~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we_000084.html. For an overview, see Adam P. Liff, "Policy by Other Means: Collective Self-Defense and the Politics of Japan's Postwar Constitutional Reinterpretations," *Asia Policy*, no. 24 (2017): 160–63; and Hornung, *Japan's Potential Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency*, chap. 8.

even if Japan had not been directly attacked. Abe's own rhetoric significantly raised U.S. expectations of Japanese support, such as when he famously declared "we [the United States and Japan] can defend each other from now on."[72] But often missing from the contemporaneous discourse was sufficient appreciation of the 2014 reinterpretation's limited and conditional nature. Eight years later, these conditions continue to operate as practically significant constraints on the circumstances under which the JSDF could use force outside an unambiguous defense of Japan scenario. Ambiguities could significantly delay a Japanese government response in a cross-strait contingency as debate over the political and legal interpretation unfolds in real time.

Nevertheless, together with the new legal authorities that resulted from Japan's 2015 security legislation, the net effect of the 2014–15 reforms was to enable (though not obligate) the JSDF to play a far more robust supporting role and, under certain strict conditions, potentially a combat role, even if no armed attack against Japan has occurred or is imminent. Additionally, the 2015 guidelines facilitated and expanded other forms of bilateral security cooperation, planning, and real-time alliance coordination, including in peacetime and "gray-zone" contingencies.[73] All carry significant implications for deterrence and any potential preparations for, and possible U.S.-Japan cooperation in, a Taiwan contingency.

What Role Could Japan Legally Play in a Taiwan Contingency Today?

The nuances of Japan's "positive list" legal authorities governing JSDF operations are famously complicated, as are the constitutional and self-imposed policy constraints on use of force or weapons. Furthermore, judgments about whether and under what authorities the JSDF could be mobilized specifically in a cross-strait crisis will inevitably hinge on legal interpretations and political decisions in Tokyo based on specific circumstances. Thus, it could be said that Japan's likely response is doubly ambiguous due to (1) the government's vague official position on Taiwan's status and desire to avoid precommiting to any particular course of action in a Taiwan contingency, and (2) Japan's unique constitutional and legal constraints on the JSDF using force.

For these reasons, widespread recent claims that assert or imply that Japan inevitably would take a particular action in a cross-strait conflict are

72 "Security Laws Usher in New Era for Pacifist Japan," *Japan Times*, March 29, 2016 ~ https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/03/29/national/politics-diplomacy/japans-contentious-new-security-laws-take-effect-paving-way-collective-self-defense.

73 Liff, "Policy by Other Means."

inherently problematic. That said, in theory at least, since 2015 there are basically three roles that the JSDF could possibly play in the event of a military conflict over Taiwan:

1. *Conducting logistical and other support activities outside "combat zones."* If the PRC had not attacked Japan but Japanese leaders judged that the contingency had an "important influence" on Japan's peace and security, they could order the JSDF to provide logistical and other noncombat support for U.S. (or other) military forces. These measures could include sharing intelligence, conducting surveillance or reconnaissance, refueling U.S. warships or aircraft, protecting U.S. bases in Japan, and assisting with the evacuation of noncombatants (via Japan). In this so-called important influence situation the JSDF could undertake these activities only outside Japanese government–defined "combat zones."
2. *Countering attacks against the U.S. military (or others).* If Japan's leaders judged that a PRC attack against a "foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan"—presumably, though not necessarily limited to, U.S. forces defending Taiwan—had escalated to constitute a "threat to Japan's survival," they could exercise the UN Charter–sanctioned right of collective self-defense and involve the JSDF up to and including possible use of force.
3. *Countering attacks against Japan.* If China carried out an armed attack against Japan (including, for example, against the Senkakus, which Japan considers its territory, or U.S. military facilities on Japanese soil), Japan's leaders could exercise the UN Charter–sanctioned right of individual self-defense and involve the JSDF up to and including possible use of force.[74]

In the case of the second and third roles, the aforementioned three conditions for use of force stipulated in the 2014 reinterpretation of Article 9 would need to be met.

