“Japan, Taiwan, and the ‘One China’ Framework after 50 Years”

Adam P. Liff

Article manuscript conditionally accepted for publication in the peer-reviewed academic journal *The China Quarterly*. Citation is allowed, but please avoid direct quotations (as wording may change). For the manuscript’s most up-to-date status, please check here.

**Suggested Citation:**
Adam P. Liff (accepted subject to minor revisions), “Japan, Taiwan, and the ‘One China’ Framework after 50 Years,” *The China Quarterly*.

**ABSTRACT**
This study analyzes the “One China” framework’s significance for Japan-Taiwan relations since Japan and the People’s Republic established official diplomatic ties in 1972. Drawing on Chinese-, Japanese-, and English-language sources, it examines developments since the breakthrough normalization communique and ‘Japan Formula,’ which enabled Tokyo to normalize relations—six years before Washington—without recognizing Beijing’s claim of sovereignty over Taiwan and while maintaining robust, if unofficial, ties with Taipei thenceforth. Highlighting distinctions between Beijing’s self-defined “One China principle” and Japan’s ambiguous official position and subsequent effective policies, it assesses the incremental but practically significant evolution of Japan-Taiwan relations over the past half-century—despite Tokyo’s unchanging 1972 stance on Taiwan’s status. In the 21st century, ever-closer ties have proven strikingly resilient to political transitions in Japan and Taiwan, China’s growing power and pushback from Beijing, and worsening cross-Strait frictions. Beyond Japan-Taiwan relations and theoretical debates on “One China,” this article’s findings carry significant implications for cross-Strait dynamics and PRC-Japan-U.S. relations.
In its authoritative 2020 *Diplomatic Bluebook*, the Government of Japan (GOJ) identifies Taiwan as “an extremely crucial partner and an important friend, with which Japan shares universal values such as freedom, democracy, basic human rights, and the rule of law, and enjoys close economic relations and people-to-people exchanges.”¹ This new language marks only the latest instance of GOJ’s official reframing of Taiwan’s importance to Japan over the past decade. Recent shifts in Tokyo’s engagement with, and rhetoric and policy toward, Taiwan are especially striking when baselined against Japan’s officially unchanging 50-year-old position on “One China”—established when Tokyo switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan (the Republic of China; ROC) to the People’s Republic (PRC) in 1972.

Recent shifts are subtle, but significant. As recently as 2012, GOJ’s *Diplomatic Bluebook* had relegated Taiwan to status as merely an “important region” [emphasis added] with which Japan has close economic relations.”² Yet by 2015 it began implicitly granting Taiwan status and agency as a distinct political entity, rather than just geographical space; upgraded Taiwan’s political and diplomatic importance to that of a “crucial partner and an important friend,” rather than just an economy; and newly emphasized shared “fundamental values”—language theretofore reserved primarily for Japan’s U.S. treaty ally and a select group of advanced democracies/U.S. treaty allies.³ In short, the past decade has witnessed GOJ quietly but authoritatively upgrading its official conception of Taiwan and Taiwan’s significance to Japan. Notably, its *Bluebooks* have done so despite unfailingly also including boilerplate reiterating the relationship’s “non-governmental” nature—in accordance with GOJ’s unchanging official 1972 position on “One China.”

Beyond official Japanese government rhetoric about Taiwan’s importance, recent years have also witnessed significant expansions of practical cooperation and symbolic signaling. The net effect has been a further de facto upgrade of the nominally unofficial Japan-Taiwan relationship. Over just the past five years, for example, Japan’s leaders have sent unprecedented congratulatory messages to Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen (2016-present) upon her two electoral victories;⁴ dispatched the highest-level government representative to visit Taipei officially since 1972;⁵ and upgraded the 1970s-era name for Japan’s de facto embassy in Taiwan from the conspicuously

---

¹ MOFA 2020a
² MOFA 2012, 52
³ MOFA 2015, 41. 2020 saw “extremely” added before “crucial partner” and “fundamental values” changed to “universal values.” MOFA 2020a
⁴ MOFA 2016, 2020b
⁵ Shimizu 2020, 271-72
vague “Interchange Association” to the “Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association”—which one leading expert calls “the most significant breakthrough in their relationship since 1972.” GOJ has also enhanced and expanded coordination on Taiwan policy with its U.S. ally—Taiwan’s and Japan’s most important political partner and de facto security guarantor—and other partners, through new initiatives such as the Global Cooperation and Training Framework, which Japan formally joined in 2019.

Importantly, the recent deepening of bilateral ties and Japan’s support for Taiwan does not unfold in a political or strategic vacuum, and occurs despite the PRC being Japan’s top trading partner. Amidst a regional power shift, Tokyo and Washington have, inter alia, identified the PRC’s perceived unilateral changes to the status quo and coercive economic policies as national and economic security threats, expressed concerns about a deepening competition between democracy and authoritarianism, and openly advocate for “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” concepts that implicitly (or, in some cases, explicitly) identify democratic Taiwan as an essential partner. Despite opposition from Beijing, during the 50th year since Japan-PRC normalization—2021—GOJ joined Washington and other major U.S. democratic allies in expressing both support for Taiwan’s “meaningful participation” in the World Health Organization and membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and concerns about “peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait,” and “encouraged the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues.” Japan’s 2021 defense white paper noted that “stability of Taiwan's situation is important for both Japan's security and the stability of the international community,” and said Japan must “pay closer attention with a greater sense of crisis than ever before.” Beyond the deepening of economic, popular, and political ties, the link between Taiwan’s security and that of both Japan and the wider region has attracted unprecedented political and media attention in Japan over the past year.

The recent incremental deepening of Japan-Taiwan ties carries significant implications beyond the “unofficial” relationship, and for China’s and East Asian international relations more
generally. Since 1949, no issue has proved more politically sensitive and potentially incendiary for Beijing than Taiwan’s status, which the PRC (henceforth, interchangeable with “China”) has never governed but which it asserts must be unified with the Mainland, by force if necessary.\footnote{NPC 2005} In Beijing, “the Taiwan issue is perceived as the most uncertain and the most serious problem facing China-Japan-US relations.”\footnote{Matsuda 2010, 123-24; 134} Beijing’s leaders consider Tokyo the second most important external player after Washington in cross-Strait dynamics—a view which has consolidated this century.\footnote{Sun 2001} For its part, Taiwan relies heavily on extensive economic, political, and other ties to Japan and on the U.S.-Japan alliance as a deterrent against feared PRC aggression, and is itself a major variable in U.S.-Japan-PRC relations. Japan’s westernmost territory is only ~70 miles from Taiwan and the U.S. military’s large presence at bases in Japan, especially in nearby Okinawa, all but ensures Japan’s critical role in any U.S.-PRC contingency.\footnote{Liff 2022b} Against this backdrop, it is no wonder that the recent deepening of Japan-Taiwan relations has attracted significant ire in Beijing.\footnote{Waijiaobu 2020a}

On the eve of the 1972 Japan-PRC normalization communique’s 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary, this study critically reflects on Japan’s effective interpretation and operationalization of “One China” since it switched official recognition to Beijing, especially how it manifests in Tokyo’s evolving policies toward Taiwan in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. An important case in its own right, the historical evolution and vicissitudes of Japan’s approach today also carry significant implications for scholars’ understanding of the past, present, and potential future operation of the “One China” framework in international politics more generally (the focus of this proposed special issue), cross-Strait dynamics, and China’s foreign relations. Taiwan’s emergence as a liberal democracy, coupled with changing power balances and worsening political, security, and economic frictions across the Strait and between the PRC and the U.S. and key democratic allies and partners, further motivate this study. After all, the extent and nature of support Taiwan receives from, and its substantive exchange and cooperation with, Japan and other major democratic powers—or lack thereof—are crucial variables certain to shape the future of cross-Strait ties and China’s foreign relations.

