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Enhancing US-Japan-Taiwan Cooperation/Deterrence Efforts for Potential Taiwan Contingencies

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NPS NRP Executive Summary

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Period of Performance: 10/23/2021 – 10/22/2022

Report Date: 02/10/2023 | Project Number: NPS-22-N249-A

Naval Postgraduate School, National Security Affairs (NSA)



NAVAL RESEARCH PROGRAM
NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

ENHANCING US-JAPAN-TAIWAN
COOPERATION/DETERRENCE EFFORTS FOR POTENTIAL
TAIWAN CONTINGENCIES
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Summary

This project examines the recent evolution of U.S.-Japan alliance coordination in potential Taiwan contingencies and offers recommendations on how to enhance it. The U.S.-Japan alliance remains one of the strongest pillars for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, but ambiguities in the policies of both countries regarding responses in Taiwan contingencies and insufficient coordination between the U.S., Japan, and Taiwan may undermine deterrence and encourage beliefs in Beijing that military operations may succeed. As COVID restrictions on travel prevented conducting discussions with Japanese officials and experts and American officers in Japan, this project has relied on scholarship of experts and gathered data from official sources and news coverage. The project has three main findings: 1) despite new signals from Japan about being serious in its military modernization and new focus on the Taiwan issue, the Japanese official position remains ambiguous in terms of whether or not it would grant access to U.S. bases and if (and how) it would directly participate in military responses to a Taiwan contingency; 2) although Japan remains sensitive to directly antagonizing China, the growing fears over an attack on Taiwan have opened up more possibilities for official and unofficial discussions of how to improve coordination, while maintaining a division of labor approach; 3) Japan's response will be shaped by domestic legal and political judgments, which may constrain or delay Japan's response. These findings suggest that even though Japan has embarked on a new military modernization and there is greater interest in Taiwan issues, which does provide opportunities for enhanced cooperation and coordination, Japan's policy ambiguity and legal and political constraints on support may delay Japan's decision and result in lower levels of military participation than many planners currently assume.

Keywords: *Taiwan, China, United States, Japan, U.S.-Japan alliance, deterrence, alliance, bases, naval diplomacy*

Background

China's military modernization and regional aggression, combined with a return to power of the more independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party government in Taiwan, has led to greater tension and possibility of war across the Taiwan Strait. With the balance of military power shifting in China's direction, and concerns that Xi Jinping may be growing impatient, many experts have voiced concern that China is more likely to use force against Taiwan in the near-term. Japan is a major regional power with shared interests in preventing Chinese regional domination and the U.S.-Japan alliance is one of the cornerstones in maintaining stability and enhancing deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. Despite the importance of US military bases in Japan for deterrence and warfighting in Taiwan contingencies, the role of Japan and the U.S.-Japan alliance in Taiwan contingencies remains understudied. As the challenge from China becomes greater, ambiguity and uncertainty in the role of the U.S.-Japan alliance in Taiwan contingencies may undermine deterrence across the Taiwan Strait. To enhance deterrence across the Taiwan Strait and to strengthen coordination in the event of a crisis or conflict, this project examines ways to enhance U.S.-Japan-Taiwan coordination.



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This project aims to identify ways to enhance and deepen U.S.-Japan-Taiwan coordination in response to potential military contingencies in the Taiwan Strait. To achieve this objective, the project addresses the following questions:

What is the evolution of and current role of the U.S.-Japan alliance in Taiwan contingencies?

What are the best areas to pursue greater coordination between the U.S., Japan, and Taiwan in Taiwan contingencies?

What are the greatest impediments to deeper cooperation and coordination?

The data collected and analyzed for this project builds on the existing scholarship on the U.S.-Japan alliance and Taiwan military contingencies. This project will also draw on evidence of new official and unofficial discussions and debates in Japan about Taiwan that have been sparked by greater Japanese concerns about the threat from China and a potential attack on Taiwan. The biggest methodological weakness and challenge for this project is that COVID travel restrictions prevented me from taking a research trip to Japan to have discussions with Japanese officials and experts and U.S. military officers operating in Japan. Hopefully future projects and research will allow such travel, which will produce more complete data and findings, and lead to improved policy recommendations.

Findings and Conclusions

This project has three main findings.