DISCUSSION

Against this backdrop of longer-term alliance tightening, growing concerns about China's military power and coercive policies, expanded JSDF capabilities in Japan's southwest (near Taiwan), and the new legal authorities

[74] List adapted and expanded from Nakamura Susumu, "Taiwan kiki to Nichi Bei no taio (kohen)—Nihon wa do junbi taio subeki ka?" [Taiwan Crisis and U.S.-Japan Response (Part 2)—How Should Japan Prepare and Respond?], Sasakawa Peace Foundation, International Information Network Analysis, August 7, 2021 ~ https://www.spf.org/iina/articles/nakamura_05.html.

introduced in 2015, Tokyo and Washington both appear increasingly concerned about cross-strait peace and stability today, perhaps more so than ever before. The allies also have a significantly expanded security toolkit to deter conflict and, if deterrence fails, to cooperate in a Taiwan contingency. Deepening concerns and expanded response options, however, do not constitute evidence that Japan's core positions or policies have fundamentally changed, much less that Tokyo has precommitted to defending Taiwan. It has not. Widespread claims to the contrary since the 2021 Biden-Suga summit have drawn disproportionately—often exclusively—on English-language media headlines and select comments from politicians rather than a historically grounded and evidence-based analysis of Japan's official government policies and positions. Such claims reflect, to varying degrees, manifold analytical problems, including:

- exaggerating the pace or scale of change due to failures to adequately baseline and overlooking the subtle shifts and sustained ambiguity of Japan's relevant positions before 2021, as well as past remarks and statements during and after 1997 (see examples in **Table 1**);
- dubiously asserting that a few unofficial remarks from famously outspoken and "pro-Taiwan" conservative politicians reflect official government positions and policy, while discounting (or overlooking) contradictory evidence, especially repeated authoritative statements by Japanese government officials;
- mistaking deepening political, economic, people-to-people, and other ties between Japan and Taiwan as somehow suggestive of an alleged defense commitment or bilateral military cooperation, despite the lack of evidence for cooperation in the military domain;
- misleadingly using "would" and "could" interchangeably about Japan's response to a cross-strait conflict, when the latter is usually more appropriate given the dual ambiguities of Japan's posture, while the former inappropriately implies *ex ante* certainty;
- drawing unsubstantiated inferences from often vague statements and public opinion surveys that do not clearly define ambiguous terms such as "response," "involvement," and, most importantly, "Taiwan contingency" (*Taiwan yuji*); and
- using imprecise and misleading language (e.g., claiming that "Japan commits to defend Taiwan" when a statement or media report implies only a possible JSDF role defending Japanese territory or perhaps supporting the U.S. military, not defending Taiwan itself).

TABLE 1

Example Post-1997 Expressions of Concern about Taiwan's Security and Japan or the Alliance

Year	Source	Statement
1997	Chief Cabinet Secretary Seiroku Kajiyama	• "Naturally, [a dispute between China and Taiwan] is included in [the regional scope of the 1997 Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation]." • "We have serious concerns about China using force against Taiwan." • "Could we really say we wouldn't do anything to support U.S. military operations?"[a]
1997	Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General of North America Bureau Hitoshi Tanaka	• "It will depend on your [China's] actions" [in response to a question about whether the 1997 U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines could apply to the Taiwan Strait].[b]
1997	Former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone	• "It would be a mistake to say that Taiwan is not included in the interpretation of the Japan-U.S. security treaty."[c]
2002	Japan's Defense White Paper	• "The issue between China and Taiwan…is a security issue that could threaten regional peace and stability."[d]
2005	Acting LDP Secretary General Shinzo Abe	• "It would be wrong for us to send a signal to China that the United States and Japan will watch and tolerate China's military invasion of Taiwan…If the situation surrounding Japan threatens our security, Japan can provide U.S. forces with support."[e]
2008	Ministry of Defense Director-General of Defense Planning Nobushige Takamizawa	• [A contingency in the Taiwan Strait] "would not [only] be an issue for the U.S.-Japan security treaty, it would be a security issue for Japan."[f]

