



# Japan and Taiwan

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## Introduction

In the sphere of Japan's diplomacy and security policies, the role of Taiwan has been taking on increasing prominence in recent years. The relationships with the United States and China are Japan's foremost diplomatic challenges, and Taiwan's situation stands as the most destabilizing aspect of US-China relations. Frameworks such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative (FOIP) highlight Taiwan as an essential element. However, while economic and societal relations between Japan and Taiwan are amicable, there is a conspicuous absence of formal diplomatic ties, matched by a similarly sparse presence of direct security associations.

This article aims to present an overview of Japan's policy toward Taiwan, to analyze how Japan has managed its relations with Taiwan amidst the constraints emanating from its relations with China, and finally, to highlight the policy challenges currently faced by the Japanese government.

## The Japanese government's basic stance toward Taiwan

First, let us revisit the fundamental framework of Japan's policy toward Taiwan. As a direct consequence of Japan's normalization of diplomatic relations with the

government of the People's Republic of China in 1972, it severed diplomatic ties with the Taiwan-based Republic of China's government and, as will be discussed later, maintained relations by establishing organizations of a semi-official nature. The arrangement that was formed concerning Taiwan following the severance of diplomatic ties is commonly referred to as the "1972 system." Many other countries have severed relations with Taiwan and established quasi-official relationships similar to that between Japan and Taiwan. This has resulted in Taiwan's marginalization from international organizations that only recognize sovereign states. Hence, the 1972 system also carries a broader meaning in reference to Taiwan's status within the international system, to which the island has had no option but to adapt.

In the Japan-China Joint Communiqué of 1972, Japan recognized that the Government of the People's Republic of China is "the sole legal government of China." Concerning China's claim that "Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the People's Republic of China," Japan "fully understands and respects this stand of the Government of the People's Republic of China, and it firmly maintains its stand under Article 8 of the Potsdam Proclamation." This means that while Japan currently does not recognize Taiwan as part of China, it would accept such a status quo if Taiwan were to become a part of China in reality. Therefore, Japan would not support Taiwan's independence at present.

Foreign Minister Masayoshi Ohira stated in the Diet on November 8, 1972 that, on the assumption that the Taiwan issue would reach a peaceful resolution, he considered the issue of contention between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan to be essentially an internal matter for China. This statement also carries an implication that, should force be used, the Taiwan issue would cease to be a purely internal Chinese matter. Furthermore, a senior official with Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated in the Diet on February 28, 1975 that Japan was "not in a position to comment" on the legal status of Taiwan in international law.

In its Diplomatic Bluebook, Japan defines its relationship with Taiwan as a "non-governmental, working-level relationship" centered on the economy and culture. Following the loss of diplomatic ties, Japan and Taiwan each established institutions equivalent to embassies—namely, the Interchange Association and the Association of East Asian Relations—deemed "private institutions." Through these bodies, they have strived to maintain practical relations. In 2017, the Interchange Association was renamed the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association, and the Association of East Asian Relations was renamed the Taiwan-Japan Relations Association. It is worth noting that while Japan maintains the pretense of these being civilian organizations, the Taiwan-Japan Relations Association is located within Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According

to Taiwanese statistics, the total trade between Japan and Taiwan reached 85.31 billion US dollars in 2021, making Japan Taiwan's third-largest trading partner and vice versa.

While there are numerous constraints regarding official contact between Japan and Taiwan, both the government and society of Japan took a favorable view of the democratization and localization that progressed under the Lee Teng-hui administration (1988–2000). Taiwan's profile in Japan has been increasingly prominent since the 1990s, reaching a zenith when a massive donation exceeding 20 billion yen was sent to Japan from Taiwan following the 2011 off the Pacific coast of Tohoku Earthquake. Furthermore, since Shinzo Abe—famous as a pro-Taiwan figure—became Prime Minister, the phrase "a crucial partner and an important friend, with which it shares fundamental values (*kachi wo kyōyū suru taisetsuna yūjin*)" has been appended to the official explanation concerning Taiwan.

According to a public opinion poll conducted by Taiwan in 2021, 75.9% of Japanese people harbored a sense of affinity for Taiwan. Similarly, a Japanese survey from the same year revealed that 60% of Taiwanese respondents chose Japan as their "most favored nation or region." These figures point to a strong and reciprocal sense of closeness between the general populace of Japan and Taiwan, a mutual regard that, paradoxically, seems to be maintained in

inverse proportion to the deteriorating relations between Japan and China, as well as between China and Taiwan.