First, despite new signals from Japan about being serious in its military modernization and new focus on the Taiwan issue, the Japanese official position remains ambiguous in terms of whether it would grant the U.S. access to American bases and if (and how) it would directly participate in military responses to a Taiwan contingency. Although American and Japanese leaders referred to Taiwan in an April 2021 joint statement, for the first time since 1969, this did not represent a radical shift in position. For a Japan that wants to maximize benefits from relations with both America and China, this would be the true “nightmare scenario” for Japan.

Second, although Japan remains sensitive to antagonizing China, the growing fears over an attack on Taiwan have opened up more possibilities for official and unofficial discussions of how to improve coordination, while maintaining a division of labor approach. The division of labor approach would prevent Japan from directly attacking China in combat but would allow Japan to support and enable American combat efforts. Beyond granting access to use of bases, Japan’s defense of its islands to its Southwest, providing intelligence on Chinese aircraft, surface ships, and submarines would enhance U.S. combat power in defense of Taiwan.

Third, Japan’s response will be shaped by domestic legal and political judgments, which may constrain or delay Japan’s response. Whether a Chinese attack on Taiwan is judged to be a “survival threatening situation” or merely an “important influence situation,” will determine how much assistance Japan could legally provide. It is possible, and even likely, that there would be considerable domestic debate within



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Japan, delaying Japan's decision on granting access to bases and on whether to participate in the defense of Taiwan.

This project has directly informed how the U.S. Navy and OPNAV N3/N5 should incorporate its most important ally in the Indo-Pacific in its planning for the most challenging high-end contingency. The following recommendations will enhance alliance coordination and inform future official naval engagements, discussions, and exercises with Japan.

The United States and Japan should deepen their understanding of “prior consultation,” as this will be required for U.S. military access to U.S. bases. What are the mechanisms and content for such consultation?

Given the importance of rapid reaction in a Taiwan contingency, even though Japan's level of support and participation is a political decision that will be made by the prime minister, the U.S. and Japan should establish chains of command for a division of labor that will allow them to coordinate a response at the strategic, tactical, and operational level.

Although much of the military planning for Taiwan contingencies “plans in” Japan, U.S. planners need to consider the possibility of a delayed response or lower levels of Japanese assistance.

With the ambiguity of Japan's commitment, military planners and military analysts should employ a spectrum approach including a minimum level of Japanese support and a maximum level of Japanese support, rather than assuming Japan will completely support the United States.

Recommendations for Further Research

Given China's continued military modernization and the strong likelihood of China's intimidation of Taiwan, there will continue to be an urgent need to deepen our understanding of the role of Japan in a potential Taiwan contingency and improve deterrence of China's use of force. Moreover, with the lifting of COVID restrictions, further research can address some of these issues by meeting with Japanese officials and experts and U.S. military officers in Japan. Several areas of further research and focus include:

Tracking future evolution of Japan's understanding of the China threat, the importance of Taiwan, and debates and new policy statements on the Taiwan situation and the role of Japan and the U.S.-Japan alliance in managing it.

Examining the implementation of Japan's recently announced plans for military modernization and increased defense spending.

Given that Japan's level of support and participation will largely be determined by political leaders and not military leaders, following the evolution of views on China and Taiwan amongst these leaders is



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critical. Are there differing views and factions within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party? How do other political parties view the issue of Taiwan and military involvement? What is the level of public support in Japan for Japan allowing U.S. access to bases and Japanese military involvement?

The future trajectories of Taiwan-Japan relations also needs to be studied. Although the ruling Democratic Progressive Party is most important currently, members of the Guomintang are powerful in the legislature and could return to power in future elections. Taiwan public views on Taiwan-Japan relations and the potential military involvement in a Taiwan contingency should also be examined.

As the main goal of this research and recommendations is to more effectively deter China from attacking Taiwan, Chinese views on the level of coordination between the U.S. and Japan in a potential Taiwan contingency is supremely important and needs to be analyzed, though it is difficult to study directly. Although China has complained about Japan's return to "militarism," how do Chinese experts assess the level of coordination in the alliance and the likelihood of Japanese involvement in a potential Taiwan contingency? Do they view recent changes in Japanese views on Taiwan as representing big changes or just empty talk?

