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Enhancing U.S.-Japan Coordination for a Taiwan Conflict

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Introduction

The questions of whether China will use force to bring Taiwan under its control and how the United States should deter and respond to Chinese aggression have emerged as central concerns for U.S. policymakers and analysts. This is due to growing worry about China's capabilities and intentions, as well as an increasing recognition that if China were to subjugate Taiwan, the ramifications for the United States, its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, and indeed international order would be momentous. Taiwan sits at the heart of the first island chain, which runs from the Japanese archipelago down through Taiwan, the Philippines, and Borneo, effectively bottling up the People's Liberation Army (PLA). With Taiwan under its control and available to base its increasingly capable military, China could easily threaten Japan and the Philippines, two U.S. treaty allies. The PLA would also be able to project power beyond the first island chain and more easily monitor and interdict U.S. military movements. China would gain control of the world's twenty-first largest economy, the United States' ninth-largest trading partner, and the global epicenter of semiconductor manufacturing. One of Asia's few democratic success stories would see its democracy extinguished. U.S. allies and partners in the region would likely come to question whether they could rely on the United States for their security.

The stakes are even higher for Japan, as a Chinese occupation of Taiwan would fundamentally challenge Japanese security. If China were to station PLA forces on Taiwan, its military would be only 110 kilometers from Yonaguni Island, the westernmost point of Japan. Such an outcome would render it far more difficult for Japan to defend Yonaguni, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and Okinawa. The United States by extension would find it just as difficult to defend the sovereignty of its treaty ally. Given that China views the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands as a part of the "Taiwan Province," China could attempt to seize them during a conflict over Taiwan, perhaps after Taiwan's seizure.

Beyond the implications for Japan's physical security, a successful Chinese annexation of Taiwan would also undermine Japan's economic security and prosperity. Taiwan is Japan's fourth-largest export market, and should China control Taiwan, it would be able to curtail Japan's access to that market. Over forty percent of Japan's maritime trade passes through the South China Sea and the country imports over ninety percent of its energy supply; with control over Taiwan and its military installations throughout the South China Sea, China would be in a position to force shipping bound for Japan to take more inefficient routes, hurting Japan's economy.¹ In addition, China would presumably gain control of Pratas Island (currently administered by Taiwan), a strategic island adjacent to the entrance to the South China Sea from the Philippine Sea, further cementing its hold on this critical maritime artery. Finally, given Taiwan's proximity to the approaches to Japan's ports, during wartime China could threaten Japan's import-dependent economy. For Japan, the day that China absorbs Taiwan would likely be the most destabilizing time in decades for its foreign policy. If China succeeds in its attack because the United States stood aside, Japan would question the United States' commitment to the region and would likely contemplate accommodating China's rise or hedging against it by developing nuclear weapons. If China achieved its objectives in spite of U.S. intervention, Japan would see its ally severely weakened, which would ultimately raise similar concerns in Tokyo. Japan would have to weigh its options in the context of other countries in the region, including Australia, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam, doing the same. Indeed, a successful Chinese invasion could very well lead to the unraveling of the network of U.S. alliances in Asia, which

has served Japanese interests for the past three-quarters of a century and underpinned peace and security in the region. Ultimately, unanswered Chinese aggression against Taiwan could precipitate the establishment of a Chinese-led order in the world's most economically dynamic region.

To prevent such an outcome, and in the face of eroding deterrence and a shift in the balance of power toward China, the United States and Japan should increase their coordination for a Taiwan conflict. Preparing for a conflict in the Taiwan Strait should become a major priority for the U.S.-Japan alliance and should drive force posture, procurement, and bilateral operational planning and exercises. Simply put, the United States cannot effectively come to Taiwan's defense without the use of its forces and assets located on Japan and significant Japanese logistic and operational support. During a crisis, the United States will require Japan to rapidly grant it permission to operate from bases on Japan to respond to Chinese aggression. Therefore, intense consultations that allow each side to communicate expectations of the other is critical to avoiding surprise and ensuring operational effectiveness during a conflict. How well the United States and Japan are able to deter an attack on Taiwan and respond jointly and effectively to Chinese aggression if deterrence fails could determine Asia's future, as well as their own.

Background

The increased focus in national security circles on the potential for a conflict in the Taiwan Strait is driven by a concern that Chinese President Xi Jinping could be growing impatient with the status quo and feel emboldened to accelerate the pace of unification. Xi has ushered in a new era of Chinese foreign policy, one marked by increased assertiveness and a heightened tolerance for risk. Under Xi's leadership, China has militarized the South China Sea, demolished Hong Kong's democracy and autonomy, fought a border clash with India, ramped up its military activities near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and economically coerced countries in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. This pattern of Chinese behavior has led some to conclude that Xi will soon turn his sights to Taiwan and attempt to bring the island under China's control, by force if necessary.

Adding to the worry, over the past five years China has steadily increased its pressure on Taiwan, reducing the number of mainland tourists who can visit the island, stripping away its few remaining diplomatic partners, placing an embargo on certain Taiwanese exports, ramping up military activities in its vicinity, conducting cyber-attacks, and interfering in Taiwan's democratic process. While Xi continues to publicly stress his commitment to "peaceful reunification" with Taiwan and has not introduced an explicit timeline for achieving this objective, he has also said that the Taiwan issue cannot be passed on from generation to generation.² He has set 2049 as the date by which China must achieve the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," and achieving "reunification" with Taiwan is a core condition for that project.³ Still, it remains unlikely that Xi has already decided to use force against Taiwan, which provides an opening for the United States to adjust its policies and work with its allies to help prevent such an outcome.

Although there is debate over whether China will resort to force, China is clearly developing capabilities needed to invade and occupy Taiwan. Preparing for a conflict over Taiwan has driven China's military modernization campaign for the past two and a half decades. China has invested significant resources in developing the tools to defeat Taiwan and prevent the United States from coming to its aid, principally an arsenal of accurate ballistic missiles, the world's largest navy, hundreds of modern fighter aircraft and bombers, and advanced cyber and counterspace assets.