Source: [a] "Kajiyama Seiroku shi wa kakushinhan? 'Aete itta'" [Kajiyama Seiroku's Crime of Conscience? Dared to Say It 'Taiwan Contingency as Surrounding Area"], *Asahi shimbun*, August 20, 1997; [b] Tanaka's self-reported recollection of 1997 conversation with his PRC counterpart [Wang Yi] in Tanaka and Tahara, *Kokka to gaiko*, 160–61; [c] "Jimintonai kara hihan boei shishin 'tai Chu hairyo' no Kato kanji" [Criticism from Within LDP, Japan-U.S. Guidelines Secretary General Kato's "China Consideration" Remark], *Asahi shimbun*, July 28, 1997; [d] Ministry of Defense (Japan), *Boei hakusho* [Defense White Paper] (Tokyo, 2002) ~ http://www.clearing.mod.go.jp/hakusho_data/2002/w2002_00.html; [e] Abe quoted in Faiola, "Japan to Join U.S. Policy on Taiwan"; and [f] "Taiwan yuji 'Nihon no mondai' boei seisaku kyokucho, jiminto chosakai de hatsugen" [Taiwan Contingency "Issue for Japan," Defense Policy Director-General Comment at LDP Committee], *Yomiuri shimbun*, March 13, 2008.

Note: Statements originally in Japanese are author's translations.

Going forward, carefully separating signal from noise will be important to accurately distill the truth from a complicated and evolving reality and to prevent a possibly destabilizing misalignment of allied expectations—or worse—miscalculation. The stakes for regional peace and the global economy, and for the millions of lives likely to be affected in Taiwan and beyond, are extremely high.

Viewed in the appropriate historical context, claims of radical change since 2021 lose significant luster. Specifically, developments of the past year-plus, though significant, did not fundamentally shift Japan's posture away from the allies':

1. 1960 agreements that the mutual security treaty roughly includes the Taiwan area as part of the "Far East," and that Tokyo expects Washington to engage in "prior consultation" before, inter alia, deploying U.S. forces from Japan for combat operations in a regional contingency;
2. respective vague positions since the 1970s concerning Taiwan's status and repeated calls for "peaceful resolution" of the cross-strait dispute through dialogue;
3. respective assertions in the 1990s that the prospects for allied security cooperation in the event of a cross-strait contingency will depend on the situation;
4. joint 2005 identification of "encourag[ing] the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait through dialogue" as a "common strategic objective."

Carefully distinguishing between select individual politicians' remarks and government rhetoric/policy is also crucial. This is not to say that political rhetoric is unimportant, but the most prominent, provocative, and headline-generating politicians' remarks are often not representative of official positions or policy. As such, they should be contextualized and discounted appropriately. For example, Abe's remark in December 2021 that "a Taiwan contingency is a Japan contingency, as well as a Japan-U.S. alliance contingency,"[75] which made global headlines, was that of an influential politician, not a government official. Abe and his family, especially former prime ministers Eisaku Sato (great uncle) and Nobusuke Kishi (grandfather), have been famously pro-Taiwan and have a long track record

75 "Ribenguo yuanneigezonglidachen Anbei Jinsan gexia xianshang yanjianghui."

of forward-leaning statements. In 2005, for example, as then acting LDP secretary general, Abe reportedly said:

> It would be wrong for us to send a signal to China that the United States and Japan will watch and tolerate China's military invasion of Taiwan.… If the situation surrounding Japan threatens our security, Japan can provide U.S. forces with support.[76]

It is therefore noteworthy that despite his long-standing personal views, Abe conspicuously avoided making any remotely similar statements as Japan's longest-serving prime minister (2012–20)—and, by many accounts, its most influential. Current minister of defense Nobuo Kishi, a former head of the supra-partisan Japan-Taiwan parliamentary friendship group (and, incidentally, Abe's brother) is another example. Though Kishi clearly appears concerned about Taiwan and has responded to worsening cross-strait frictions by focusing the Ministry of Defense more on the cross-strait balance and Japan's and the region's stake in peace and stability, his official statements as defense minister generally stick to long-standing government positions, objective facts (e.g., Taiwan is close to Japanese territory; the cross-strait balance is shifting), and vague calls to "pay more attention."

Most significantly, selective focus of much overseas commentary last year on headline-grabbing remarks by prominent politicians often meant subtle and important signals and evidence of continuity with past positions were overlooked, further exaggerating claims of radical change. Throughout 2021, Japanese officials repeatedly reaffirmed the basic ambiguity at the heart of Japan's posture—that Japan does not precommit to any particular course of action in the event of a conflict. Given repeated opportunities to endorse headline-making remarks by conservative LDP politicians (for example, claims that a "Taiwan contingency" *could* constitute a "survival-threatening situation"), government officials opted to reply vaguely. They repeatedly stated that how Japan interprets a contingency and how it would respond will depend on the "particular and concrete circumstances." This official language in 2021 was roughly analogous to that from 1997, and nearly identical to what Prime Minister Kishida himself, then foreign minister in the Abe cabinet, said in 2015.[77]

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76 Shinzo Abe, quoted in Anthony Faiola, "Japan to Join U.S. Policy on Taiwan," *Washington Post*, February 18, 2005.