\footnote{NPC 2005} \footnote{Matsuda 2010, 123-24; 134} \footnote{Sun 2001} \footnote{Liff 2022b} \footnote{Waijiaobu 2020a}
The remainder of this article is organized as follows: an opening section briefly introduces Beijing’s “One China principle” and the “myth of consensus” that has allowed it to persist as an informal institution of international politics; one which has shaped but not determined Japan’s effective “One China” policy since 1972. Next, the article surveys Japan-ROC/Taiwan relations since 1945, with a particular focus on the period following the official severance of diplomatic relations and major developments in the 21st century. A penultimate section analyzes contemporary challenges for, and the uncertain future of, Japan’s “One China” policy. A final section concludes.

Beijing’s “One China principle” vs. Others’ “One China” policies

As discussed in the proposed special issue’s lead article, Beijing defines its “One-China principle” (yi ge zhongguo yuanze) as “there is only one China in the world, Taiwan is a part of China and the government of the PRC is the sole legal government representing the whole of China.” Though the PRC has never governed Taiwan, seven-plus decades after Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists (KMT) fled to and forcefully established a new ROC capital in Taipei in 1949, CCP leaders continue to define Taiwan as an “inseparable part of China” whose unification with the PRC, by force if necessary, is a “core interest,” and part of a “historic trend of national rejuvenation and national strengthening […] that cannot be stopped by anyone or any force.”

In support of this goal, Beijing today frequently asserts that its “One China principle” is a “basic norm of international relations and universal consensus in international society.” Furthermore, its rhetoric implies—often misleadingly—that Japan (and its U.S. ally) have agreed to it. Beijing openly castigates any party perceived to be violating their (alleged) commitment to said “principle.” For example, Beijing publicly lambasted Japan for renaming its de facto embassy in Taiwan in 2017, expressing “strong opposition” against “any attempt to create a framework of ‘one China, one Taiwan’ or ‘two Chinas’.” It called on Tokyo to “adhere to the principles set forth in the Japan-China Joint Communique and honor the promises it has made to China, uphold the ‘one China’ principle and refrain from sending false signals to Taiwan and the international community, thereby causing new problems to China-Japan relations.”

---

18 Taiwan Affairs Office 2004; [REDACTED] the proposed special issue
19 Li 2020
20 Waijiaobu 2020a
21 Waijiaobu 2016; Xinhua 2017
Yet the empirical record demonstrates clearly that, rather than the “universal consensus” that the PRC government claims, Beijing’s “One China principle” is best understood as the PRC/CCP’s self-asserted claim of sovereignty over Taiwan.\textsuperscript{22} The U.S.’ “One China” policy and forward-leaning engagement of Taiwan after 1979 are the most famous example evincing a disconnect between Beijing’s position and others’. However, Japan’s vague, officially static 1972 position on Taiwan’s status, together with its dynamic effective policies toward Taiwan since the 1970s, are another (see next section).

The lack of “universal consensus” and demonstrable subjectivity of “One China’s” definition—Beijing’s unilateral assertions to the contrary—is also observable beyond the cases of the U.S. and Japan. Today, this contestation is most conspicuous across the Taiwan Strait, where the CCP, the KMT, and Taiwan’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) disagree fundamentally.\textsuperscript{23} Meanwhile, the percentage of people in Taiwan supporting eventual unification has plummeted to historic lows.\textsuperscript{24} Diverse and dynamic policies across Europe, and increasingly extensive engagement of Taiwan by some major European powers today, are also salient examples.\textsuperscript{25} So, too, are variegated national responses to Taiwan’s effort to contribute to the global fight against COVID-19.\textsuperscript{26} Simply put, since 1949 the meaning, significance, and acceptability of Beijing’s self-defined “One China principle” has always been contested outside the formal boundaries of CCP-administered territory. There is no global consensus on the question of “One China.”\textsuperscript{27}

Yet contrarian PRC claims of a myth of consensus to shape international discourse in its favor abound.\textsuperscript{28} For example, a seminal 2004 PRC white paper on “One China” asserts that GOJ agrees to Beijing’s interpretation of the “One China principle” and that every country with which the PRC has normalized diplomatic relations shares Beijing’s position on Taiwan in principle and in practice.\textsuperscript{29} The reality, of course, is that a diverse array of official and effective interpretations of “One China” exist globally. To be sure, the PRC’s joint communiques with some foreign governments “recognize” Beijing’s claim of sovereignty over Taiwan unambiguously. However,
others are ambiguous; or do not even mention Taiwan. Furthermore, separate from the question of a foreign government’s official position on Taiwan’s status; the empirical record evinces considerable variability—both across cases and over time—in how each country chooses to operationalize its official position in terms of concrete policies vis-à-vis and the degree and extent of engagement with Taipei. The Japan case demonstrates this clearly.

Japan’s Dynamic “One China” Policy (and Relations with Taiwan)

Since the Chinese Civil War effectively ended in 1949, Japan has emerged as the most significant external player in cross-Strait relations after the United States. When GOJ switched official diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1972, it did not give in to PRC pressure to recognize Beijing’s “One China principle” as it relates to Taiwan. Furthermore, Tokyo’s breakthrough “Japan Formula” enabled de facto diplomatic representation in Taipei and Tokyo, which in turn facilitated practically significant, if officially “unofficial,” ties with Taiwan. Far from being frozen by some putative consensus in 1972, and especially following the denouement of late-Cold War U.S.-Japan-PRC anti-Soviet alignment, Taiwan’s democratization, and deepening concerns in Tokyo about the PRC’s trajectory and cross-Strait balance of power, Tokyo’s effective “One China” policy has demonstrated significant flexibility since 1949.

Japan’s effective “One China” policy in the early Cold War basically had two defining elements: (1) a de facto “Two Chinas” policy; and (2) efforts to “separate politics from economics” (zhengjing fenli). The former vaguely addressed the political aspect of the “One China” issue—the PRC’s and ROC’s intractable positions on “One China”—while the latter sought to facilitate Japan’s mutually-beneficial economic engagement with “both” Chinas simultaneously. Despite officially recognizing only one “China” at a time, both before and after 1972 Japan pursued a flexible policy toward the “other.” Though Japan’s leaders have exercised far greater political agency in formulating Tokyo’s effective “One China” policy than is often appreciated, the effective implementation and viability of Japan’s approach has also been powerfully shaped by its regional strategic environment—vicissitudes in U.S.-PRC relations, above all.