While China has been preparing for high-intensity war along its periphery, the United States has spent the past twenty years fighting insurgencies, enjoying uncontested U.S. air and sea superiority and unimpeded command and control. Taiwan, for its part, has belatedly begun to realistically address its defense shortcomings. It now has to make up for lost time and aggressively address them. This all adds up to weakening deterrence in the Taiwan Strait and a military balance that could soon decisively move in China's favor.

Questions surrounding the United States' willingness to come to Taiwan's defense, brought on in part by U.S. foreign policy missteps elsewhere in the world, have also eroded deterrence. American inaction in the face of Russia's seizure of Crimea, its failure to prevent China from militarizing the South China Sea, and its lack of response to China's dismantling of Hong Kong's autonomy have all raised doubts about U.S. resolve and reliability. After the United States hastily withdrew from Afghanistan and abandoned its Afghan partners, some nationalistic Chinese commentators even made an explicit connection to Taiwan, arguing that the episode revealed the United States would not come to Taiwan's aid.⁴ Xi could look at these examples and conclude that the price for invading Taiwan will merely be expressions of outrage and, given China's centrality to global trade, limited economic sanctions that would not fundamentally challenge China's economic growth.

Against the backdrop of increasing uncertainty in the Taiwan Strait, Japanese leaders are beginning to publicly voice their concerns about what a Chinese attack on Taiwan would mean for Japan. At the same time, the Japanese government has yet to definitively state whether Japan would intervene on Taiwan's behalf or even support U.S. operations. This is largely due to longstanding constitutional limits on the use of military force for anything other than self-defense and reticence to be clearer than the United States, which has not formally committed to Taiwan's defense. Tokyo could also be attempting to preserve its decision space so it can calibrate its response based on the range of possible contingencies and level of public support for action.

Japan will also have to weigh the costs of assisting Taiwan or the United States during a conflict. If Japan were to allow the United States to use bases in Japan to conduct operations in defense of Taiwan, those bases could come under attack. China could also choose to target Japanese assets—such as ballistic missile defense units—that are supporting U.S. operations. China is Japan's largest trading partner and could retaliate by significantly curtailing bilateral trade, including cutting off the export of strategic items such as rare earth minerals. China could also attempt to interdict critical shipments of oil and gas to Japan. China would also likely pressure Japanese businesses operating on the mainland and encourage a nationalist backlash against Japanese goods.

Japan's support in a Taiwan contingency is a vital factor, and greater clarity on the foregoing issues is critical to U.S. operational plans to come to Taiwan's defense. This includes, at a minimum, timely approval and unfettered use of bases hosting U.S. forces in Japan, assistance with search and rescue operations, and logistic support, all the way up to information and intelligence sharing and combined command and control for combat operations. Indeed, greater certainty about Japan's role in a Taiwan contingency will play an important role in determining whether the United States would—or even could—come to Taiwan's assistance. Greater coordination with Japan prior to a conflict and increased signaling from Tokyo that it would support U.S. operations could also deter Chinese aggression and complicate PLA planning.

In assessing the necessity of and potential for increased U.S.-Japan coordination for a Taiwan contingency, the United States should: (1) take stock of the current cross-strait military balance and determine how Japan could help deter Chinese aggression and contribute to the defense of Taiwan; (2) gauge Japan's current posture toward the security of Taiwan and the impediments, constitutional and otherwise, that could limit its role; and (3) propose how the United States and Japan can improve their combined preparedness and coordination to defend Taiwan should they choose to do so.

The recommendations proposed, while ambitious, are feasible in the current political climate in both Washington and Tokyo, and, with sustained focus in both capitals, can be implemented in the next five years. While China has a number of options it could take to put pressure on Taiwan—seizing an offshore island, initiating massive cyberattacks, firing hundreds of ballistic missiles to take out critical infrastructure, and conducting a quarantine of the island—this paper focuses squarely on how to deter and respond to an invasion of Taiwan. It does so in the belief that Japan's appetite for assisting the United States in countering Chinese aggression against Taiwan short of a full war is politically challenging and likely limited.

Eroding Balance of Power

The shifting balance of power in the vicinity of Taiwan is fueling concerns that China will soon have the capability to successfully invade and occupy Taiwan, even if the United States were to intervene on Taiwan's behalf.

China has significant built-in advantages over the United States, above all geography (see figure 1). Whereas China is 100 miles away from Taiwan, the closest U.S. airbase (Kadena Air Base) is in Okinawa, 460 miles away, while Guam is 1,720 miles away. The United States has only two air bases from which its fighter jets can conduct unrefueled operations over Taiwan (both located in Japan), compared with thirty-nine for China.⁵ The closest U.S. bases, however, are highly vulnerable to Chinese missile attacks, with one study estimating that China would only need about one-tenth of its current medium-range ballistic missile inventory to crater every runway at every major U.S. air base in Japan.⁶

Figure 1. Map of Major U.S. Military Bases in Japan

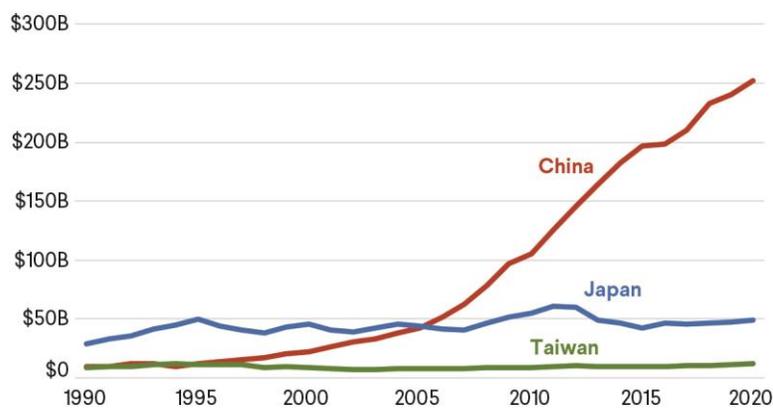


Source: Japanese Ministry of Defense, "Defense of Japan 2021."