77 See, for example,"Sonritsu kiki jitai 'ichigai ni iezu'" [Existential Crisis Situation "It Depends"], Jiji, July 6, 2021; and "'Taiwan yuji wa sonritsu kiki jitai' kanbo chokan 'jokyo ni sokushi handan'" [Chief Cabinet Secretary: Whether Taiwan Contingency Is Existential Crisis Situation "to Be Decided Based on the Circumstances"], NHK, December 14, 2021; and Kokkai Kaigiroku Kensaku Shitsutemu, July 29, 2015.

None of this is to say that Japan is ambivalent about Taiwan's future or the importance of deterrence in the interest of peace and stability in the strait. Nor is it the case that the JSDF's posture or possible role in a cross-strait conflict has been static as circumstances, capabilities, and legal authorities have evolved. Far from it. Since the 1970s, Japanese leaders have repeatedly resisted pressure from Beijing to recognize the PRC's claim of sovereignty over Taiwan and to explicitly exclude Taiwan or a cross-strait contingency from the scope of the U.S.-Japan security treaty and guidelines. They have also consistently called for peaceful resolution through cross-strait dialogue. More recently, even official government rhetoric displays an interest in continuing to deepen unofficial ties with Taiwan and to explicitly identify Taipei as "an extremely crucial partner and an important friend, with which [Japan] shares basic values."[78] And the past decade-plus has witnessed more extensive Japan-Taiwan cooperation outside the military domain, both independently and together with the United States and others.[79]

But it is critical to also acknowledge what has not changed. Japan's deepening cooperation with Taiwan remains nonmilitary. Tokyo has never made a public commitment to support the U.S. military in a possible fight with China in defense of Taiwan, much less to defend Taiwan independently. As true in the past, whatever action, if any, Japan would ultimately take if Beijing used military force against Taiwan will depend on top-level political judgments about the nature of the crisis, how it began, how Taiwan and the United States respond, the threat posed to Japan's peace and security, and, at least to some extent, public opinion. Despite some recent hyperbolic commentary to the contrary, the government has for decades treated Japan's response to a Taiwan contingency as deliberately ambiguous.

This should not be surprising, and not only because the official positions of Japan's U.S. ally on both Taiwan's status and a potential U.S. response in the event of a cross-strait military conflict are also strategically ambiguous. Unlike NATO, the 1960 U.S.-Japan mutual security treaty does not give Japan fully reciprocal obligations; the latter's Article V applies only to "an armed attack against either Party in the territories *under the administration of Japan*" (emphasis added).[80] Nor do the allies have a combined operational command. Though since 2015 the roles the JSDF and the alliance *could* play supporting the United States in a Taiwan contingency have expanded, the treaty itself;

78 MOFA (Japan), *Diplomatic Bluebook 2021* (Tokyo, 2021), 66.

79 Liff, "Japan, Taiwan, and the 'One China' Framework after 50 Years."

80 "Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of America."

the nonbinding 1978, 1997, or 2015 Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation; and Japanese legislation or declaratory policy do not legally obligate Japan to play a role—even if the United States comes to Taiwan's aid militarily. And despite Japan's historic 2014 constitutional reinterpretation to allow exercise of collective self-defense, the three self-imposed conditions for its potential exercise remain important. Unless Japan itself suffers an attack, for example, the precondition for JSDF use of force remains a perceived existential threat to Japan, and use of force must be limited to "the minimum extent necessary." Interpretations of both criteria will inevitably be politically defined and approved.