30 Drun 2017
31 [REDACTED], the proposed special issue
32 Soeya 2001

Though Japan relinquished all claim to Taiwan after its 1945 surrender, extensive links with its former colony and relative Japanese-language fluency on Taiwan provided ballast to Japan-ROC relations during the early Cold War. After the end of the Allied Occupation in 1952, U.S. pressure led newly sovereign Japan’s leaders to sign a separate peace treaty with and recognize the ROC as “China.” Yet Tokyo insisted that the treaty apply only to territory under the KMT’s control, which excluded the mainland. Following the Korean War and the consolidation of U.S.-centered “hub-and-spokes” bilateral alliance system, by the mid-1950s Japan was closely aligned with the U.S.’ early Cold War strategy focused on containment of international communism. Two major consequences were Tokyo’s official recognition of and close links with the staunchly anti-communist ROC and non-recognition of the CCP-led PRC.33

In stark contrast to Washington, however, Tokyo pursued meaningful engagement with both Chinas long before Nixon’s landmark 1971 announcement of U.S.-China rapprochement. As scholar Ishii Akira later noted, “every postwar Japanese government’s policy toward China has been, with minor differences, basically an unofficial policy of “Two Chinas” or “One China, One Taiwan.””34 Many Japanese leaders were eager to engage both “Chinas” to the extent that Cold War geopolitics, Mao-era volatility within the PRC, and Beijing’s and Taipei’s irreconcilable “One China principle(s)” allowed. Regardless of ideological considerations, geographical proximity and economic interests motivated postwar Japan’s informal exchange with the mainland in the 1950s and 1960s.

This approach was consistent with GOJ’s post-war diplomatic preference for “separating politics from economics.” As Soeya sums up Japan’s “de facto ‘Two Chinas’” policy, Tokyo wished to “support[] Taiwan’s existence” through U.S.-Japan security ties, but believed strict ideological containment of China was not in Japan’s interests. Accordingly, Tokyo sought to “have good relations,” and benefit from economic exchange, with both Beijing and Taipei.35 Thus, despite lacking official relations with Beijing between 1952 and 1972, thousands of Japanese citizens and scores of Diet members visited the PRC. The two sides also engaged in increasingly

33 Kokubun 2013, Ch.1
34 Takahashi and Wakayama 2003, 70
35 Soeya 2001, 137
extensive “friendly trade” through “quasi-governmental agencies.” By 1964, Japan’s trade with the PRC exceeded that with the ROC. By 1970, Japan had become Beijing’s top trading partner. Nevertheless, based on their own respective interpretations of the “One China principle,” throughout the Cold War a formalization of “two Chinas” was anathema for both Beijing and Taipei. After geopolitical winds shifted and Richard Nixon “shocked” the world (and Japanese leaders) in July 1971 by announcing plans to become the first U.S. president to visit the PRC, however, the door to Japan-PRC normalization was unlocked. In determining what came next, Japanese leaders demonstrated quiet, but considerable, agency. Just seven months after Nixon’s historic February 1972 visit and two months after taking office, Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei and Zhou Enlai signed the Japan-PRC normalization communique in Beijing.

1972-1992: Japan/(U.S.)-PRC “Golden Age” and Japan’s “Unofficial” Ties with Taiwan

Tokyo moved with remarkable speed, normalizing diplomatic relations with Beijing more than six years faster than Washington. Importantly, it did so while both refusing PRC demands to fully recognize its “One China principle” and successfully maintaining extensive, if “unofficial,” links with Taiwan. Though vague and controversial in both capitals, the effective compromise between Tokyo and Beijing further established 1972 as a historic inflection point in the Cold War in Asia, set powerful precedents for subsequent U.S.-PRC normalization negotiations. It also contributed to what Vogel calls a two-decade “golden age” of Japan-U.S.-PRC strategic and economic cooperation. The logic of anti-Soviet strategic alignment, coupled with Beijing’s desire for a massive influx of Japanese investment and trade under Deng-era “reform and opening up,” disincentivized any effort by Beijing to “rock the boat” on “One China” or Japan’s continued engagement of Taiwan. Consequently, in those critical first two decades the post-1972 effective status quo of Japan’s official recognition of the PRC, non-recognition of Beijing’s claim to sovereignty over Taiwan, and significant, if unofficial, ties with Taipei, consolidated.

The 1972 Communique, Japan’s official position on “One China,” and the “Japan Formula”

Nixon’s 1972 visit to China and the resulting U.S.-PRC Shanghai Communique are widely credited as marking a “week that changed the world.” Nevertheless, Washington did not actually achieve diplomatic normalization with Beijing until 1979. In contrast, Tokyo and Beijing signed

36 Vogel 2019, 315-6; 323
37 Vogel 2019, chap. 10
their normalization communique on September 29, 1972—just seven months after Nixon left China. Two aspects of Japan-PRC normalization were especially significant in contributing to the ambiguity central to the “One China” framework, and Japan’s evolving effective operationalization of it, in the fifty years since.

First, Beijing agreed to normalize relations with Tokyo despite GOJ’s refusal to recognize two of Beijing’s three “principles” for diplomatic restoration—all of which centered on Taiwan:

1. The PRC government is the sole legal government of China.
2. Taiwan is an inalienable part of the PRC.
3. The Japan-ROC Peace Treaty is illegal, void, and should be denounced.\(^{38}\)

Japan accepted the first principle, but took no explicit position on the second and third, refusing to comment on Taiwan’s legal status.\(^{39}\) Thus, in the 1972 Japan-PRC normalization communique, GOJ officially “recognizes” (chengren) the PRC as “the sole legal Government of China,” but states merely that it “fully understands and respects” (chongfen lijie he zunzhong) Beijing’s position on Taiwan.\(^{40}\) By normalizing diplomatic relations without recognizing the PRC’s position on Taiwan, Japanese negotiators adopted an ambiguous position that, especially when combined with vague stances of other major players—most significantly, its U.S. ally—demonstrates the lack of international consensus on Taiwan’s status. In subsequent decades, this ambiguity enabled both robust, mutually-beneficial Japan-PRC cooperation and remarkable flexibility in Japan’s effective policies vis-à-vis Taiwan.

A second foundational pillar of Japan’s effective “One China” policy after 1972 resulted from Beijing’s tacit acceptance of GOJ’s insistence on maintaining extensive, if “unofficial,” links with Taipei.\(^{41}\) Japan’s innovative approach, often referred to as the “Japan Formula,” drew on its flexible engagement of the PRC before 1972. It helped address the “‘Two Chinas’ dilemma” through a creative framework that enabled substantive relations with Taiwan through nominally non-governmental actors and economic, cultural, and other private—officially non-political—

\(^{38}\) Ogata 1988, 44
\(^{39}\) He 2017
\(^{40}\) Waijiaobu 1972, Lest one misinterpret the ambiguity of “fully understand and respect,” a U.S. analogue is revealing: In 1982, President Reagan used identical phrasing to explain his position on PRC opposition to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. (State Department 1985, 1028). U.S. arms sales to Taiwan continue to this day.
\(^{41}\) Takahashi and Wakayama 2003, 69
Japan and Taiwan established permanent, if “unofficial,” de facto embassies. To avoid a brazen violation of the myth of consensus on “One China,” however, both institutions were labeled euphemistically: the “East Asian Relations Association” represented Taipei in Tokyo, and the “Interchange Association” represented Tokyo in Taipei.

Though some Japanese business and political leaders continued to covet official relations with both Chinas, the mutual incompatibility of the ROC’s and PRC’s “One China principle(s)” made that impossible. However, Beijing’s tacit acceptance of the Japan Formula allowed it to consolidate as a core element of the “One China” framework in practice after 1972, both in Japan’s case and in the international community. In fact, other countries ultimately followed suit. Remarkably, to Henry Kissinger and other U.S. leaders’ reported chagrin, Beijing demanded that the U.S. follow Japan’s lead and adopt the same basic Formula, too.