China is not relying on its inherent advantages, however, and has instead spent the last two and a half decades developing capabilities designed to neutralize U.S. power in the Taiwan Strait. Its military budget has grown from \$14.3 billion in 1996 to \$252.3 billion in 2020, a nearly eighteen-fold increase (see figure 2).⁷ Preparing for a conflict over Taiwan has consistently driven Beijing's procurement decisions, and China can now bring significant capabilities to bear. The PLA Navy (PLAN) is now the largest navy in the world (as measured by the number of ships, although the United States continues to exceed it by tonnage), with 355 ships and submarines, and is set to grow by nearly 100 ships by the end of the decade.⁸ The PLA Air Force is the largest air force in the region and is "rapidly catching up to Western air forces" and eroding U.S. advantages, according to the U.S. Department of Defense.⁹ The PLA has one thousand short-range ballistic missiles and six hundred medium-range ballistic missiles in its arsenal.¹⁰ China has also established an advanced integrated air defense system on its east coast that can cover Taiwan.¹¹ The PLA is now turning its attention to addressing previous gaps that have persisted, such as anti-submarine warfare, while also rapidly developing information, cyber, and space and counterspace capabilities.¹²

Figure 2. China's Military Spending is Over Four Times Taiwan and Japan Combined

Military spending, current dollars



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Military Expenditure Database.

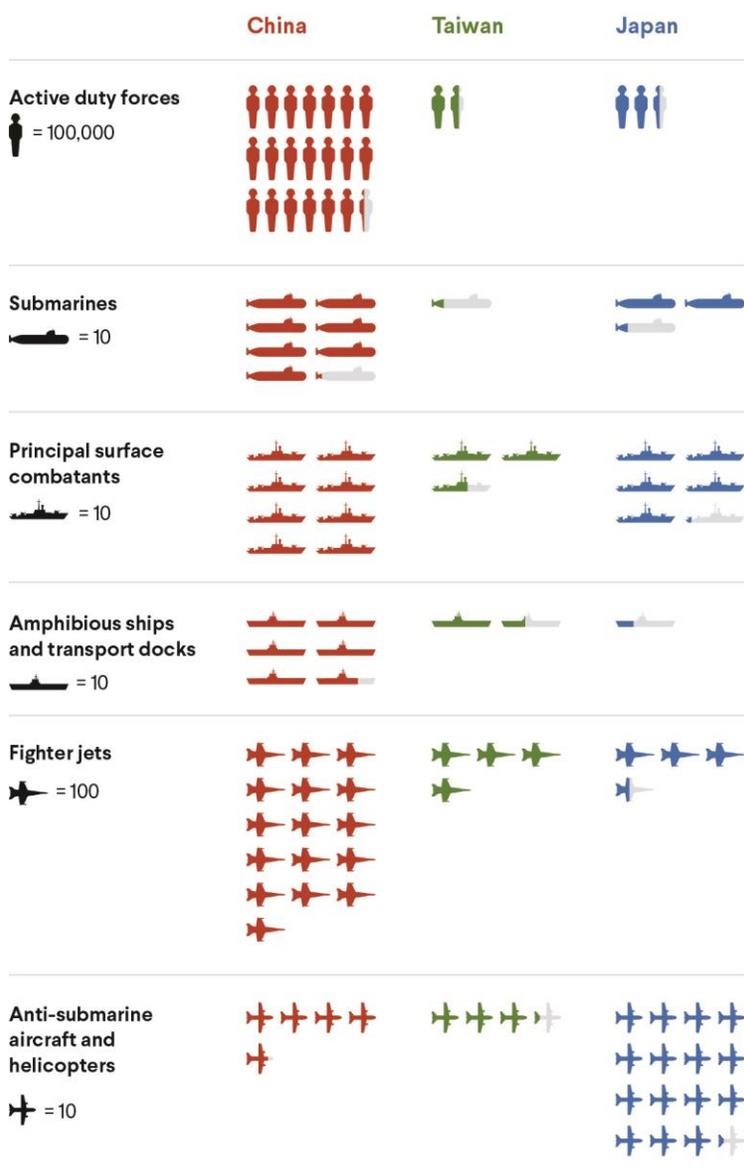
China is quickly improving and expanding its nuclear arsenal, potentially convinced that if it can stalemate the United States at the nuclear level, then it can keep a war over Taiwan limited to conventional weapons, where it believes it can prevail.¹³ The U.S. Department of Defense assesses that China could have up to seven hundred nuclear warheads by 2027 and one thousand warheads by 2030.¹⁴ China also recently tested a nuclear-capable hypersonic glide vehicle, which some analysts believe is intended to evade U.S. missile defenses.¹⁵ These developments put an even bigger premium on the U.S. ability to prevent a Chinese *fait accompli* over Taiwan without having to resort to nuclear weapons.

While China has been almost single-mindedly focused on preparing for a high-intensity regional war with the United States, Washington has spent the past two decades conducting low-intensity counterterrorism operations, leaving it ill-prepared for the threat Beijing poses. Although the U.S. military remains superior to the PLA, its global responsibilities mean that China could already outmatch the United States regionally. For instance, a 2015 RAND Corporation report that compared U.S. and Chinese forces in the context of a conflict over Taiwan found that the United States moved from having an advantage in most areas to rough parity or disadvantage over the past two decades, with trends continuing to move in China's direction.¹⁶

Also contributing to the growing imbalance is Taiwan's neglect in transforming its armed forces. In 1994, Taiwan's military budget surpassed China's; now, China's military budget is over twenty times that of Taiwan. Taiwan's military budget averaged over four percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) in the 1990s but dipped below two percent in 2013 and stayed below that level until 2021.¹⁷ As a result, China currently fields 1,600 fighter jets compared to Taiwan's 400, 71 submarines to Taiwan's 2, 48 frigates to Taiwan's 22, and 32 destroyers to Taiwan's 4 (see figure 3).¹⁸ China has 416,000 ground force personnel in the Taiwan Strait area alone, outnumbering Taiwan's entire military by a ratio of over two to one.¹⁹ Taiwan has historically relied on a qualitative military edge to make up for what it lacks in numbers, but as the U.S. Department of Defense has noted, China has eroded or negated many of these advantages."²⁰

Figure 3. China's Military Advantage

Estimated military assets as of 2021



Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance 2021; U.S. Department of Defense.