As Abe noted back in 1999, Japan's ambiguous posture intends to elicit strategically beneficial (read: stabilizing) effects in peacetime. However, in the event of a major crisis it could also lead to delays in decision-making or indecision with real-world consequences. These could include miscalculation if Beijing interprets—perhaps inappropriately—delays as indicating Japan is likely to sit it out, or impacts on the U.S. ability to respond rapidly during the crucial early moments. Beyond the possible implications for the immediate crisis (and, of course, Taiwan), a Japanese response that falls short of U.S. expectations—which Abe and other outspoken leaders have heightened significantly through reforms and rhetoric, amplified by media and commentary—could have major consequences for the alliance itself. Arguably, unlike U.S. requests to Japan in the early 1990s or 2000s to "show the flag" and support military engagements in the Middle East, geographic proximity alone makes it almost certain that a war across the Taiwan Strait would deeply impact Japan and regional peace and stability. On the one hand, the stakes seem to make some form of Japanese support much more likely. On the other hand, depending on the scenario and extent of the United States' own response, any perception that Japan was sitting out the conflict or limiting its contribution to logistical support could result in substantial political backlash in the United States with potentially significant implications for the alliance.

In several conceivable scenarios in which the United States chooses to come to Taiwan's defense (i.e., if the U.S. military and PLA are already in a shooting war on Japan's doorstep), however, such concerns may be rendered moot. A few possibilities suggest themselves. Because Japan's most likely role would be supporting the United States and/or defending its own territory—rather than defending Taiwan, per se—even in an "important influence situation" JSDF protection of the massive U.S. forward-deployed military presence *in Japan* would be a significant and risky contribution. So, too, would be refueling operations; intelligence, surveillance, and

reconnaissance missions; or noncombatant evacuations—which, inter alia, would free up U.S. forces to focus on other missions. Furthermore, a PLA attack on, or occupation of, the nearby Senkakus—which Beijing considers part of Taiwan (and thus PRC-claimed territory)—or strikes against U.S. facilities or forces within Japanese territory seem likely to quickly render thorny constitutional questions about collective self-defense moot.[81] Regardless, these difficult questions are best engaged as much as possible by the allies behind closed doors in peacetime, not only to manage expectations but also to strengthen deterrence and, if deterrence fails, to ensure a maximally rapid and effective response.

LOOKING BACK AND AHEAD

Questions for the Future

The most remarkable shift since the April 2021 Biden-Suga joint statement has not been to Japan's official policy or posture toward a possible cross-strait conflict but, in response to political and geopolitical vicissitudes, an increased focus on and willingness of its leaders to more candidly discuss the perceived threat to democratic Taiwan; the stakes for Japan's national security; what can be done to bolster peacetime deterrence; and to plan and prepare for a possible contingency. Though much relevant intra-alliance discussions and planning are classified, recent media reports suggest more extensive bilateral dialogue focused specifically on a Taiwan contingency than ever before, including table-top exercises and operational planning.[82] Important changes may be on the horizon. Questions to guide sober-minded assessments of the pace and scope of change in the months and years ahead include:

- What, if anything, will the Kishida administration's upcoming review of Japan's National Security Strategy and National Defense Program Guidelines, as well as the next revision of the U.S.-Japan defense guidelines, say of relevance to a Taiwan contingency?

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81 Even Japan's leading progressive opposition party appears to consider any PLA attack on U.S. bases in Japan as grounds for a Japanese response based on individual, not collective, self-defense. "Taiwan yuji, kobetsuteki jieiken de taio Edano ritsumin daihyo" [Taiwan Contingency, Respond by Individual Self-Defense, CDP President Edano], *Jiji*, September 27, 2021.

82 "U.S. and Japan Conduct War Games amid Rising China-Taiwan Tensions," *Financial Times*, June 30, 2021; and "Japan, U.S. Draw Up Plan for Any Taiwan Emergency—Kyodo," Reuters, December 23, 2021.

- Will the United States and Japan soon—for the first time—in a 2+2 or joint summit statement refer explicitly to some form of support for "Taiwan" (rather than repeating past, rather anodyne references to "peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" or "cross-strait issues"), and if so, how?
- What concrete evidence has emerged regarding whether and how the allies are expanding operational planning for a Taiwan contingency?[83]
- Have the allies established a shared understanding of what the United States' 1960 commitment to prior consultation means for conceivable cross-strait scenarios?
- Do the allies have a shared understanding of how Taiwan's ambiguous status based on their own official government positions might affect decision-making or the role the JSDF and alliance could conceivably play in a conflict?[84]
- What does Japanese public opinion suggest about direct or indirect JSDF involvement in a cross-strait conflict, which could entail war against Japan's top trading partner, next-door neighbor, and the region's most powerful military, in addition to likely risking the first JSDF combat deaths and armed attacks against Japan since 1945?[85]
- Where do political parties besides the LDP, such its junior coalition partner, Komeito, stand on these issues?