### **How has Japan responded to the dynamics of cross-strait relations?**

China has sought to restrain the burgeoning closeness between Japan and Taiwan, occasionally exerting political pressure. This tendency has been particularly apparent in the realms of politics and security. On the other hand, in Japan, policy adjustments toward Taiwan have been consistently seen as remaining within the confines of the framework established in the 1972 system, with criticisms or concerns from the Chinese side regarded as being unwarranted. However, it is also possible to discern certain trends or shifts in Japan's ongoing involvement with Taiwan.

I have previously argued that there are four areas in which Japan may make decisions that would ultimately be favorable to Taiwan, even if these are strongly opposed by China. Successive Japanese cabinets, when faced with the zero-sum nature of cross-strait interests and China's strong opposition, have prioritized "Japan's inviolable national interests and values" and "Japan's sovereign judgment," with the result that they have made several "Taiwan-friendly" policy decisions that go against China's intentions in the following domains.

The first domain relates to Japan's security and the Japan-US alliance. Japan has consistently called for a peaceful resolution to the Taiwan issue based on dialogue between China and Taiwan and has strongly expressed regret over threats of military force. The "Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation" of 1997 and the joint announcement by the Japan-US Security Consultative Committee (2+2) in 2005 explicitly stated for the first time the importance of the "peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait through dialogue." Despite China's repeated demands to exclude Taiwan from being regarded as the potential site of a "situation in areas surrounding Japan" under Japan's Act on Measures to Ensure the Peace and Security of Japan in Perilous Situations in Areas Surrounding Japan (Act No. 60 of 1999), Japan has never acquiesced to these requests. Moreover, in 2003, Japan took the unprecedented step of stationing a retired Ground Self-Defense Force Major General in its Taipei office of the Exchange Association to begin gathering military intelligence in Taiwan.

The second domain pertains to Japan's sovereignty, specifically the question of who is allowed to enter Japan from Taiwan and who from Japan can visit Taiwan—areas where the Japanese government does not favor Chinese interference. For instance, in 1994, Japan allowed Hsu Li-teh, the Vice Premier of Taiwan, to attend the opening ceremony of the Asian Games in Hiroshima. Similarly, in 2004, Japan permitted former

President Lee Teng-hui to visit for sight-seeing. While visits to Taiwan by former Japanese prime ministers had been rare, they became frequent following the visit by former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori in 2003. Furthermore, in 2018, Jiro Akama, Senior Vice Minister of Internal Affairs and Communication, made an official visit to Taiwan. This visit represented the highest-ranking journey to Taiwan by a government official since the cessation of formal diplomatic relations. All of these personal exchanges were carried out in the face of strong opposition from China.

The third domain pertains to the non-political realms of economics and culture. Although China should, in principle, not oppose Japan and Taiwan growing closer in this domain, there have been instances where China has not hesitated to do so. For example, China strongly discouraged Taiwan's bid to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) even before it became a member itself. Similarly, China voiced strong opposition to the Japan-Taiwan Fisheries Agreement concluded in 2013. However, Japan, along with the United States, advanced Taiwan's accession to the WTO and concluded the fisheries agreement, ignoring China's opposition.

The fourth domain involves humanitarian issues. For instance, in response to the major earthquake that struck central Taiwan in 1999, Japan dispatched an international emergency aid team to Taiwan. On this occasion, China attempted to compel countries to obtain

its consent before dispatching aid, yet Japan bypassed such formalities and quickly sent humanitarian assistance to Taiwan. Moreover, Japan permitted former President Lee Teng-hui to visit in 2001 for heart disease treatment in the face of Chinese opposition. Japan has also increasingly shown support for Taiwan's participation in the World Health Organization (WHO). Beginning in 2004, Japan expressed a "hope" for Taiwan's gaining observer status at the WHO's annual World Health Assembly (WHA), later strengthening this expression to outright "support."