Taiwan has also too often failed to use its limited resources wisely, prioritizing expensive legacy systems such as fighter jets, tanks, and large surface vessels over cheaper, more numerous weapons that can survive an initial PLA attack. It has purchased U.S. weapons systems designed to project power over great distances and conduct offensive operations rather than investing in cost-imposing defensive schemes, and in other instances procured weapons that will have little relevance during a conflict with China. To be sure, these legacy platforms have a role to play in peacetime deterrence, help boost the morale of Taiwan's military, and aid in its effort to recruit soldiers. But the challenge for Taiwan is ensuring that these purchases do not crowd out the asymmetric tools such as missiles, drones, sea mines, and fast-attack ships that will be decisive during wartime.

Taiwan has also been making the difficult transition from conscription to an all-volunteer force. In doing so, it has not met its recruitment targets, and has been forced to increase compensation packages to attract and retain soldiers. As a result, Taiwan's military has had fewer funds for purchasing new weapons or investing in training and readiness.²¹ There are also significant questions surrounding the ability of Taiwan's reserve force to play a meaningful role during a conflict.²²

Taiwan, however, is belatedly recognizing the need to dramatically rethink and invest in its defense. In 2017, its military leadership introduced the Overall Defense Concept (ODC), which aims to develop asymmetric approaches to fend off a Chinese invasion and calls for investing in a large number of smaller, cheaper, and more mobile weapons.²³ Rather than seeking to defeat the PLA through attrition, ODC focuses on a decisive fight near Taiwan's shores and the prevention of a successful PLA landing. Taiwan has steadily increased its defense budget in recent years, which is now the highest it has ever been in absolute terms.²⁴ More important is using these funds to resource an asymmetric strategy, purchasing missiles, drones, and howitzers.²⁵ There remain obstacles to ODC's implementation, however, and more traditional thinking could well make a comeback.²⁶

All of this means that U.S. intervention on Taiwan's behalf would be a risky and costly proposition, as China can now challenge the United States across all domains and place U.S. aircraft, surface vessels (including aircraft carriers), and bases throughout the Indo-Pacific at risk. In addition, the United States would for the first time be fighting a nuclear-armed opponent with precision standoff weapons, extensive cyberwarfare capabilities, and the ability to target its satellites.²⁷

The most sensible way for the United States to address these challenges is to partner with its allies, above all Japan, to preserve peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. This would entail conducting routine substantive consultations on how to deter and, if necessary, respond to Chinese aggression; leveraging Japan's comparative strengths; urging it to invest in capabilities that would help ensure Japan's security and aid the United States during a conflict; and planning a division of responsibilities with Japan for responding to a Chinese attack on Taiwan.

Adjusting To a More Assertive China, Japan Leans Forward

Japan has become increasingly concerned with China's aggressive behavior and regional ambitions, spurred in large part by China's decision to press its territorial claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. A turning point for Tokyo came in 2010, when a Chinese fishing boat rammed a Japanese Coast Guard vessel patrolling near the islands, leading to a major dispute in which Japan detained the fisherman and China responded by halting the export of rare earth minerals to Japan. This prompted a major shift in how Japanese leaders and its public viewed China. One recent poll, for instance, showed that 88 percent of Japanese hold a negative opinion of China, the highest of the countries surveyed (including the United States).²⁸

Japan views China as a revisionist power, with the Japanese Ministry of Defense assessing that Beijing continues to demonstrate its attitude of realizing its unilateral assertions without compromise, while promoting assertive actions including those to change the status quo by coercion and create a *fait accompli* for such changes, based on its own assertions incompatible with the existing international order."²⁹ In an attempt to preserve the current order, Japan has taken on a leadership role in the Indo-Pacific, casting itself as "the flag bearer of universal values" in the region.³⁰ Japan coined the term "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" as its organizing principle, which the United States subsequently endorsed and adopted in its 2017 National Security Strategy.³¹ To pursue that strategy, Japan led the formation of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP); helped elevate the Quad, a grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States; and offered an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for Asian countries. Japan's increasing support for Taiwan is consistent with its decision to take on a greater leadership role in the region.

Japan also began increasing its defense budget to deter Chinese adventurism: following a decade of defense cuts, the country raised its defense spending in 2012 and has steadily increased funds each year. Its military budget for 2021 broke the self-imposed ceiling of one percent of GDP for the first time, with Japanese defense officials noting that much of the extra spending will be used to deploy additional hardware to defend Japan's western islands close to Taiwan.³²

Tokyo's evolving attitude toward Taiwan should be seen within the larger context of its disaffection with Beijing's trajectory. Japan has begun to publicly voice its interest in maintaining the status quo and link Taiwan's security with its own. This development first burst into the open in December 2020, when its deputy minister of defense, Yasuhide Nakayama, called Taiwan's safety a "red line" for Tokyo.³³ In April 2021, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga agreed to include a clause on Taiwan in his joint statement with President Joe Biden during a visit to the White House, marking the first time the two countries mentioned Taiwan in a leader-level joint statement in five decades. According to the statement, the two countries "underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues."³⁴ The following month, Japan and the European Union affirmed the "importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait," the first time that the two mentioned Taiwan in such a statement.³⁵

Japan's senior policymakers have gone even further in subsequent months. In June, Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi stated that "the peace and stability of Taiwan is directly connected to Japan," seeming to imply that Japan could respond to an attack on Taiwan within its current constitutional framework.³⁶ Nakayama then explicitly stated "we have to protect Taiwan as a democratic country."³⁷ In July, Japan released its annual defense white paper, which spoke of Taiwan in an unprecedented manner, asserting that "stabilizing the situation surrounding Taiwan is important for Japan's

security and the stability of the international community. Therefore, it is necessary that we pay close attention to the situation with a sense of crisis more than ever before.”³⁸ Such language signifies a noteworthy degree of bureaucratic buy-in and institutionalization to the recent comments of Japanese political leaders.