Thus, these two foundational pillars established in 1972—Japan’s non-position on Taiwan’s status and the Japan Formula—had profound consequences for “One China” generally, and the Japan-Taiwan relationship specifically. They affected the course of U.S.-PRC normalization negotiations. And they allowed Japan and Taiwan to maintain robust, if officially non-governmental, relations. For example, for several years after 1972 the volume of Japan’s trade with Taiwan stayed roughly comparable to that with mainland China. Personal and business ties also sustained, and in the year after normalization, 40-times as many Japanese traveled to Taiwan as to the Mainland.

Though official visits by senior government officials or serving ministers ceased, Japanese politicians continued to travel to Taiwan—immediately undermining the myth that Japan-Taiwan relations after 1972 have been strictly “economic and cultural.” Over time, practically significant “unofficial,” “semi-official,” and “virtual political” relations have not only persisted but deepened significantly. Through prominent groups like the Japan-ROC Dietmembers’ Consultative Council, established in 1973, Japanese politicians have served as informal channels and complements to government-supported, but nominally unofficial, channels such as the de facto

42 Hirakawa 2006
43 Vogel 2019, 329; Takahashi and Wakayama 2003
44 Hirakawa 2006
45 Vogel 2019, 335
46 Kawashima etal. 2020
embassies, facilitated links between political and business figures, and attended important ceremonies in Taiwan.  

Given Beijing’s severe frictions with Moscow and desire for massive Japanese economic cooperation under “reform and opening up,” this ambiguous post-1972 status quo proved grudgingly tolerable to China’s leaders—so tolerable, in fact, that they agreed not to even discuss Taiwan during negotiations over the 1978 Japan-PRC Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Significantly, the signed treaty does not even mention “Taiwan.” The striking lack of contestation and absence of any “Taiwan” reference in the second most important political document defining post-normalization Japan-PRC relations further established the 1972 communique and “Japan Formula” as institution-creating precedents whose vagueness, flexibility, and lack of Japan-PRC consensus were fundamental to their viability. Furthermore, the two additional documents that Beijing considers, alongside the 1972 normalization agreement and 1978 peace treaty, as “the political foundation of PRC-Japan relations” after 1972 effectively reaffirmed the vague status quo for the post-Cold War era. Regarding “the Taiwan issue,” both the 1998 and 2009 joint statements contain only a unilateral statement that Tokyo “continues to maintain its [1972] stand.”

Legacies for the “One China” Framework

That Japan signed a normalization treaty (September 1972) and a peace treaty (August 1978) before Washington even normalized ties with Beijing (January 1979), coupled with Beijing’s insistence that Washington’s post-normalization ties with Taipei be modeled on the “Japan Formula,” makes clear Japan’s foundational, if widely underappreciated, role in establishing the flexibility (and myth of consensus) fundamental to the “One China” framework’s operation in international politics the past fifty years. Japan achieved diplomatic normalization with the PRC without recognizing Beijing’s “One China principle.” Meanwhile, the “Japan Formula” enabled de facto embassies in Tokyo and Taipei and avoided a fundamental disruption in most “unofficial” bilateral exchanges between Japan and Taiwan.

47 e.g., Deans 2001, 152-58; 167
48 Waijiaobu 1978
49 Waijiaobu 2002
50 Waijiaobu 1998; Waijiaobu 2008
As Taiwan’s second most important partner after the United States, what Japan achieved in the 1970s left a significant legacy for Japan-Taiwan relations. As noted above, it also served as a model for other countries. Most consequentially, U.S. leaders ultimately achieved with Beijing an accommodation on Taiwan “something like the Japanese solution,” as Henry Kissinger put it in 1973.\(^{51}\) Six years later, Washington similarly “acknowledge[d]” but avoided “recognizing” Beijing’s position on Taiwan; unilaterally asserted the continuation of economic, cultural, and other unofficial relations with Taipei; and established the American Institute in Taiwan as the U.S.’ de facto embassy. Beijing’s tacit acceptance of these vague stances vis-à-vis Taiwan by Taipei’s two most important international partners—which evinced their non-recognition of the PRC’s “One China principle”—led to their consolidation as influential pillars of much of the international community’s post-1970s effective operationalization of “One China.”

1992-2021: Post-Cold War Evolution of Japan’s “One China” Policy and Deepening Relations with Democratic Taiwan

As noted above, the last two decades of the Cold War are generally considered a “golden age” of expanding trilateral economic and political cooperation and cultural and grass-roots exchanges among Japan, the U.S., and China.\(^{52}\) Throughout, Japan’s leaders nevertheless continued to value unofficial exchange with Taiwan. Between 1972 and the twentieth century’s end, Japan-Taiwan trade volume expanded thirty-fold. Bilateral political exchanges continued.\(^{53}\) Yet Taiwan “was largely a nonissue between Beijing and Tokyo”\(^{54}\)—a clear indication of Beijing’s tolerance, if not tacit acceptance of the post-1972 status quo.

As the Cold War wound down, however, two major developments heralded the end of the Japan-U.S.-PRC “golden age” and effectively planted the seeds for both greater Japan-PRC tensions and more robust Japan-Taiwan engagement. First, Beijing-Moscow rapprochement and the Soviet Union’s 1991 collapse eliminated the geopolitical rationale for close Japan-U.S.-PRC cooperation, while the PRC’s rapid economic growth and military modernization presaged a transformed regional balance of power and elevated Japan’s security concerns about China. A second factor was Taiwan’s democratization and the resulting increased internal contestation vis-

\(^{51}\) Hirakawa 2006, 141  
\(^{52}\) Vogel 2019, Ch.10  
\(^{53}\) Lam and Chong 2004, 254  
\(^{54}\) Wan 2007, 163
à-vis both its relationship with Beijing and “One China.” Taiwan’s liberalization, especially when juxtaposed against Beijing’s violent 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square and growing security concerns vis-à-vis Beijing, also led many Japanese to see rapidly democratizing Taiwan and authoritarian China very differently.55

**Deepening Japan-Taiwan Exchange in the 1990s**

Taiwan’s democratization had significant implications—direct and indirect—for Japan-Taiwan relations: First, it heightened cross-Strait tensions and, by extension, Japan’s concerns about cross-Strait peace and stability. Taiwan’s democratically-elected national leaders increasingly spoke of both “Taiwan” (rather than the “ROC”) and cross-Strait relations in a manner incompatible with the PRC’s (or ROC’s pre-1991) conceptualization of “One China.” By the late 1990s, Taiwan’s first popularly-elected president—the Taiwan-born, Japanese-speaking, and Cornell-educated Lee Teng-hui—referred to cross-Strait ties as special “state-to-state” relations. Under his successor, DPP President Chen Shui-bian (2000-2008), the first non-KMT administration since 1949 often referred to “Taiwan”—rather than the “ROC”—and adopted measures widely seen as flirting with de jure independence. The resulting cross-Strait frictions significantly heightened Japan’s security concerns vis-à-vis the Taiwan Strait.56

Second, Taiwan’s democratization created new opportunities for deepening officially “non-governmental” Japan-Taiwan ties, including among politicians. Though Japan-Taiwan political exchanges had continued since 1972, they expanded significantly in the 1990s. For the first time, sitting cabinet members from Taiwan traveled to Japan in “private” and official capacities.57 Both sides’ increasingly influential left-of-center opposition parties—the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and the DPP—also deepened exchanges.58 Partially in response, the erstwhile LDP/KMT-centric Japan-ROC Dietmembers’ Consultative Council changed its name and became supra-partisan. At the same time, Japan-PRC tensions over territory and history were becoming more prominent, and the older generation of politicians who had spearheaded normalization were passing from the scene. Further worsening concerns were PLA military exercises in 1995-1996 in