## **Mounting concerns over Chinese military action toward Taiwan**

In recent years, in the domain of security, Japan has grown increasingly concerned, particularly about potential Chinese military action against Taiwan. In March 2021, during the US-Japan 2+2 meeting, the phrase "the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" was used, and was subsequently mentioned at the US-Japan Summit in the following month. However, this referred to the "Taiwan Strait" rather than "Taiwan": It placed an emphasis on the significance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, most of which is international waters, and should not be misconstrued as a declaration of support for Taiwan.

Even among senior Japanese government officials, who usually exercise

caution in their statements, Yasuhide Nakayama, the Senior Vice Minister of Defense, and Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso made comments in private contexts in June and July 2021, respectively, suggesting that Japan should aid in Taiwan's defense in case of a so-called Taiwan contingency. However, these statements were subsequently corrected by Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato, indicating that they did not represent Japan's official policy.

The 2021 *Defense White Paper* ("Defense of Japan 2021") stated for the first time that "stabilizing the situation surrounding Taiwan is important not only for Japan's security but also for the stability of the international community." However, the phrase "the situation surrounding Taiwan (*Taiwan wo meguru jōsei*)" is not new and has been repeatedly used by the Japanese government in responses at the Diet, Japan's legislature. Thus, it does not represent a shift in Japan's official language or stance.

In any case, these discourses undoubtedly signal an intensifying sense of crisis in Japan concerning the situation in the Taiwan Strait. However, no legal framework in Japan allows the inference that Japan should directly defend Taiwan. The linchpin of Japan's policy remains the support of the US military within the framework of the US-Japan alliance, depending on whether the situation significantly impacts Japan's peace and security—in other words, for "Japan's security."

Amid reports raising concerns about the possibility of warfare in the Taiwan Strait, former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated in a March 2022 teleconference with President Tsai Ing-wen that "any contingency concerning Taiwan would be also an emergency for Japan and for the Japan-US security alliance." This pronouncement was greeted warmly in Taiwan but met with criticism from China. While the understanding that a Taiwan contingency could escalate into a crisis for Japan was commonplace among experts, a statement by a former Prime Minister carried a distinct weight. It widely informed Japanese society that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would immediately bring the flames of war to Japan.

A public opinion survey published by the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* in April 2021 found that 74% of respondents approved of Japan's involvement in Taiwan's stability. Moreover, the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022 further heightened concerns about China's potential use of military force against Taiwan. According to a survey released by the *Mainichi Shimbun* in March 2022, 89% of respondents expressed worry about China's invasion of Taiwan. In another poll published by the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* in May of the same year, in response to a question regarding how Japan should prepare for a crisis in Taiwan instigated by China, the combined total of those who thought "Japan should prepare within the current legal framework" (50%) and those who believed "Japan should enhance

its responsiveness, including through revisions to the law" (41%), reached a substantial 91%. Conversely, only 4% thought "there was no need to prepare." The psychological state of Japanese citizens in this regard seems comparable to that of European citizens concerned about Russia instigating warfare in Europe.

Such apparent public sentiment, however, does not signify a change in the country's policy. According to a *Sankei Shimbun* report published on January 3, 2022, Japan declined an offer by Taiwan's government to exchange defense information. Japan's Taiwan policy is, for now, still nested within the framework of the 1972 system.

On the other hand, any enhancements to Japan's defense capability could make a Chinese attack on Taiwan that much less feasible, thereby bolstering Taiwan's security indirectly. Of course, should Japan be attacked, it can exercise its right of individual self-defense and retaliate. Similarly, if the US were to be attacked, Japan could exercise its right to collective self-defense, albeit to a limited degree. The security of Japan and Taiwan are therefore intricately intertwined.

In December 2022, Japan undertook a revision of its three principal security-related documents, including the National Security Strategy, signaling an intention to fundamentally enhance its defense capabilities. This policy outline involved a

doubling of the defense budget over the course of five years. In regard to Taiwan, the phrase "the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" was reiterated throughout these documents. Regarding the development of Japan's defense capabilities, specific measures to deter military aggression from China were also explicitly outlined, including enhancing base resilience, fortifying the capacity to sustain combat operations, and acquiring "counterstrike capabilities." Although Japan has refrained from explicitly committing to the defense of Taiwan and does not engage in defense exchanges with the island, it is possible to interpret this policy shift as a strategic maneuver intended to indirectly deter China's potential use of force against Taiwan by bolstering Japan's own defense abilities.

