

JAPAN'S POLICIES TOWARDS TAIWAN

TRENDS, CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS
FOR THE FUTURE OF TOKYO-TAIPEI RELATIONS

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Japan has significantly increased its political and security support for Taiwan in recent years. Jason Chen provides a nuanced explanation for this trend by analyzing the state of US-Japanese relations, Japan's own realist interests and popular domestic support for Taiwan in Japan. He forecasts that these developments show no signs of changing and that Japan will continue to grow closer to Taiwan in the years to come.

Japan's support for Taiwan's political and security interests has improved sharply in recent years. Politically, this trend can be most clearly seen in the rapid growth of Japan's support for Taipei's repeated bids for entry into the World Health Organization (WHO). In the span of five years, Tokyo has gone from refusing to support Taipei *despite* US pressure to do so in 1999,¹ to verbally backing Taipei for the first time in 2003,² and to voting in Taiwan's favor in 2004.³

Furthermore, Tokyo's growing political support for Taipei can be seen in its unusually strong opposition to the January 2005 proposal by some European Union (EU) member states to lift the EU arms embargo on China.⁴ It can also be seen in Tokyo's condemnation of China's Anti-Secession Law of March 2005, which formally gave Beijing the domestic legal authority to use "non-peaceful means" to force Taiwan's reunification with the mainland.⁵ In response to the former, Japan's Foreign Minister bluntly declared: "The matter of the lifting of the arms embargo is one of great concern not only for Japan but for the security of East Asia as a whole. We are against a lifting of the arms embargo."⁶

Militarily, Japan's support for Taipei is also

increasing. In March 2004, a team of retired Japanese naval officers began advising the Taiwanese navy.⁷ A year later, another team of retired Japanese military officers took this involvement a step further by actively training Taiwanese forces.⁸ And in August 2005, a multi-partisan group of legislators from the National Defense Committee of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan traveled to Japan for the first time to discuss "issues concerning military cooperation between Taiwan and Japan" with Japanese legislators and retired military officials.⁹

Together these developments demonstrate growing military cooperation between Taiwan and Japan, although the cooperation is on an unofficial basis. China itself acknowledged this when its state councilor publicly declared in April 2005, "We are strongly dissatisfied with some negative tendencies in Japan's recent policies concerning the Taiwan issue, and are especially concerned with deepening Japan-Taiwan ties in security."¹⁰

Furthermore, Japan has shown a growing commitment to maintain peace in the Taiwan Strait. The 1996 US-Japan Joint Declaration simply stated that the United States and Japan would work together in addressing "situations that may emerge

in the areas surrounding Japan and which will have *an important influence on the peace and security of Japan. . . [and] the Asia-Pacific region*" – intentionally leaving the issue of Taiwan ambiguous.¹¹ In the Japan Defense Agency's (JDA) 2002 White Paper, however, Tokyo clarified its stance significantly when it declared that "the issue of China-Taiwan relations, though a domestic issue from the Chinese perspective, is perceived as a security problem which *threatens regional peace and stability*."¹² By doing so, Tokyo explicitly defined the Taiwan Straits issue in the language of the Joint Declaration, thus placing it directly under Japan's purview – and, by association, under the terms of the US-Japan Security Agreement. This stance was further clarified in 2005, when the United States and Japan issued a joint statement that for the first time publicly and explicitly declared the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait to be a "common strategic objective" for both countries.¹³

The Driving Causes Behind Tokyo's Actions

Having identified this recent shift in Japan's policy toward being more supportive of Taiwan's political and security interests, how can we best explain it? What are the driving forces behind Tokyo's recent actions with regard to Taipei?

The evidence suggests that this trend is not being driven by any single cause. Rather, three separate factors appear to be involved: US influence on Japan's foreign policy, Tokyo's own realist interests in the context of China's growing economic and military power, and strong domestic political support for Taiwan.