55 Amae 2001; Wan 2007
56 Yang 2009; [REDACTED], the proposed special issue
57 Wang 2000, 363
58 Soeya 2002, 54-55
the runup to Taiwan’s first-ever direct presidential election. These exercises included missile launches that splashed down less than 100km from Japanese territory.\textsuperscript{59}

The cumulative effect was significant. As Deans argues, “There were probably more pro-Taiwan figures in the Japanese government 1998-2000 than at anytime since[…]1972.” \textsuperscript{60} Remarkably, during visits to Japan by PRC leaders Jiang Zemin (1998) and Zhu Rongji (1999) GOJ reportedly even refused to reiterate the equivalent of the Clinton Administration’s “Three Noes” policy, which committed the U.S. not to support Taiwanese independence; a one-China, one-Taiwan policy; or Taiwan's membership of international organizations for which sovereignty was a condition.\textsuperscript{61}

Finally, Taiwan’s rapid democratization transformed popular and elite conceptions in Japan and Taiwan about the other’s political significance—especially when juxtaposed against authoritarian Beijing, whose brutal 1989 crackdown on protesters had “shocked” Japan.\textsuperscript{62} Political and popular exchanges expanded. Martial-law era anti-Japanese education and propaganda in Taiwan ceased, as did prohibitions on Japanese cultural objects. One measurable consequence in Taiwan was that “pro-Japan” sentiment and popular mutual affinity—especially in younger generations—grew.\textsuperscript{63} This created fertile soil for even deeper political, popular, and other exchanges after Taiwan’s first peaceful transition to a non-KMT government in 2000. In short, in the years following Taiwan’s democratization, Japan’s leaders operationalized Japan’s “One China” policy more-and-more flexibly. Some Chen-era studies bluntly assessed the status quo as constituting “a series of contacts that could hardly be characterized as ‘informal’,” or simply declared Japan-Taiwan relations “unofficial-in-name-only.”\textsuperscript{64}

\textit{Japan-Taiwan Relations in the 21st Century: The Evolution Continues}

In the words of the late Ezra Vogel, the 1972-1992 “golden age” of Japan-PRC relations was followed by a three-decade-long “deterioration,” especially after 2008.\textsuperscript{65} Specific to twenty-first-century Japan-Taiwan relations, vagaries in Taiwan’s domestic politics and their

\textsuperscript{59} Green 2001
\textsuperscript{60} Deans 2001, 161
\textsuperscript{61} Deans 2001, 164; Lam and Chong 2004, 260
\textsuperscript{62} Wan 2007; Sun 2007
\textsuperscript{63} Fukuda 2019, 304
\textsuperscript{64} Noble 2005, 12-14; Sun 2007
\textsuperscript{65} Vogel 2019, chaps. 10-11
consequences for cross-Strait dynamics, coupled with shifting balances of power and deepening threat perceptions in Tokyo and Washington vis-à-vis Beijing, have become increasingly salient variables. Under President Chen, Taiwan’s first DPP administration (2000-2008) was widely perceived to have openly flirted with de jure independence. It also actively pursued enhanced cooperation with Tokyo. Though many expected the KMT’s return to the presidency in 2008 to negatively affect Japan-Taiwan relations, cross-Strait stability under Ma Ying-jeou (2008-2016) actually facilitated unprecedented cooperation.66 Most recently, Beijing’s more coercive posture vis-a-vis Taiwan since 2016—when DPP leader Tsai Ing-wen (2016-) recaptured the presidency and led her party to its first legislative majority—has catalyzed a sea change in discourse in Taipei, Tokyo, Washington, and other key democratic capitals about the PRC, cross-Strait relations, and the importance of more proactive support of Taiwan’s democracy and effective autonomy.

Political vicissitudes on the Taiwan side, however, are not the only variable of importance. Indeed, long before Tsai’s 2016 election, PRC-based scholars had already expressed concerns about longer-term trends in Japanese politics, including the weakening of “pro-PRC” sentiments among Diet members, growing emphasis in political discourse on Taiwan’s importance to Japan’s security and Japan’s 1972 non-recognition of Beijing’s stance on Taiwan, and expanding mutual visits by Japanese and Taiwanese politicians promoting practical cooperation and allegedly “testing the waters” for de facto official exchanges.67 Indeed, the twenty-first-century has witnessed a striking deepening of Japan-Taiwan ties along three tracks: “unofficial relations” through business and cultural exchanges, “semi-official relations” through government representatives (e.g., de facto embassies); and “virtual political relations” (e.g., parliamentary exchanges and former Japanese prime ministers visiting Taiwan).68

Importantly, in both capitals political support for deeper Japan-Taiwan ties is basically supra-partisan. After the famously “pro-Japan” KMT President Lee Teng-hui retired from politics in 2000, DPP President Chen’s administration unabashedly called for a bilateral free trade agreement, an Asia-Pacific democracy alliance, enhanced security cooperation, and even a Japanese version of the U.S.’ landmark 1979 “Taiwan Relations Act.”69 Meanwhile, GOJ began explicitly supporting Taiwan’s “international space, including observer status at the World Health

---

66 Matsuda 2020; Leng and Liao 2016
67 Yan and Kong 2004, 28; Zhao 2004, 51; Sheng 2006, 62
68 Kawashima et al. 2020
69 Bridges and Chan 2008, 583
Assembly. Under KMT President Ma, Taiwan’s government continued to advocate for more practical cooperation with Tokyo, including a free trade agreement. GOJ responded positively, including its unprecedented conveyance of congratulations following Ma’s election victory—a post-1972 “first.” Ma’s administration subsequently called for a “Taiwan-Japan special partnership.” and signed various bilateral agreements with Japan, including a landmark memorandum on strengthening bilateral exchange and cooperation, bilateral investment and open skies agreements, and a historic 2013 agreement on fisheries to deescalate tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (which Japan administers but over which Taiwan also claims sovereignty in the name of the ROC). Unprecedented memoranda of understanding demonstrated the practical deepening of Japan-Taiwan “virtual” political and diplomatic relations, even under the KMT.

The Past Decade of Japan-Taiwan Relations: A New Era of Deeper Cooperation?

Over the past decade-plus, Japanese and Taiwanese leaders of various political stripes have continued to promote deeper Japan-Taiwan cooperation—often in subtle but symbolically and practically significant ways. As further evidence of the supra-partisan support for these developments, after the LDP regained control of the Kantei from the left-of-center DPJ in 2012, long-serving LDP prime minister Abe Shinzo’s government (2012-2020) expanded cooperation with his KMT (Ma) and DPP (Tsai) counterparts. This continued deepening of Japan-Taiwan relations has not gone unnoticed in China, or PRC academic circles. Some Chinese observers argue that the true intent of this uptick in Japan-Taiwan “quasi-diplomacy” is “to create the illusion of Taiwan as an independent political entity,” or to “break the 1972 system” by expanding bilateral exchange, economic links, security cooperation, and Taiwan’s international space. Needless to say, such trends are not viewed positively in Beijing.