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83 Throughout 2021 many Japanese security experts raised an alleged lack of allied planning as a major concern, including to U.S. media. See, for example, Anthony Kuhn, "After Being Silent for Decades, Japan Now Speaks Up about Taiwan," NPR, August 2, 2021 ~ https://www.npr.org/2021/07/26/1020866539/japans-position-on-defending-taiwan-has-taken-a-remarkable-shift.

84 Some legal scholars have raised these issues, and the government's position appears ambiguous. Beijing seems likely to seek to exploit this ambiguity. As one recent PRC government official asked rhetorically, "Since Taiwan is part of China, how could China 'invade' Taiwan?" See, for example, Mayama Akira, "Kenpoteki yosei niyoru shudanteki jieiken genteiteki koshi no hatsugen keitai" [Constitutional Requirements for Limited Exercise of Collective Self-Defense], *Kokusai mondai*, no. 648 (2016): 16–28; Sangiin [House of Councillors] (Japan), "Tobensho" [Written Response], July 21, 2015 ~ https://www.sangiin.go.jp/japanese/joho1/kousei/syuisyo/189/touh/t189202.htm; Kokkai Kaigiroku Kensaku Shitsutemu, July 29, 2015; and "Waijiaobu fayanren Wang Wenbin zhuchi lixing jizhehui" [MFA Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Holds Routine Press Conference], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), April 27, 2022 ~ https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/fyrbt_674889/202204/t20220427_10674571.shtml.

85 Widespread popular affinity in Japan for Taiwan does not necessarily translate into popular support for fighting China in its defense. The paucity of high-quality polling on these questions and the nebulous wording of the few existing surveys provide ambiguous results. See, for example, "Taiwan kaikyo ni kanyo 'sansei' 74%" [Involvement in Taiwan Strait, 74% "Agree"], *Nikkei shimbun*, April 26, 2021; and "Yoron chosa" [Public Opinion Survey], TV Asahi, April 2021 ~ https://www.tv-asahi.co.jp/hst/poll/202104. Additionally, one recent expert group reportedly found that discussing a cross-strait military conflict has been taboo in Japan for so long that "Japan has very little knowledge, concerns, and awareness about the Taiwan issue"—including, presumably, what the potential consequences of Japan supporting Taiwan in a U.S.-China war could be. "Japan, the U.S., and Economic and Security Policy Linkages in the Taiwan Strait."

- What steps, if any, are Japan and Taiwan taking to develop bilateral military or intelligence ties and cooperation, either directly or through the United States?[86]

Conclusion

Despite widespread claims to the contrary, the foundational elements of Japan's ambiguous official posture toward a possible Taiwan Strait contingency have not fundamentally changed since the April 2021 Biden-Suga statement—at least not publicly. But Japan's intentionally ambiguous posture should not be mistaken as ambivalence about democratic Taiwan's future or peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Cross-strait vicissitudes have increasingly focused Japanese officials, media, commentators, and scholars on the strait and the impact a possible conflict there could have on Japan, the U.S.-Japan alliance, Taiwan, East Asia, and the world. Amid a rapidly changing regional balance of power, concerns about weakening deterrence vis-à-vis China, and worsening cross-strait and U.S.-China frictions, influential political elites in Japan appear to regard the current situation as increasingly precarious and seem more willing to openly call for deeper allied cooperation. Implied, though difficult as yet to judge from publicly available sources, is a new sense of urgency to deepen U.S.-Japan contingency and bilateral planning to enhance deterrence and prepare for the worst if deterrence fails.

Barring an unforeseen crisis, however, major changes to Japan's long-standing public positions seem unlikely. To be sure, much has changed since the early Cold War when Japanese leaders basically saw cross-strait deterrence as an exclusively U.S.-ROC responsibility. But Japan has never publicly committed to Taiwan's defense, within or outside an alliance framework. Rather, exactly 50 years after adopting a vague 1972 official stance on Taiwan's status and expressing "hope for the issues relating to Taiwan to be resolved peacefully through direct talks," and 25 years after officially stating the applicability of the 1997 Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation to a regional contingency was "situational, not geographical," Tokyo's position on Japan's and the U.S.-Japan alliance's likely response to a cross-strait conflict remains purposefully ambiguous. Today, government officials, including prime ministers, have repeatedly avoided "pre-judging" how Japan—or the allies—would respond to a hypothetical contingency.