US Influence: the US-Japan Security Alliance

Perhaps the simplest explanation is that Japan has merely been going along with the actions

of the United States, a key ally whom Tokyo is understandably reluctant to offend. Indeed, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi even declared in 2003, while justifying Japan's decision to back the United States in its war against Iraq, that "maintenance of the US-Japan alliance will now be given priority," thereby highlighting how heavily relations with Washington weigh into Tokyo's policymaking.¹⁴

With regard to Japan's actions toward Taiwan, US influence can perhaps best be seen in Japan's growing commitment to the maintenance of peace in the Taiwan Straits. Washington, and the Bush Administration in particular, has long urged Japan to play a bigger role in maintaining peace and stability in East Asia. Indeed, some US policymakers have even called for developing Japan into the "Britain of the Far East" as a counter to the potential Chinese threat.¹⁵ Thus, Japan's recent steps to assume greater responsibility in the Taiwan Straits by agreeing to bring it under the rubric of the US-Japan security alliance was probably driven to some degree by this pressure from Washington. American influence also likely contributed to Japan's decision to support Taiwan's participation in the WHO – a decision which, as noted above, came only after five years of US pressure to do so.¹⁶

In many other areas Japan's actions have occurred in concert with Washington. For example, Tokyo and Washington explicitly agreed to cooperate in opposing moves by some EU members to end the arms embargo on China,¹⁷ and Tokyo's criticism of China's Anti-Secession Law followed similar condemnations from Washington.¹⁸ Indeed, Japan's growing support for Taiwan's security coincides with increased interest in Taiwan's security demonstrated by the US. In July 2005, for example, the US sent its first active-duty military liaison officer to the

American Institute in Taiwan – the United States’ *de facto* embassy in Taipei – since formal Washington-Taipei diplomatic relations ended in 1979.¹⁹

Given these developments, it seems likely that the actions of Washington, whether by pressure or example, are at least one of the major driving forces behind Tokyo’s recent moves to enhance its political and military support for Taipei.

Realism: Protecting Japan’s Own Security Interests

Although the US remains a major influence, Japan has instrumental reasons of its own to seek stronger Tokyo-Taipei ties. Most notable are fears over China’s growing military might and Japan’s numerous ongoing disputes with China over issues vital to its national security interests. Tokyo’s concern about growing Chinese military power has played a decisive role in shaping Japan’s security policy in recent years. Over the past decade, white papers issued by the JDA and policy guidelines issued by the Cabinet have all demonstrated increasing focus on the Chinese threat. The JDA first touched upon the issue in a 1996 White Paper declaring that “we need to continue to watch Chinese actions, such as modernization of its nuclear forces, naval and air forces; expanding its scope of activities in the high seas; and growing tension in the Taiwan Strait caused by its military exercises.”²⁰ The JDA’s 2000 White Paper, meanwhile, further expanded upon the potential Chinese threat by explicitly noting that Japan lies within China’s missile range.²¹ In 2004, the JDA’s Committee on Defense Capability elevated the warning yet another step when it issued a report outlining three situations under which China might attack Japan – one of which involved a war over the Taiwan Straits.²²

Responding to this cascade of warnings, Japan’s Cabinet adopted the new “National Defense

Program Guideline, FY 2005” in December 2004.

A multi-year plan intended to guide the country’s long-term defense development, the document identifies China as one of Japan’s major defense concerns in the Asia-Pacific region.²³ Moreover, expressing Tokyo’s growing unease over China’s military modernization, the JDA chief publicly called for greater transparency in China’s military spending in June 2005 – a call later echoed by the JDA’s 2005 draft White Paper.²⁴ Furthermore, the 2005 draft White Paper additionally cautioned – in three separate places – of the need to continue closely monitoring China’s rise, declaring that “China has been modernizing its military capabilities focusing on nuclear and missile forces as well as its naval and air forces in recent years. It is necessary to continue to pay close attention to these modernization trends and to carefully evaluate whether the modernization of China’s military forces exceeds the level necessary for its national defense.”²⁵

This growing concern over China appears to be well justified. In terms of military strength, China is clearly on track to overtake Japan – if it has not already. The estimated \$51 billion that China spent on defense in 2002 already easily outstripped Japan’s \$39.5 billion.²⁶ Moreover, China’s military spending is also growing rapidly, with its official defense budget ballooning by some 12.6% in 2005.²⁷

Japan’s regional leadership is also coming under assault by China in other ways. In the economic sphere, Beijing successfully concluded a free trade agreement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in November 2004, more than half a year before Japan-ASEAN free trade negotiations were scheduled to even begin.²⁸