As noted in the introduction, one authoritative manifestation of GOJ’s quiet but official shift in how it conceives of Taiwan’s importance to Japan is changing language in MOFA Diplomatic Bluebooks—which shapes official rhetoric across the government, including Cabinet-

70 Guojia Zhengce Yanjiu Jijinhui 2008
71 Matsuda 2020, 241
72 Waijiaobu(ROC) 2009
73 Waijiaobu(ROC) 2010
74 Matsuda 2020, 241
75 Li 2010, 45; Zhang 2019
76 Luo and Jiang 2017
level speeches. As detailed in Table 1, an important shift began in 2013—Abe’s first full year in office. GOJ began granting Taiwan incrementally enhanced status and agency as a distinct political entity, rather than just a geographical “region,” and political and diplomatic significance as a “crucial partner and an important friend,” rather than just an economy. This trend has continued intermittently in more recent bluebooks, which newly emphasize that Japan and Taiwan share democratic and other “fundamental” or “universal” values, drawing a subtle but unambiguous contrast with Beijing. Not coincidentally, these changes occur against the backdrop of Japanese, U.S., and Taiwanese leaders’ calls for enhanced cooperation among democratic countries against “revisionist” authoritarianism and support for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” As noted above, close readings of the entire bluebooks further reveal that GOJ is now referring to shared values with Taiwan using language it previously reserved primarily for Washington and its other democratic treaty allies and partners.

Table 1 Changes in GOJ’s authoritative single-sentence definition of Japan’s significance to Taiwan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MOFA Bluebook</th>
<th>“For Japan, Taiwan is a/an…”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>“…important region with which Japan has close economic relations”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>“…important partner with which Japan has close economic relations”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2019</td>
<td>“…crucial partner and an important friend, with which [Japan] shares basic values in the form of freedom, democracy, basic human rights, and the rule of law, as well as close economic relations and people-to-people exchanges”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>“…extremely crucial partner and an important friend, with which [Japan] shares universal values in the form of freedom, democracy, basic human rights, and the rule of law, as well as close economic relations and people-to-people exchanges”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Supra-partisan and unprecedentedly high-level and frequent political exchanges over the past decade-plus further evince the incremental deepening of Japan-Taiwan relations and their bipartisan support. They also further undermine the myth that after 1972 the relationship has been strictly “economic and cultural.” For example: in 2012, then-(DPJ) Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko and former vice president Lien Chan met at the APEC Summit. The following year, former vice president Vincent Siew met with then-LDP Prime Minister Abe at APEC. (Such meetings have since become routine.) Between 2010 and 2016, seven former prime ministers—

---

including four from the LDP and all three former DPJ prime ministers—visited Taiwan in some capacity. Additional precedents were reported when Japan’s then-Chief Cabinet Secretary (and future prime minister) Suga Yoshhide hosted East Asia Relations Commission Chairman Li Jiajin at the Kantei (2013) and when then-Prime Minister Abe held (unannounced) meetings in Tokyo with Taiwan’s former President Lee and then DPP chairperson/future president Tsai (2015).78 Upon Lee’s death in 2020, former Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro led a supra-partisan delegation to Taipei to convey their and then-Prime Minister Abe’s condolences. The visit reportedly included meetings with Tsai at Zongtongfu.79

In the Tsai era, Japan and Taiwan’s officially nongovernmental relationship has also become increasingly institutionalized. For example, in 2016 Japan’s foreign minister sent the first-ever official congratulatory message to a Taiwanese president-elect, which also praised Taiwan’s democracy and highlighted shared values.80 As a sign of how much the relationship has evolved in the 21st century, this language contrasted starkly with MOFA’s 2000 statement following the first election victory of Tsai’s only DPP predecessor: Chen Shui-bian. Revealingly, that earlier statement merely acknowledged that Chen “was elected” and even included scare quotes around “president”—consistent with PRC convention.81

Just two days after Tsai’s election victory, then-Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga expressed support for Taiwan joining the (then-) U.S.- and Japan-led Trans-Pacific Partnership.82 Later that year, Japan and Taiwan launched annual “maritime cooperation dialogues” involving representatives from both sides’ de facto embassies and government agencies, including MOFA and Taiwan’s National Security Council.83 In 2017, Japan dispatched the highest-level government representative to visit Taiwan officially since 1972.84 And in a move that one expert has called “the most significant breakthrough in their relationship since 1972,” the governments agreed to change the name of Japan’s de facto embassy in Taiwan from the 1970s-era and conspicuously vague “Interchange Association” to the “Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association.”85 Significantly,

78 Matsuda 2020, 244-46
79 Zhongyangshe 2020; Shimizu 2020, 277
80 MOFA 2016
81 MOFA 2000
82 Shusho Kantei 2016
83 Waijiaobu(ROC) 2016; Shimizu 2020, 267
84 Shimizu 2020, 271-72
85 Fukuda 2020, 27
the new name includes characters for “Japan” (り) and “Taiwan” (台).\textsuperscript{86} Recent years have also witnessed an expansion and new forms of unofficial, bilateral and trilateral security dialogues among legislators and experts. For example, in 2021, the LDP stood up its first-ever “Taiwan Project Team,” formally submitted to Japan’s prime minister proposals to improve Japan-Taiwan relations, and held its first-ever direct (virtual) dialogues with counterparts in the ruling DPP to discuss security and economic concerns.\textsuperscript{87}

Supplementing these politician and government-led efforts to expand and further institutionalize political exchanges and policy cooperation are extensive business ties and deepening popular and civil society linkages. In the last year before COVID-19 induced disruption, Japan was Taiwan’s third-largest trading partner, while Taiwan was Japan's fourth-largest,\textsuperscript{88} Furthermore, Japan was exceptionally popular among people in Taiwan, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{89} And Japan-Taiwan tourism had soared to record highs.\textsuperscript{90}

Another important trend to highlight is that Tokyo has expanded cooperation with third parties—most importantly, the U.S. and its other major democratic allies—to support Taiwan’s effective autonomy amidst perceived efforts by Beijing to coerce and isolate Taipei. In 2019, Japan became the first new formal member of the theretofore bilateral U.S.-Taiwan Global Cooperation and Training Framework—a platform Washington launched in 2015 in response to Beijing’s efforts to block Taipei’s participation in many international organizations. GOJ expressions of support for Taiwan’s efforts to deepen its international connections, including expanded trade ties through CPTPP, which Beijing opposes, are now commonplace. And in global health, Japanese leaders continue to join U.S. and other foreign counterparts in supporting Taiwan’s effort to regain WHO observer status—which Beijing has blocked since Tsai’s election in 2016, even during the COVID-19 pandemic.\textsuperscript{91} In response to perceived efforts by Beijing to frustrate Taiwan’s efforts to purchase vaccines during a May 2021 COVID-19 wave, President Tsai reportedly called former Prime Minister Abe for help. A trilateral meeting (including the U.S. chargé d'affaires) at Taiwan’s de facto ambassador’s residence in Japan led Tokyo and Washington to rush aid to Taiwan.\textsuperscript{92} GOJ

\textsuperscript{86} Ziyou Shibao 2016
\textsuperscript{87} Liff 2022a
\textsuperscript{88} National Development Council 2019, 220-24; JETRO 2020
\textsuperscript{89} JTEA 2019; Chuo Chosasha 2019
\textsuperscript{90} Taiwan News 2020; MOFA 2020, 47
\textsuperscript{91} [REDACTED], the proposed special issue
\textsuperscript{92} Yomiuri 2021
and Washington directly donated to Taiwan’s 23-million people a combined total of 8 million vaccine doses—roughly 4 million each.