Also in July, Japanese Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso stated that “if a major problem took place in Taiwan, it would not be too much to say that it could relate to a survival-threatening situation,” an assessment that would enable Japan to exercise collective self-defense.³⁹ At the end of the month, former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe participated in a trilateral dialogue with lawmakers from the United States and Taiwan, where he said “what happened in Hong Kong must never happen in Taiwan.”⁴⁰

In August 2021, Nobuo Kishi argued “international society needs to pay greater attention to the survival of Taiwan.”⁴¹ That same month, the ruling parties of Japan and Taiwan held virtual talks where Masahisa Sato, chair of the Liberal Democratic Party’s Foreign Affairs Division, stated that “China’s unilateral change of the regional status quo not only affects the security of the Taiwan Strait, but also affects the security of Japan.”⁴²

The current prime minister, Fumio Kishida, has voiced concern with China’s regional ambitions, specifically as they relate to Taiwan. With China in mind, Kishida stated Japan must consider developing missiles that can strike an enemy’s bases.⁴³ He also argued that “the front line of the clash between authoritarianism and democracy is Asia, and particularly Taiwan,” and that “Japan cannot respond on its own. We cannot respond except by cooperating with our ally, the U.S. It’s important to conduct simulations for this.”⁴⁴ Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who remains an influential figure in Japanese politics, has gone the furthest to date, declaring in late-November 2021, “A Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency, and therefore an emergency for the Japan-U.S. alliance. People in Beijing, President Xi Jinping in particular, should never have a misunderstanding in recognizing this.”⁴⁵

In addition to publicly highlighting the importance of cross-strait stability and drawing a connection between Taiwan’s security and its own, Japan is also pursuing closer ties with Taiwan. Over the past year, Japan has donated nearly four million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Taiwan, second only to the United States.⁴⁶ Japan has also come out in support of Taiwan’s bid to join the CPTPP.⁴⁷ After China banned Taiwanese pineapples in March 2021, Japanese citizens purchased them as a sign of solidarity with Taiwan, leading to an eightfold increase in pineapple exports to Japan.⁴⁸ Japan is also pursuing more trilateral cooperation with the United States and Taiwan, becoming a cosponsor of the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF), under which members facilitate workshops that allow Taiwan to showcase its expertise in fields like public health, disaster relief, women’s empowerment, and good governance.

While Japan’s government is increasingly explicit in linking Taiwan’s security to its own, it remains a question whether the country’s deeply pacifistic population would be willing to come to Taiwan’s defense. There are, however, some signs that public opinion is slowly evolving. According to a recent public opinion poll, 80 percent of respondents stated that they felt threatened by China.⁴⁹ In April 2021, a Nikkei and TV Tokyo poll found that nearly three-quarters of those surveyed favored the Japanese government being involved in maintaining peace in the Taiwan Strait.⁵⁰ To be fair, “being involved” is quite ambiguous, and respondents likely did not envision it including combat operations against China. At the same time, polls such as this mark an important shift in Japanese thinking on Taiwan and a willingness to discuss the issue publicly. While public opinion polling during peacetime provides valuable insight into attitudes, these views will likely evolve during a crisis, at which point the prime minister could significantly shape public opinion.

Japan's Potential Contributions to a Defense of Taiwan

Japan, with its geographic proximity to Taiwan, its role as host to over 54,000 U.S. troops on bases throughout the Japanese archipelago, and its own modern and advanced military, will play a critical role in a Taiwan contingency—both if it chooses to remain on the sidelines or if it decides to aid any U.S. intervention.

If it chose to come to Taiwan's defense, the United States would need Japan to at a minimum grant it permission to operate from bases and use its assets located in the country for combat operations, as they offer the closest proximity to China and Taiwan. The United States already has many of its most relevant capabilities for a Taiwan conflict positioned in Japan. The Seventh Fleet, based in Yokosuka, is the largest of the U.S. Navy's forward-deployed fleets and has the United States' only forward-deployed carrier strike group in the region.⁵¹ The United States' only forward-deployed Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) is headquartered in Okinawa and offers a "ready force" capable of responding to a crisis and conducting major combat operations. Kadena Air Base, the United States' largest military installation in the Asia-Pacific region not on U.S. territory, is located in Japan, and the U.S. Air Force forward deploys its most advanced capabilities to Japan. The United States would find it nearly impossible to respond promptly and effectively to Chinese aggression against Taiwan without being able to call on these assets and facilities.

Japan also has the ability to make more significant, and potentially decisive, contributions to a U.S.-led effort to defend Taiwan. Although Japan's military—technically the Self-Defense Forces (SDF)—has a narrow writ of defending Japan's sovereign territory, to include its airspace and seas, it nonetheless has cutting edge capabilities that would be relevant during a Taiwan contingency. This includes a layered missile defense architecture, sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), undersea and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities, the ability to maintain air superiority over Japan, and proficiency offering rear area support (for instance, by escorting U.S. ships, assisting with search and rescue operations, and conducting noncombatant emergency evacuation). During a Taiwan conflict, Japan could defend sea lines of communication, conduct chokepoint control and minesweeping operations, defend U.S. forces based in Japan, interdict shipments of war materiel or other logistics bound for China, and prevent China's military from breaking out of the first island chain.

Japan's Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) could aid the United States by maintaining air superiority in Japanese airspace. The ASDF has skilled pilots experienced in operating with their American counterparts, and the force fields 335 modern fighters, with plans to acquire 105 F-35As and 42 F-35Bs.⁵² By protecting Japanese territory and citizens during a conflict, the ASDF would simultaneously defend U.S. assets operating in and from Japan from PLAAF fighters and bombers.

