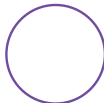




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and brought the threat of China to Taiwan front and center: “We affirm the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of global security and prosperity” (White House 2024). And American journalists began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

This report will examine the evolution of Japanese defense and diplomatic policy, and informal relations with Taiwan in recent years, then will examine the rise of China and its determination to

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

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

from the Straits of Taiwan to Osaka. The extreme limits of this zone are approximately 1,000 nautical miles from Tokyo and the zone includes the most heavily used sea routes

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

Taiwan has long recognized that cultivating the
policy makers and influential public of powerful
countries is key to maintaining its existence
as a quasi-state. Much of this attention has
natura-ation has

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

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

The Rise of China and Its Ambitions

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

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

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

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

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

The Deterioration of Sino-Japanese Relations

The rise of China and the assertiveness it

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

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

The Japanese Response: From Hedging to Edging to Walking Openly

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

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

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

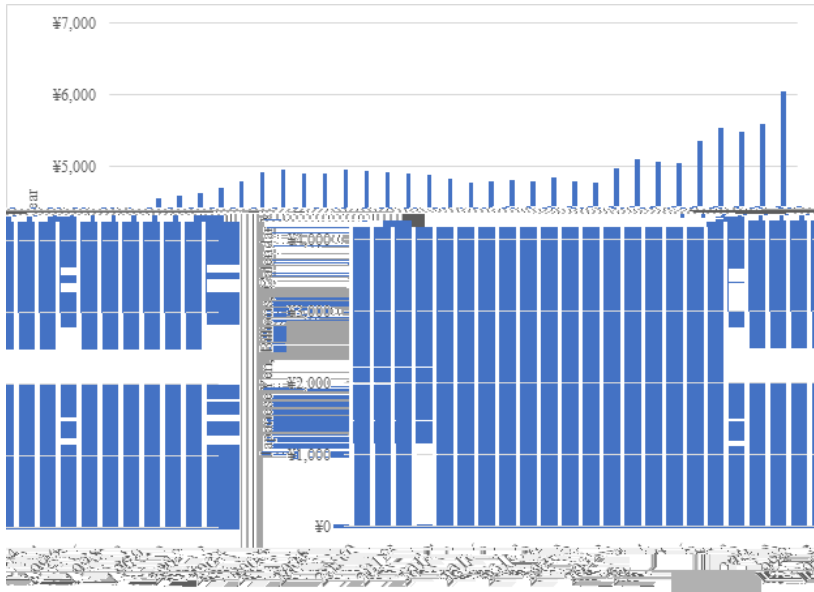
D g

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

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

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

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



Data Source: SIPRI, 2022

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

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

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

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

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

The Camp David trilateral summit of US President Biden, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, and Prime Minister Kishida was one of the most important steps in the diplomacy of those three nations toward institutionalizing multilateralism along the historically difficult Tokyo-Seoul “

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

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

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

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

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

The sentiments of Japanese and Taiwanese citizens toward each other are generally favorable. In a

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

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

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

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

Public opinion in Japan is beginning to back a greater Japanese role in the Taiwan straits. The high Japanese disapproval of China in general has already been noted. Following President Biden’s joint statement with then-Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga in April 2021, a poll by Nikkei/TV Tokyo asked the Japanese public whether they

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

k A

Almost all of this occurred before February 24, 2022, when the world changed. Japan reacted quickly and decisively against the Russian Federation, imposing sanctions along with the United States and European Union, freezing Russian assets held in Tokyo, cutting off SWIFT banking access, and freezing Russian officials’ assets as well. As then-Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi stated, “If the international community

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

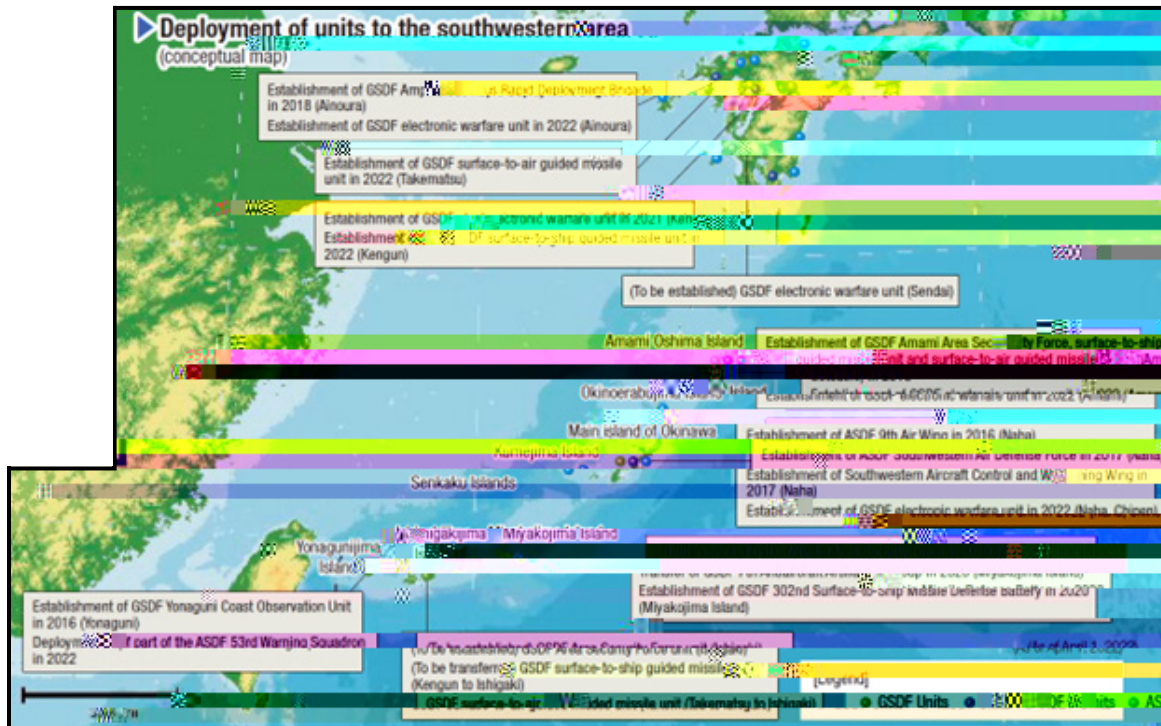
attack that would hit American forces in Japan in the first salvo, then using anti-access/area denial weapons to prevent US naval forces especially aircraft carriers from intervening. That would mean a direct attack on Japanese soil, since American forces are overwhelmingly located in Okinawa. This would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

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

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

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

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



Source: MODJ 2022, 265.³

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

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

Why Japan Might Not...

If Chinese missiles hit Japanese islands in a first strike, the question of war will likely be resolved. If, however, China's maritime forces announce a blockade of the island, possibly for spurious reasons calling it a "quarantine" (a term the world remembers from the Cuban Missile Crisis), the

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

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

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

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

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

D

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

credibility has been seriously tarnished by its actions in Ukraine, but its Far Eastern naval and

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

F

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

Conclusion

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

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