Against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting balance of power across the Taiwan Strait and a sharp uptick in PLA activities around Taiwan, the past year has also witnessed especially noteworthy developments indicative of deepening concerns in Tokyo about cross-Strait peace and stability and the implications a possible conflict would have for Japan’s interests.\(^93\) Since a historic U.S.-Japan summit statement in April 2021 criticized China’s activities, including “the use of economic and other forms of coercion,” and “underscored the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait” and “encouraged the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues,” both the U.S. and Japan have joined with other democratic partners to issue similar expressions of concern\(^94\)—an unprecedented multilateralization of the issue. And while remaining ambiguous about any possible Japanese role in a cross-Strait contingency, over the past year, Japan’s sitting Cabinet ministers have explicitly noted the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance bolstering deterrence and even publicly linked Taiwan’s security to both regional security and Japan’s own.\(^95\) Prominent politicians, especially those without government posts (and therefore unencumbered by the official GOJ line), such as former Prime Minister Abe, have gone even further.\(^96\)

**Japan’s Evolving “One China” Policy and Japan-Taiwan Relations 50 Years after Normalization: Toward an Uncertain Future**

The historical record of the past half-century demonstrates that, beyond seemingly obvious red lines (e.g., supporting Taiwan’s de jure independence), the practical constraints for Japan-Taiwan engagement of the Japan Formula and Tokyo’s vague 1972 position on “One China” are remarkably flexible. In none of the four “major political documents” defining Japan-PRC relations does Tokyo recognize Beijing’s “One China principle” as it concerns its essential claim of PRC sovereignty over Taiwan. Far from being strictly beholden to some putative Japan-PRC consensus on Taiwan’s status frozen in 1972, Japan’s leaders’ choices about how to operationalize its vague official position and effective “One China” policy have evolved significantly in response to

\(^{93}\) Liff 2022b  
\(^{94}\) e.g., MOFA 2021; G7 2021  
\(^{95}\) Jiji 2021; Jiminto 2021; MOD 2021, 52  
\(^{96}\) Liff 2022b
shifting political winds, strategic vicissitudes, perceived threats, and political will in Tokyo and Taipei.

This empirical reality evinces the informal institutional nature of the “One China” framework and the striking ambiguity and myth of consensus at its heart. The political contingent flexibility is further reflected in the concrete deepening of Japan-Taiwan (and U.S.-Japan-Taiwan) ties in recent years: not only expanding cultural and economic exchange, but more forward-leaning official rhetoric, supra-partisan political and de facto diplomatic engagement, and practical cooperation—in key instances in partnership with other major democratic partners. Collectively, these trends demonstrate the practical disconnect between Japan’s ambiguous (and static) official 1972 position on “One China” and the unambiguous (and dynamic) political and policy reality that defines—and redefines—practical Japan-Taiwan relations today.

In past scholarship, some scholars have commented on the “1972 system’s” perceived inflexibility. For example, twenty years ago, Amae observed that it caused Tokyo to “abstain[] from any actions that Beijing opposes, even though they may not violate the communique.” Yet presciently, he also suspected that deepening tensions with Beijing and across the Taiwan Strait, coupled with Taiwan’s democratization, would challenge that status quo. Though flexibility was already apparent in the 1990s, the indeterminant bounds on Japan’s “One China” policy were less conspicuous in earlier periods, especially when Japan’s leaders prioritized cooperation with Beijing and changing power balances and security frictions were less relevant. Indeed, today, highly dynamic geopolitical and domestic political vicissitudes (i.e., political will in the relevant capitals) manifest clearly as key variables. Such is the nature of fundamentally political informal institutions.

Since Taiwan’s democratization, the steady deepening and institutionalization of Japan-Taiwan relations across KMT, DPP, DPJ, and LDP administrations and despite the waxing (Lee, Chen), waning (Ma), and waxing (Tsai) of cross-Strait frictions, further demonstrates that although bilateral ties are hardly immune to PRC pressure or shifting domestic political and geopolitical winds, the basic trend appears firmly rooted, supra-partisan, and beholden to neither. In recent years, Japan, the U.S., and key other major democratic powers are increasingly treating Taipei as

97 [REDACTED], the proposed special issue
98 Amae 2001
an important international actor and valued cooperative partner in its own right, not merely as an issue derivative of the countries’ relations with Beijing.

The fact that effective bounds on what’s possible were not locked in five decades ago, and are instead basically where the key players ultimately decide they are, has another important implication: this political contingency means that what the future holds for Japan-Taiwan relations is also unclear. Indeed, fifty years after 1972, worsening frictions with the PRC and across the Strait, coupled with the post-normalization nadir of U.S.-China relations, raise questions about the sustainability of today’s effective status quo. Recent geopolitical and geoeconomics vicissitudes render the tensions inherent in the vagueness at the heart of Tokyo’s traditional approach—a de facto “Two Chinas” policy and separation of economics and politics—increasingly conspicuous. With public sentiment in democratic Taiwan suggesting a peaceful resolution of the cross-Strait dispute on terms acceptable to both the Taiwanese people and CCP leaders difficult to imagine, and Xi Jinping’s rhetoric and increased pressure on Taiwan suggesting deepening intolerance for the uneasy status quo, how far Japan (separately from and in concert with its U.S. ally and other major democracies) is willing to go in supporting its “extremely crucial partner and important friend” is an open question.

At least so far, the constraints appear most apparent in the security domain, where GOJ’s apparent reluctance to respond positively to intermittent calls for more robust Japan-Taiwan security cooperation, or to be seen as too publicly explicit or forward-leaning regarding how it would respond to a PRC attack on Taiwan, are easily overlooked but should be soberly acknowledged.\(^9\) No matter how things play out, as other contributions to the proposed special issue also point out, as the metaphorical distance across the Taiwan Strait expands so, too, do the potential risks.\(^10\)

In charting their path forward, Japan’s conservative diplomatic mores, post-1949 preference for avoiding open confrontation with Beijing, relatively constrained security posture and constitutional/legal limitations on freedom of action in contingencies not involving a direct attack on Japan, and deep economic ties with China (its top trading partner most years since 2005) are important considerations for Japan’s leaders. So, too, are the risks of openly challenging an increasingly powerful Beijing on the potentially incendiary issue of Taiwan’s status.

---

\(^9\) Liff 2022b

\(^10\) [REDACTED], the proposed special issue; [REDACTED], the proposed special issue
Since 1993, Beijing’s defense spending has surged to more than quintuple Japan’s, with developing the ability to conquer Taiwan and deter, delay or defeat U.S. efforts to aid Taipei guiding China’s rapid military modernization.\textsuperscript{101} Nor is Taiwan an ancillary political concern for China’s leadership. Indeed, for decades its leaders have judged “full reunification” to be the “greatest and final obstacle” for achieving “national rejuvenation.” Accordingly, opposing and containing “Taiwan independence” is Beijing’s core national defense aim.\textsuperscript{102} In various speeches, current PRC leader Xi Jinping has repeatedly linked unification with Taiwan to China’s “national rejuvenation.”\textsuperscript{103} This changing political, economic, and strategic context challenges the ambiguity in Tokyo’s traditional approach across multiple fronts, especially as Taipei and Washington look to Japan and other democratic partners for additional support. As a recent study in the PRC’s Ministry of State Security-affiliated journal cautioned about trends in Japan-Taiwan cooperation: the PRC “should be on high alert.”\textsuperscript{104}