Japan's layered missile defense system would also protect U.S. assets and personnel—and Japanese territory—from Chinese ballistic missiles. Japan employs both Aegis-equipped destroyers optimized for mid-course phase ballistic missile defense and Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC-3) interceptors for terminal phase defense. U.S. Navy Aegis-equipped ships forward deployed in Japan are interoperable with Japan's Aegis-equipped destroyers. The severity of the threat that China's ballistic missile arsenal poses to U.S. forces in Japan make ballistic missile defense coordination and cooperation critical during a conflict.

Japan also has significant ASW expertise, having honed its skills during the Cold War by hunting Soviet Union submarines. The Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) fields twenty-four P-1 and forty-eight P-3C ASW aircraft, as well as eighty helicopters that contribute to ASW.⁵³ Japan is also expanding its submarine and destroyer fleets, both of which are already substantial and which will enhance

ASW effectiveness. Given its competence in ASW, Japan could assist the United States by helping to keep PLAN submarines contained within the first island chain, thus providing more freedom of maneuver to U.S. vessels operating beyond it (i.e., in the Philippine Sea). Unlike the U.S. Navy, the MSDF has significant minesweeping expertise, having cleared Iraqi mines following the Gulf War, and could take on this mission in the waters surrounding Japan or in the approaches to Taiwan's east coast ports.

Japan also has advanced ISR capabilities, many of which are compatible with U.S. systems. Japan's early warning sensor network and twenty-eight ground-based air-defense radars are connected to U.S. communications satellites, and the United States and Japan already share information on threats to Japan and U.S. bases.⁵⁴ The two also have a Bilateral and Joint Operations Coordination Center, which allows them to share early warning information and intelligence. The United States and Japan also closely collaborate on undersea information sharing. Japan is purchasing sophisticated surveillance unmanned aerial vehicles from the United States and is upgrading its aerial early warning systems.⁵⁵

The Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force's (GSDF) recent decision to establish operating locations in Japan's southwest islands—the closest Japanese territory to Taiwan—has the potential to substantially aid U.S. operations. So far, the GSDF has established a presence on Yonaguni, Amami-Oshima, Miyakojima, and Ishigaki. These installations include ISR as well as surface-to-air and anti-ship cruise missile batteries.⁵⁶ The GSDF also established an Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade in 2018 which is tasked with moving soldiers among these islands and rapidly responding to contingencies.⁵⁷ With a presence in these islands, Japan could target PLA operations and offer a ready-made base from which U.S. forces can operate.

There is scope for even greater coordination between the United States and Japan. Japan employs many of the same platforms and systems as the United States and has similar doctrines and operational concepts, and the two militaries have decades of experience training and exercising together. Because Japan acquires over 90 percent of its defense imports from the United States, U.S. forces could potentially use spare parts from the SDF's inventory during a conflict and SDF maintenance crews could help repair U.S. systems.⁵⁸

At the same time, Japan's military has shortfalls that if not addressed will hinder its ability to defend its territory and assist the United States during a conflict. Japan lacks sufficient aerial refueling capabilities, and while it plans to purchase additional refueling aircraft over the next decade, it will still not have enough.⁵⁹ Similarly, the MSDF has insufficient oilers and underway replenishment ships and no plans to purchase more. As a result, the MSDF's surface combatants and minesweepers would have a relatively limited range. Japan also lacks the ability to rapidly transport troops by air and sea to remote islands to defend vulnerable Japanese territory and interdict PLA forces.

Potential Constitutional and Political Impediments

If conflict erupts in the Taiwan Strait, Japan's leaders would have to grapple with complex political and legal questions. The scope of Japanese involvement alongside U.S. forces, and thus the success of a U.S. defense of Taiwan, would hinge in large part on how the government applies Japan's pacifistic postwar constitution to the situation at hand. Japan would also have to consider how its response, or lack thereof, would affect the U.S. commitment to its security, as well as the public appetite for intervention.

While the security treaty between the United States and Japan (formally the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of America) does not obligate Japan to assist the United States during a conflict over Taiwan, it leaves the door open to Japanese involvement. Article V of that treaty states that "an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional provisions and processes."⁶⁰ Presumably, a Chinese attack on bases in Japan from which U.S. forces were operating during a conflict over Taiwan would trigger this provision and necessitate a Japanese response. Article VI notes that the United States "is granted the use by its land, air and naval forces of facilities and areas in Japan" in order to contribute "to the security of Japan and the maintenance of international peace and security in the Far East," a geographic area that includes Taiwan.⁶¹ Thus, from the outset of the alliance relationship, Tokyo has viewed the U.S. presence in Japan as enabling Washington to play a larger regional role.

While the treaty between the United States and Japan leaves open the possibility of the United States utilizing bases on Japan for missions other than the defense of Japan, a subsequent exchange of diplomatic notes makes clear that Japan wants to be a part of that decision-making process. The United States agrees to conduct "prior consultation" with Japan before using its forces on Japan for a mission other than the defense of Japan, though this mechanism has never been invoked.⁶² The need for contemporaneous consultations adds a layer of uncertainty and could delay a U.S. military response with significant operational consequences.

Until 2016, one could not even ask the question of whether Japan would assist the United States in a conflict over Taiwan, as its constitution precluded exercising collective self-defense and rejected the possibility of responding to armed attacks against other countries.⁶³ Instead, Japan could only employ the SDF in response to an actual or anticipated attack against Japan. As a result, the SDF would have been able to provide rear area support to the United States (as long as there were no combat operations taking place in the area), but unable to supply ammunition to U.S. forces or assist in refueling or maintaining U.S. aircraft or ships.⁶⁴

Responding to a more severe international environment and a shifting balance of power, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe ushered in a reinterpretation of Japan's constitution that took effect in 2016, which opened the door to exercising collective self-defense and assisting the United States in defending Taiwan.⁶⁵ If Japan concludes that a Chinese attack on Taiwan represents an "important influence situation," defined as one that undermines Japan's security and could lead to a direct attack on Japan, Tokyo's role would be limited to noncombat, rear area support roles such as logistics, medical services, and search and rescue activities. If, however, Japan concludes that a Chinese attack on Taiwan is a "survival-threatening situation," it would have the authority to provide the full range of support, including ballistic missile defense, anti-submarine warfare, and combat operations alongside the United States after the Diet approves such operations. In addition, if Japan is directly

attacked during a Taiwan conflict, it would also have the authority to offer full support to U.S. operations. According to media reports, the Japanese government is studying which of these two scenarios would be applicable to a conflict over Taiwan.⁶⁶