Japan has a number of ongoing and substantive disputes with China, many of which involve crucial strategic concerns. Most significantly, Japan

and China both claim ownership of the Senkaku Islands, which lie in the East China Sea halfway between Japan and Taiwan and which are currently administered by Tokyo. Both China and Japan view the issue as a matter of both national sovereignty and honor. The Senkaku Islands' geographic position in the East China Sea is also crucial in supporting both Japan and China's maritime claims on suspected underwater oil and gas deposits in the region. As a result, both countries have adamantly refused to back down or even to negotiate on the matter.²⁹

This dispute reflects the larger strategic competition between Tokyo and Beijing over energy supplies. Both Japan and China are relatively oil- and gas-poor, which – coupled with China's rapidly growing energy demands – has led Beijing and Tokyo into repeated and very tense conflict over territory and suspected energy reserves. Indeed, after Tokyo granted private companies test-drilling rights to suspected oil fields in the disputed area in July 2005, China's Foreign Ministry declared that "if Japan is bent on doing such things, it will constitute a grave damage to China's rights of sovereignty" – clearly highlighting how seriously both China and Japan treat the matter.³⁰ This Sino-Japanese competition for energy supplies is not restricted to the East China Sea, however. The two countries have clashed elsewhere in their efforts to provide for their respective countries' future energy security. When Russia was planning to build an oil pipeline across Eastern Siberia in early 2004, China and Japan both lobbied intensively for the pipeline route most advantageous to them, with Beijing urging Moscow to terminate the pipeline in northeastern China and Tokyo urging the Russians to terminate the pipeline at the Pacific coast.³¹

Another major dispute revolves around China's stated intention to oppose Japan's bid for

a permanent seat on the UN Security Council – a "cherished goal" which Japan has now pursued for nearly four decades.³² Since any reform in the Security Council's permanent membership would require China's approval, or at least abstention, Beijing's opposition could very well single-handedly and indefinitely prevent Tokyo from joining the Security Council as a permanent member

Given all of these factors, it seems clear that Tokyo has solid reasons of its own to be wary of the recent proposal by some EU member states to lift the EU's arms embargo against China: Japan itself is directly threatened by China's growing might. In addition, these factors suggest that Japan has even more reason than the United States, from an instrumental perspective, to improve political and security relations with Taiwan through such means as dispatching military advisers and trainers to Taipei, supporting Taiwan's participation in the WHO, and increasing its commitment to maintaining peace in the Taiwan Straits. This is because Taiwan, as a potential – if unofficial – ally, would be of great strategic value to Japan in its competition with China for security and influence. Indeed, possibly the worst resolution for Japan with regard to the Taiwan Straits issue would be a Taiwan under mainland Chinese control.

By virtue of geography, Taiwan "provides a gateway for China to enter the Pacific,"³³ thus threatening Japan from the south and east in the event of hostilities. A Chinese-controlled Taiwan could also directly threaten Japan's southern sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), upon which Japan is heavily reliant for trade. In fact, most of Japan's crucial energy imports must travel through the South China Sea and the waters near Taiwan before reaching Japan.³⁴ Indeed, largely because of this, Japan's Self-Defense Forces since 1981 have

“assumed responsibility for the protection of 1,000 nautical miles of SLOCs to its south and southwest” – a region that encompasses the waters around Taiwan.³⁵

On the other hand, as an ally, Taiwan would be very valuable because of its geographic position. Coupled with its large and technologically advanced air force and sizeable modern navy,³⁶ Taiwan’s position would allow it to help contain the Chinese navy in the event of hostilities while also helping to safeguard Japan’s SLOCs through the Western Pacific. In this way, Taipei could contribute considerably towards alleviating Japan’s energy and national security concerns with regard to China, as well as assist Japan’s Self-Defense Forces in their regional operations.

Thus, it is clear that US influence on Japan’s foreign policy is not the sole driving cause behind Tokyo’s recent support for Taipei. Rather, Japan has realist reasons of its own for its decision to side with Taiwan.