[86] As of this writing, Japan has no active-duty JSDF/military exchanges, training, or exercises with, nor does it sell or transfer arms to, Taiwan.

That said, national security and alliance reforms since the 1990s, and especially over the past decade, have significantly expanded the possibilities for allied cooperation and a more robust JSDF role in a regional contingency, in peacetime, in the context of an armed attack, or in something in between. Even setting aside the possible response of Japan's U.S. ally, an increasingly prominent school of thought among conservative politicians and security experts appears to hold that any effort by Beijing to use force to unify with Taiwan would have profound negative consequences for Japan's national security. Coupled with Tokyo's evolving official position on Taiwan's importance to Japan as a "crucial partner and an important friend, with which [Japan] shares basic values," some Japanese experts argue this makes it likely that if the United States were to become involved militarily in a cross-strait scenario, then Japan would at least provide noncombat support for U.S. forces.[87] But if a conflict over Taiwan ever occurs, the ultimate decision about how Japan responds will rest with its political leaders at the time—not all of whom necessarily share the views of the most outspoken political and expert voices on these issues.

At least in peacetime, however, alliance cooperation aimed at strengthening deterrence, including possible Taiwan-focused contingency planning, seems likely to deepen, even if declaratory policy does not change. For Japan's leaders, the possibility of Beijing using force against Taiwan is not merely a security concern. In this regard, the famously moderate Kishida's remarks in the weeks before he was elected prime minister last autumn are revealing of how much the political ground may have shifted in recent years. He highlighted democratic Taiwan's status "on the front lines of the clash between authoritarianism and democracy," noted the necessity of U.S.-Japan cooperation to address associated challenges, called for robust discussions about a Taiwan contingency,[88] flagged cross-strait dynamics as "a major issue for Japanese foreign policy,"[89] and called on Japan to confront associated challenges in partnership with the United States and like-minded states in Asia and Europe.[90] In recent weeks, Russia's war of aggression against

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87 Hideki Tokuchi. "Will Japan Fight in a Taiwan Contingency?" Prospect Foundation, Prospects and Perspectives, no. 42, August 20, 2021 ~ https://www.pf.org.tw/article-pfch-2168-7281.

88 Peter Landers, "Japan Prime Minister Contender Takes Harder Line on Missile-Strike Ability," *Wall Street Journal*, September 7, 2021.

89 "'Taiwan mondai' okina kadai" ["Taiwan Question" Major Issue], Bloomberg (Japan edition), September 3, 2021.

90 "Kishida shi kisha kaiken no yoshi" [Summary of Kishida Press Conference], *Yomiuri shimbun*, August 27, 2021; and Kishida Fumio, "2021 Jiminto sosaisen shutsuba e no omoi" [Thoughts on Running in the 2021 LDP Presidential Election], August 27, 2021 ~ https://kishida.gr.jp/activity/7653.

Ukraine has sharply heightened concerns in Japan about possible PRC action to unilaterally change various regional status quos, especially concerning Taiwan. And it has given the allies a long list of lessons and issues to discuss urgently, including economic risks and the possible role of nuclear threats.[91]

Though the future remains uncertain, one thing is clear: Japan's engagement of Taiwan and U.S.-Japan cooperation in support of Taiwan's effective autonomy, including as it concerns cross-strait deterrence and possible preparations for a response to a potential contingency, are increasingly important spaces to watch. Careful historical baselining before asserting radical change is essential. Especially in the security space, continual efforts to separate the signal from the noise—to recognize the complexity and political and strategic logic of Japan's nuanced positions, posture, and policies; to appreciate the unique constitutional and legal constraints its leaders must confront; and to carefully contextualize political rhetoric emanating from Tokyo—will be critical to efforts by scholars and policymakers to accurately assess the status quo. Doing so will help manage expectations and facilitate sound decision-making, not only in Washington, Tokyo, and Taipei but also in all countries with interests in continued peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia. The stakes for regional stability and the global economy—and for the millions of lives to be profoundly affected in Taiwan and beyond—are extremely high. ◈

[91] Sheila A. Smith, "The United States, Japan, and Taiwan: What Has Russia's Aggression Changed?" *Asia Policy* 17, no. 2 (2022): 69–97.