At first glance, it could seem as though Japan would be unlikely to define an attack on Taiwan as a "survival-threatening situation," but its definition is broad enough to potentially include a conflict over Taiwan. Japan defines a "survival-threatening situation" as one in which "an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan occurs and as a result threatens Japan's survival and poses a clear danger to fundamentally overturn people's right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness." Taiwan shares a close relationship with Japan (although Japan does not formally recognize Taiwan as a "foreign country") and, given its proximity to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and Okinawa, a Chinese takeover could be seen as posing a danger to Japan's survival. In addition, the advisory panel that studied this issue for the government argued that a "survival-threatening situation" should include one in which "not taking action could significantly undermine trust in the Japan-U.S. alliance" or "the international order itself could be significantly affected."⁶⁷ A failure to assist the United States in coming to Taiwan's defense could be seen as fatally weakening the U.S.-Japan alliance. Japanese leaders have recently spoken of Taiwan as the front line of an ideological competition between democracy and authoritarianism, which could portend a view that a Chinese attack on Taiwan would be considered a threat to international order.

A Way Forward

The shifting balance of power in the Taiwan Strait and growing concern that China could resort to force to subjugate Taiwan argue for the United States and Japan to prioritize developing a coordinated strategy to bolster deterrence and respond to Chinese aggression if deterrence fails. Washington should establish an understanding of how Tokyo is likely to respond to an unprovoked attack on Taiwan and the type and degree of support Tokyo is likely to offer Washington during such a conflict. The United States and Japan should then work together to determine which operational challenges Japan can most effectively help the United States overcome within those parameters. The allies should then adapt elements of the alliance relationship to maximize their ability to respond quickly and effectively to Chinese aggression against Taiwan.

A concerted effort to increase Japan's role in maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait should be pursued in such a way that it does not compromise Japanese support for the U.S.-Japan alliance, which is critical to regional stability; destabilize cross-strait relations or provoke a Chinese attack; or restrict U.S. freedom of action in the event of a Taiwan conflict.

The United States should work closely with Japan in developing capabilities that enhance Japan's defense and would have the added benefit of contributing to the defense of Taiwan:

- *Integrate intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities:* Given China's proximity to Taiwan, its regular military operations and exercises in Taiwan's vicinity, and the vastness of the Indo-Pacific, the United States and Japan will be challenged to maintain awareness of PLA movements. To increase their awareness of PLA activities and maximize their warning time for an attack on Taiwan, the United States and Japan should knit together space, air, and undersea domain awareness networks and sensors to create a common operating picture. Further integrating the two countries' ISR assets would also improve the United States' ability to conduct operations in what is anticipated to be a severely contested information environment. The United States should also quietly incorporate Taiwan's capabilities and act as a central node, facilitating the sharing of information between Japan and Taiwan. Given that the PLA would likely attempt to jam and destroy U.S. satellites during the opening stages of a conflict, the United States should seek Japan's commitment to provide space-based ISR support during a Taiwan contingency. In particular, Japan has made significant investments in independent remote sensing and communications capabilities, which could provide critical support to U.S. forces during a conflict. As a priority, the United States should begin the process of bringing Japan into the Five Eyes intelligence sharing alliance with Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.
- *Assist Japan's development of cutting-edge military capabilities:* Japan is reportedly planning to extend the range of its cruise missiles to hit targets over one thousand kilometers away, and hopes to deploy these missiles by the second half of this decade.⁶⁸ This would give Japan the ability to strike China's bases during a conflict. This likely also signals that Japan would consider a range of weapons that would be relevant during a Taiwan scenario. The United States should encourage this shift and assist Japan in its development of a long-range missile capability. The United States should also enable Japan to collaborate with its existing autonomous underwater vehicle programs and establish a co-development effort to ad-

vance underwater autonomy. The Department of Defense's Office of International Cooperation should lead the effort and make cooperative research and development with Japan a top priority.

- *Urge Japan to increase defense spending and rapidly modernize its forces:* While Japan is dramatically rethinking its national security posture, the country is not where it needs to be. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party has pledged to double defense spending to two percent of GDP (it recently introduced a defense budget that surpasses one percent of GDP for the first time), but Japan would need to increase its budget by ten percent annually for the next seven years to hit that target.⁶⁹ The United States should push Japan to accelerate this timeline. Equally important, Washington should urge Tokyo to apply more resources toward long-range missiles, shorter range anti-ship cruise missiles, countermine platforms and systems, unmanned autonomous underwater vehicles, transport aircraft and sealift that can move troops to its smaller islands, aerial refueling capabilities, underway replenishment ships, and hardened defense facilities.

The United States should take steps that facilitate the use of U.S. forces in Japan and Japanese assets even if Japan chooses to not directly assist U.S. operations:

- *Create conditions for smooth prior consultation:* In order for the United States to use its forces in Japan for a mission other than defending Japan, it must first conduct prior consultations with Japan and receive Japanese permission for doing so. If this process drags on due to Japanese qualms or indecision, it could significantly delay U.S. operations and put the defense of Taiwan in jeopardy. To avoid this, the United States should conduct routine discussions with Japan on this issue, perform tabletop exercises focusing on Taiwan contingencies, prioritize exercising complex combined operations with Japan, and encourage the Japanese government to speak publicly about how Taiwan's security influences Japanese security.
- *Urge Japan to publicly state that an attack on U.S. assets or forces in Japan would be considered an attack on Japan itself:* The decision to attack Taiwan would be the most consequential decision that a Chinese leader makes. The next most consequential decision will be whether to attack U.S. forces in Japan to complicate U.S. efforts to come to Taiwan's defense. While U.S. forces share many bases in Japan with the SDF, there are also bases that do not house Japanese assets, such as Marine Corps Air Station Futenma. China could choose to target these locations, giving Japan room to not respond and creating a crisis in the U.S.-Japan alliance. The United States should encourage Japan to unequivocally state that an attack on any U.S. assets or personnel on Japanese territory would be interpreted as an attack on Japan and to define an attack broadly, to include cyber operations and any other action that harms the base's effectiveness.