Domestic Politics: Growing Goodwill Toward Taipei

While the foregoing two reasons are probably the most influential driving causes behind Japan’s improving political and security support for Taiwan, Japan’s own domestic politics has also clearly played a role in influencing the direction of Tokyo’s policy toward Taipei. Popular views of Taiwan among Japanese, and popular views of Japan among Taiwanese are among the most positive in Asia.³⁷ This is important because if democratic theory is correct, in a functioning electoral democracy such as Japan this bilateral goodwill at the popular level will eventually be reflected at the legislative and executive levels. Indeed, the evidence clearly suggests that this has been the case. Both ruling and opposition politicians from Japan and Taiwan regularly

exchange unofficial meetings. Both ruling pan-green Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) leader (and now President) Chen Shui-bian and opposition pan-blue People’s First Party (PFP) leader James Soong have visited Japan and met with top political leaders. In fact, when Chen traveled to Tokyo in July 1999, he was granted access to top Cabinet officials, including then-director of the Japan Defense Agency Norota Hosei and Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo.³⁸

The strength of political ties between Taiwan and Japan can best be observed in the influence of the so-called “Taiwan lobby” in the Japanese Diet: well over 300 members of the Diet – including several Cabinet ministers – out of a total of 722 have joined one of several Japan-Taiwan friendship associations. Nor is this support for Taiwan merely an example of political partisanship. Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), and many of Japan’s smaller parties are all represented in the Diet Members’ Dialogue Group on Japan-China Relations, one of the biggest of such Japan-Taiwan friendship associations.³⁹

As a result, some commentators have noted that the “Taiwan lobby” in the Japanese Diet is already more influential than its counterpart in the US Congress.⁴⁰ Furthermore, younger legislators in the Japanese Diet tend to be more pro-Taiwan, and “as older politicians and officials who oversaw the 1972 China-Japan normalization fade from the scene,” these younger politicians are increasingly gaining influence.⁴¹

This strong and growing support for Taiwan in the Diet – and therefore among the Cabinet as well, since in parliamentary systems such as Japan’s, the Cabinet is drawn directly from the Diet – helps further explain Japan’s overall movement towards stronger political and military ties with Taiwan.

This support clearly assisted the aforementioned August 2005 visit of Taiwanese National Defense Committee legislators to Japan in order to discuss closer Japan-Taiwan military cooperation, where Taiwanese legislators met with several members of the Japanese Diet as part of the visit.⁴²

Thus, although it is difficult to say just how important Japan's growing popular and elite goodwill towards Taipei has been, it seems clear that this domestic political factor is indeed a third driving force pushing Tokyo's foreign policy in Taipei's direction.

The Future of Tokyo-Taipei Relations

These three driving forces suggest that the recent improving trend in Japan-Taiwan relations is much more stable than might otherwise be expected. This is due to two main reasons. First, the improving trend does not rest on any single factor that could suddenly shift, and second, the evidence suggests that all of these three driving forces will, if anything, only strengthen with time.

The fact that the recent trend toward closer Tokyo-Taipei relations rests on multiple causes strongly suggests that this trend will remain stable for the foreseeable future. Given the wide base on which the growing Tokyo-Taipei cooperation rests, it is unlikely that a shift in any one factor will single-handedly derail the strengthening relationship. For example, even if US policy toward Taiwan were suddenly to backtrack with the inauguration of a new administration in Washington, the threat Japan faces from China, together with the existence of a large and influential pro-Taiwan lobby in Japan's Diet and Cabinet, would still help to push the Japan-Taiwan relationship forward.

Moreover, the fact that these trends rest heavily

upon Japan's own realist interests is particularly important. After all, if realist theory is correct, a country's national interests should be the most accurate long-term predictor of its future actions. If true, this would bode very well for the future of the Japan-Taiwan relationship.

Furthermore, recent trends toward closer Tokyo-Taipei political and military cooperation will likely remain stable for another reason: all three driving factors behind these trends appear likely to strengthen, rather than weaken, with time.