As has been the case since the 1950s, Tokyo continues to value stable ties with Beijing—its top trading partner since 2008 and increasingly powerful and immense next-door neighbor. Nevertheless, and despite (or perhaps because of) the shifting power balance across the region and between China and the U.S., deepening concerns about Beijing’s authoritarian politics, power, and policies toward Taiwan seem—at least so far—to be pushing Japan and democratic Taiwan, as well as other major U.S. democratic allies, closer together. Shared values, democratic institutions, economic interests, popular affinity, and, increasingly, concerns vis-a-vis Beijing about economic security and its regional behavior also facilitate closer ties.\textsuperscript{105} Yet recent years also make security concerns increasingly salient, and GOJ has become increasingly (and atypically) vocal. Japan’s 2021 defense white paper publicly highlights the shifting power balance and links cross-Strait stability to the security of both Japan and the international community.\textsuperscript{106} It appears that some Japanese leaders increasingly believe what many observed after the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis: that “the peace and security that Japan wants in the Taiwan Strait can no longer be sustained by favoring China and neglecting Taiwan.”\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{101} SIPRI 2021; Fravel 2018, 51
\textsuperscript{102} Junshi Kexueyuan 2001, 471-72
\textsuperscript{103} Xi n.d.
\textsuperscript{104} Zhang 2019
\textsuperscript{105} Shimizu 2020, 276
\textsuperscript{106} MOD 2021, 52
\textsuperscript{107} Amae 2001, 274
Thus, beyond the space constraints of this paper is a crucial question for the future: how these concerns might translate into more concrete security cooperation between Tokyo and Taipei, of which there is little, or more robust “Taiwan contingency” planning with its U.S. ally to bolster deterrence. Both have long faced significant domestic and international political obstacles. Yet today public discussion and calls from prominent politicians to do more have never been greater. Whether and how these calls will lead to more robust cooperation and support remains to be seen.

Though what path Japan-Taiwan relations will take is uncertain, in confronting these complicated and challenging tradeoffs and policy choices, Japan is not alone. Policy debates in Washington and other major democratic partners, including the European Union, evince similar dilemmas vis-à-vis Taiwan, “One China,” and the importance of stable ties and economic exchange with an increasingly powerful and influential Beijing: At least so far, and as additional indicators of the vagueness and flexibility built into the “One China” framework, developments during the 50th year post-normalization suggest many appear willing to continue publicly deepening support for and practical cooperation with Taiwan—even if their official positions on “One China” remain frozen in time.

Conclusion

Despite Beijing’s repeated claims today that its “One China principle is a universal consensus,” both Tokyo’s vague 1972 stance, which does not recognize the PRC’s essential claim of sovereignty over Taiwan, and the reality of Japan’s evolving policies toward and deepening practical cooperation with Taipei belie a far more complicated reality. Beyond their real-world significance, the dynamic nature of contemporary Japan-Taiwan relations also buttresses a more general finding shared across contributions to this special issue: the importance of careful analytical differentiation between the PRC’s “One China principle”—an essential component of which is Beijing’s assertion that Taiwan is part of the PRC—and other countries’ effective “One China” policies. Recognizing this distinction is crucial for understanding the “One China” framework’s continued relevance—and the ambiguity and flexibility at its heart—50 years after

---

108 Wilkins 2012; Liff 2022b. One frequently-cited example is intermittent calls for a “Japanese Taiwan Relations Act.” So far, widespread media hype and prominent rhetorical advocates aside, the Diet has never considered legislation remotely comparable to the 1979 act that inspires the name. Liff 2021.

109 e.g., Jiminto 2021; Liff 2022b

110 REDACTED, the proposed special issue
Nixon and Tanaka went to China. How political leaders in key players like Japan choose to operationalize it has long carried, and will continue to carry, significant implications for China’s foreign relations, cross-Strait dynamics, U.S.-Japan-China relations, and Taiwan’s effective autonomy.

Though Japan is often overlooked in the heavily U.S.-China and security-centric English-language scholarship on cross-Strait relations and “One China,” Tokyo has long been a critical player. In September 1972, Tokyo successfully parried PRC pressure and normalized diplomatic relations without recognizing Beijing’s claim that Taiwan is part of the PRC. Through its “Japan Formula” Tokyo further established a powerful precedent that enabled practically significant, if officially “unofficial,” ties with, and a de facto embassy in, Taiwan thenceforth. It bears repeating that Tokyo accomplished this more than six years before its U.S. ally, and throughout the 1970s U.S. and PRC negotiators explicitly identified Japan’s “Formula” as a model. The ambiguity at the heart of “One China” further consolidated after Tokyo received Beijing’s acquiescence not to discuss Taiwan in negotiations over the 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Post-Cold War, the 1998 and 2008 joint statements merely contained unilateral reiterations of Japan’s vague 1972 position.

Tokyo’s diplomatic achievements a half-century ago demonstrated two important realities: First, key PRC “conditions” regarding its ostensibly non-negotiable “One China principle” could be effectively circumvented by omission, even by a country as important to Beijing and Taipei as Japan—their next-door neighbor, a key U.S. treaty ally, and then the world’s second-largest national economy. Second, Beijing would grudgingly allow even Japan, a former colonial occupier and wartime enemy, to maintain robust ties with Taiwan—provided they remained nominally “unofficial.” Over the fifty years since, the politically convenient “myth of consensus” at the heart of the 1972 modus vivendi has allowed Japan to enjoy extensive cooperation with both Beijing and Taipei, while officially recognizing only the former as a sovereign state.

On the eve of the September 1972 Japan-PRC normalization communique’s fiftieth anniversary, political and strategic vicissitudes across the Strait and region present new and diverse challenges for what appears to be an increasingly precarious status quo. What the future holds is uncertain, but the historical record makes one thing very clear: Japan will have a pivotal role to play. Indeed, though largely unheralded, Japan’s negotiated outcomes in the year immediately following the ROC’s 1971 ejection from the United Nations, and its meaningful engagement with
Taiwan in the decades since, have carried immense significance. They have proven essential to the robust external linkages and U.S.-Japan alliance-centered deterrence that have supported the international space necessary for Taiwan’s persistence as an autonomous international political actor (albeit with significant constraints); robust, comprehensive, and practically significant (if nominally unofficial) links to and cooperation with its two most important nation-state partners (and others); and its eventual emergence as an economic powerhouse and the first and only democracy in the primarily Chinese-speaking world.

Today, Japan’s status as a fellow democracy that shares many of Taiwan’s concerns about the PRC’s growing power and heavy-handed posture toward its neighbors, Tokyo’s close treaty alliance with Taiwan’s de facto security guarantor, and its extensive economic relations with Beijing all but ensure that Japan’s policies vis-à-vis Taiwan will continue to be a critical variable shaping the future of the “One China” framework and cross-Strait dynamics. They will also heavily influence relations among the world’s three largest economies; prospects for new avenues for cooperation among liberal democracies in an era of deepening competition between authoritarian and democratic states; and the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” ideal that governments in Taipei, Tokyo, and Washington all openly champion today.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Chuo Chosasha. 2019. “Taiwan Ni Taisuru Ishiki Chosa.” https://www.roc-taiwan.org/uploads/sites/44/2019/12/%E3%80%902019%E3%80%91%E5%8F%B0%E6%B9%BE%E3%81%AB%E5%AF%BE%E3%81%99%E3%82%8B%E6%84%8F%E8%AD%98%E8%AA%BF%E6%9F%BB_%E5%A0%B1%E5%91%8A%E6%9B%B8.pdf.


———. 2022b. “The U.S.-Japan Alliance and Taiwan.” Asia Policy. (accepted subject to minor revisions)


Wan, Ming. 2007. “Japanese Strategic Thinking toward Taiwan.” Japanese Strategic Thought toward Asia, Rozman, Togo, and Ferguson, eds. New York: Palgrave. 159-81.