The United States should coordinate with Japan to enable Tokyo to more effectively support U.S. operations if it chose to do so:

- *Transform command and control in Japan:* Although beyond the scope of this paper, the United States needs to comprehensively rethink its command and control organization in the Indo-Pacific. As it relates to Japan, unlike United States Forces, Korea (USFK), United States Forces, Japan (USFJ) is not a war-fighting command. Rather, it is a sub-unified command that supports U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) and is led by a three-star

general. To increase U.S.-Japan coordination for a Taiwan contingency and bolster their ability to rapidly intervene during a conflict, USFJ should become a joint war-fighting U.S. command with a joint and combined headquarters, led by an operational commander. Its stated mission should be expanded to include deterring aggression against Japan, defending U.S. assets and personnel, and maintaining peace, stability, and security in areas surrounding Japan. It should develop a joint operation plan to respond to Chinese aggression, which would be briefed to senior political leaders in Washington and Tokyo.

- *Focus on addressing resupply challenges:* A major difficulty for the United States will be resupplying its forces with war materiel, food, and fuel during a conflict, not to mention potentially resupplying Japan and Taiwan. China will likely seek to aggravate this challenge by pressuring shipping companies and ship owners not to aid in this effort. The United States and Japan should work together to ensure that they have sufficient sealift to support operations and can resupply their forces during a conflict.
- *Position additional ammunition and critical supplies in Japan and undertake visible exercises to bring additional forces to Japan:* Given China's growing military capabilities, it will be increasingly difficult for the United States to resupply its forces during a Taiwan conflict. The best way to mitigate this problem and demonstrate preparedness to China is to move additional munitions and support capabilities to Japan, disperse them in hardened facilities throughout the Japanese archipelago, and disclose these preparations publicly. U.S. INDO-PACOM and its integrated Geographic Combatant Command and Functional Combatant Command partners should regularly exercise surging forces to the region. Additionally, the United States and Japan should conduct rapid deployment demonstrations akin to what would be needed to secure the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands during a Taiwan conflict.

The United States should enhance Japan's ability to directly intervene in the defense of Taiwan:

- *Leverage Japan's western islands:* Japan's military recently established multiple outposts on the country's southwest islands. The proximity of these facilities to Taiwan has the potential to aid U.S. operations, should the U.S. military be allowed to operate from them. The United States should encourage Japan to open additional facilities throughout the island chain, allowing Japan and the United States to disperse their forces while increasing China's target set and enhancing the survivability of larger bases. The United States and Japan should exercise rapidly moving forces to these islands and increase the rotational presence of U.S. ground forces. Finally, the United States should work with Japan to increase the capabilities of these facilities by employing missile defense, anti-ship cruise missiles, and anti-aircraft missiles; positioning logistics; and installing advanced ISR assets.
- *Encourage and facilitate Japan's establishment of a joint warfighting headquarters separate from the Joint Staff Office (JSO):* Should Japan elect to conduct combat operations during a conflict over Taiwan, its JSO would be overwhelmed and unable to exercise effective command and control over Japanese forces, especially if bases in Japan were under attack. To support high-tempo, complex operations, Japan should establish a joint warfighting headquarters responsible for joint warfighting command and control. The United States should provide technical assistance and deploy training teams to help Japan set up such a headquarters.

- *In concert with Japan, develop a plan to help it counter Chinese economic and political retaliation and resist Chinese pressure:* China often resorts to economic coercion to dissuade countries from taking stands that run counter to Chinese interests. During a conflict over Taiwan, the United States should expect China to halt imports of Japanese products and punish Japanese corporations with a presence in China. Because China is Japan's top export market, consuming 20 percent of its exports, Beijing likely believes that it can pressure Japanese corporations to lobby their government to stay out of a Taiwan conflict.⁷⁰ Should Japan choose to support U.S. operations, the PLA could respond by mining Japan's ports to starve Japan's economy and disrupt critical fuel imports. The United States should establish an economic assistance fund that would make up for any lost exports during a future conflict and work with Japan to develop a stockpile of critical supplies, such as oil, to weather economic disruptions.
- *Facilitate military-to-military communication between Japan and Taiwan:* Although Japan-Taiwan ties have improved in recent years, the security aspect of their relationship lags behind. While the United States has a small number of active-duty military personnel in Taiwan, Japan does not. No official in Japan's Ministry of Defense is assigned to manage the security relationship with Taiwan and the two militaries barely communicate.⁷¹ During a crisis, however, the militaries of the United States, Japan, and Taiwan would need to communicate effectively to coordinate their operations. The United States should quietly facilitate military-to-military communication between Japan and Taiwan to ensure the three militaries can easily and securely communicate with each other during a conflict.

Conclusion

Deterrence is eroding in the Taiwan Strait as a result of China's rapid military modernization, the United States' failure to realistically address the changing security environment and invest wisely to address the China challenge, Taiwan's neglect of its own defense, and Japan's longstanding self-imposed limits on its defense spending and posture. These developments, paired with a bolder and more assertive Chinese foreign policy, are raising the prospect that China could feel tempted to use force to absorb Taiwan into the People's Republic of China.

To prevent a war that would be ruinous for the United States, Japan, Taiwan, and China, the United States and Japan should urgently increase their coordination and preparation for a Taiwan conflict. Deterring Chinese aggression against Taiwan and developing and fielding with urgency the capabilities necessary to respond to a Chinese attack should become the top priority for the U.S.-Japan alliance, animating all conversations among the countries' national security leadership. The regional order that has preserved peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific for the past three-quarters of a century and continues to underpin Japan's security and prosperity hangs in the balance.

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