US Influence on Japanese Foreign Policy

With regard to US influence on Japan's foreign policy, Washington has shown no signs of deviating from its stance of maintaining support for Taiwan. In fact, as demonstrated above, in recent years US-Taiwan relations have steadily strengthened, with Washington gradually upgrading its relations with Taipei to include high-level military exchanges. These have included sending delegations to Taiwan to advise and observe Taiwan's annual military exercises,⁴³ establishing direct secure communications between the US and Taiwanese military commands,⁴⁴ relaxing restrictions on US military officers visiting Taiwan,⁴⁵ allowing top Taiwanese military officials to visit the US to discuss policy issues with American officials,⁴⁶ and most recently, posting an active-duty army colonel to Taipei for the first time since the US terminated formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 1979.⁴⁷ Additionally, as noted earlier, Washington has steadily pushed Japan to play an ever-greater security role in the region.⁴⁸

It is admittedly difficult to predict how the US presidential elections in 2008 might affect these trends, as it is far too early to reasonably predict who the front-running candidates will be, let alone their foreign policy agendas with regard to the

Taiwan issue. However, the evidence available now clearly points in a positive direction with regard to the future US-Taiwan, and, by association, Japan-Taiwan relationship.

Protecting Japan's Own Security Interests

Japan's own realist interests with regard to China's growing economic and military power will only push Japan further toward Taipei in the years ahead. As noted earlier, China's growth rate is phenomenal, and shows no signs of slowing down. China has maintained an average 9.3 percent GDP growth since 1979,⁴⁹ and its military spending has also grown with a commensurate breakneck speed of 11.5 percent on average over the past decade⁵⁰, which has in turn funded a massive modernization of the People Liberation Army's (PLA). The centerpiece of this program is an effort by Beijing to expand its naval influence out to the "first island chain" – a series of islands in the Western Pacific stretching in a broad arc from the Kurile Islands, through Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines, all the way to Indonesia – and eventually develop a blue-water navy.⁵¹ Clearly, the potential threat Japan will face from China will only increase for the foreseeable future, as an increasingly modern and capable PLA Navy puts this plan into action. Indeed, the JDA's newest white paper explicitly pointed to China's effort to expand its naval influence and develop a modern blue-water navy as a major threat to Japan's security.⁵²

Nor does it seem likely that the many substantive and threatening Sino-Japanese disputes will be resolved in the foreseeable future. In fact, many of them are liable to worsen over the next few years. China's energy needs, for example, are projected to grow at a 4-5 percent annual rate through 2015 – an enormous rate compared to the approximately

1 percent annual energy demand growth rate for industrialized countries⁵³ – which will in turn likely intensify the Sino-Japanese competition over access to energy in the East China Sea and elsewhere over the next decade. Moreover, since this competition over energy is closely linked to the Sino-Japanese dispute over ownership of the Senkaku Islands, that sensitive territorial sovereignty issue will also likely intensify in proportion to China's increasing energy demands.⁵⁴

Thus, if anything, the threat Japan faces from China will increase significantly over the next decade. As a result, Japan has even more instrumental reasons to build closer political and security relations with Taipei, as well as assume a larger role in maintaining peace in the Taiwan Straits.

Japan's Domestic Politics

Japan's domestic political situation will also likely lend itself to continued improvement in Japan-Taiwan ties. As noted above, younger politicians in Japan's Diet tend to be more pro-Taiwan than their elders.⁵⁵ As these older legislators retire, the younger politicians stand to gain even greater influence in Japan's foreign policymaking – a trend that bodes well for the future of the Tokyo-Taipei relationship. Moreover, the fact that Taiwan maintains broad support in Japan's Diet from both the ruling LDP and the main opposition DPJ⁵⁶ suggests that this improving trend will continue regardless of which party comes to power in future elections.⁵⁷

The recent Sino-Japanese energy and sovereignty disputes have also fueled strong popular anger in Japan against China.⁵⁸ Riding this wave of discontent, LDP Secretary-General Shinzo Abe – a leading advocate of hard-line anti-China policies who has publicly supported Japan coming to Taiwan's aid in the event of Chinese aggression – is now seen as one of the

leading candidates to succeed Koizumi as Japan's next prime minister,⁵⁹ a possibility that would likely strengthen Japan-Taiwan ties in the future.

Conclusion

On both the political and security dimensions, Taiwan-Japan ties are unambiguously improving, and all available evidence suggests that this trend

will continue well into the foreseeable future. Japan has multiple reasons for supporting Taipei, including instrumental realist reasons of its own. All of these driving forces will likely only strengthen with time. All of this suggests that Japan is clearly moving toward becoming a closer political partner and security ally for a future Taiwan.



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