## The provision of COVID-19 vaccines and welcoming application to the CPTPP

Compared to defense capabilities, Japan has instead demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting Taiwan directly, especially in areas outside of traditional security domains. One standout example of this is Japan's response to Taiwan's COVID-19 vaccine shortage.

Faced with a shortage of vaccines to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan found relief in aid from Japan. From June to October 2021, spread over six

separate consignments, Japan shipped approximately 4.2 million doses of the domestically produced AstraZeneca vaccine to Taiwan, effectively amounting to almost the entire quantity of vaccine that Japan had produced. At the time, China was blocking Taiwan's vaccine procurement attempts, pressuring the island to accept Chinese-made vaccines instead. Adding to this pressure, the ruling government in Taiwan was facing difficulties in the form of intense criticism from the opposition party for the surging infections and vaccine shortages. Japan's timely vaccine delivery played a significant role in stabilizing the public mood in Taiwan, with some likening the move to the massive airlift operation during the Berlin Blockade.

Although the primary reason for this vaccine aid was humanitarian, Japan's foreign minister, Toshimitsu Motegi emphasized the notion that it was reciprocation for Taiwan's humanitarian assistance to Japan during its struggles with COVID-19 in 2020. Japan's "vaccine diplomacy" toward Taiwan, even if carried out under the banner of humanitarianism, hints at a strategic inclination that cannot be denied.

On the economic front, Japan immediately welcomed Taiwan's application to join the CPTPP in September 2021. Notably, Taiwan's application received far more media coverage in Japan than China's. Historically, Japan has supported the joint participation of China and Taiwan in international

bodies such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the WTO. The warm welcome for Taiwan's CPTPP application thus reflects a continuation of this established approach.

However, the promotion of free trade between Japan and Taiwan faced the hurdle of import restrictions on food from five Japanese prefectures, including Fukushima, due to the nuclear accident. This obstacle was relaxed in February 2022. Of course, the transition from a "welcome" to Taiwan's application to outright "support" for its membership in the CPTPP requires Taiwan's compliance with the standards of the CPTPP, which included the natural expectation of lifting import restrictions on Japanese food products. Taiwan has declared its compliance with the CPTPP rules and made the necessary amendments to its domestic laws.

The sequence of events—Japan's vaccine donations, Taiwan's lifting of food import restrictions, and Japan's endorsement of Taiwan's application to the CPTPP—highlight a positive diplomatic feedback loop between Japan and Taiwan.

### **Conclusion: Future policy challenges**

Japan's policy toward Taiwan may appear to have undergone significant changes, but in reality, these shifts can be interpreted within the framework of the traditional 1972 system.



Japan has historically made decisions favoring Taiwan over China's objections, particularly in the aforementioned four domains, where they aligned with Japan's inviolable values and interests. In other words, while the framework of the 1972 system itself has not changed, Japan's stance in support of Taiwan has become markedly stronger.

Additionally, as China intensifies its efforts to alter the status quo in its periphery, there is a growing apprehension in Japan regarding a potential flare-up in the Taiwan Strait. This concern could potentially lead to structural shifts, allowing for more robust security-related information sharing and collaboration between Japan and Taiwan in the future. However, given the premise of a “non-governmental working-level relationship” (as defined by Japan) primarily focused on the economy and culture, constraints remain significant, and the specifics of the current situation remain unclear to those not directly involved. The potential scope of Japan's solo military options in the event of a Taiwan contingency is limited, leaving little choice but to wait for a US military deployment. However, by fundamentally strengthening its defense capabilities, Japan can hope to exert a certain level of deterrence against potential military aggression by China.

In fact, Japanese diplomacy has made significant contributions in non-military domains, as seen in its timely large-scale

supply of COVID-19 vaccines. Looking ahead, future challenges include fostering Taiwan's engagement in key international economic frameworks, such as supporting Taiwan's accession to the CPTPP and encouraging its actual participation, which involves managing pressure from China.

Amid signs of further improvement in Japan-Taiwan relations, the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in July 2022, a strong proponent of stronger ties with Taiwan, has somewhat obscured the push toward strengthening the relationship. Although the current situation remains unclear, Japan's support for Taiwan appears to have lost momentum, especially when compared to the United States, where support for Taiwan's self-defense has been rapidly escalating.

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