“The U.S.-Japan Alliance and Taiwan”

Adam P. Liff

[DRAFT MANUSCRIPT]

This is a draft of an article manuscript “conditionally accepted” for publication in the peer-reviewed journal Asia Policy. Please feel free to cite, but kindly do not quote the text verbatim (as wording may change). Please check back here for the version-of-record later in 2022. Thank you.

Suggested Citation:
Adam P. Liff, “The U.S.-Japan Alliance and Taiwan,” manuscript conditionally accepted at Asia Policy.

Adam P. Liff ([https://adampliff.com](https://adampliff.com)) is associate professor of East Asian international relations at Indiana University’s Hamilton Lugar School of Global & International Studies, where he also serves as founding director of its 21st Century Japan Politics & Society Initiative. He holds a PhD and MA in Politics from Princeton University, and a B.A. from Stanford University.

KEYWORDS:

Japan; U.S.-Japan alliance; Taiwan; cross-Strait; United States
“Stability in Taiwan’s situation is very important for both Japan’s national security and the stability of the international community. [...] We must pay close attention to the situation with a greater sense of anxiety.”

– Japan’s 2021 Defense White Paper

“Regarding the Taiwan issue, it is crucial for the U.S. and Japan to link up to maintain deterrence and create an environment for peaceful resolution.”

– Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide (4/2021)

“A Taiwan contingency is a Japan contingency, as well as a Japan-U.S. alliance contingency.”

– Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Dietmember (/former prime minister) Abe Shinzo (12/2021)

2021 witnessed a striking uptick in concerns in Washington and major U.S. democratic allies that Beijing may use its increasingly powerful military to force democratic and self-governed Taiwan to unify with the People’s Republic of China (PRC; or “China”). In addition to the potential implications for Taiwan’s democracy and 24-million people, the Taiwan Strait is also widely considered “the most dangerous flash point in the world for a possible war that involved the United States of America, China, and probably other major powers.” A top Biden administration official recently warned that a military clash would also “broaden quickly and [...] fundamentally trash the global economy” in unpredictable ways. In short, the regional and global stakes of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait are extremely high.

Since switching diplomatic recognition from the government in Taiwan (officially, the Republic of China/ROC) to Beijing and abrogating the U.S.-ROC mutual defense pact in 1979, the U.S. government has stopped short of an unambiguous commitment to direct military involvement in the event of a cross-Strait conflict. However, Washington remains Taiwan’s de facto security guarantor. Officially, the U.S. government supports a “robust unofficial relationship” with Taipei, sells it defensive arms, and under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act considers any threat

2 Yomiuri Shimbun, April 4, 2021.
5 Nikkei Asia, May 5, 2021.
to its erstwhile treaty ally “of grave concern.”6 In December 2021 testimony, a high-ranking Pentagon official publicly stated that the PRC is “the Department’s pacing challenge and a Taiwan contingency is the pacing scenario,” and that it “remains committed to maintaining the capacity of the United States to resist the resort to force or other forms of coercion that may jeopardize the security of the people on Taiwan.”7

For decades, fundamental to U.S. defense and deterrence posture in East Asia has been its close mutual security treaty with neighboring Japan, whose westernmost territory is merely 70 miles from Taiwan. America’s massive forward-deployed military presence on Japanese soil, especially in nearby Okinawa, all-but-guarantees that if U.S. leaders ever decide to defend Taiwan they would wish to, and operational success may depend upon being able to, access U.S. bases in Japan, and Japanese support.8 As a November 2021 report to the U.S. Congress warned, China’s rapidly improving military capabilities “have fundamentally transformed the strategic environment…[making it] less certain that U.S. conventional military forces alone will continue to deter China’s leaders from initiating an attack on Taiwan.”9 The following month, a former assistant secretary of state and NSC senior director for Asia bluntly assessed that “the U.S. cannot successfully defend Taiwan without Japanese support.”10

Against the backdrop of rapidly changing balances-of-power and growing international concerns about Taiwan, and with the Biden administration asserting that U.S. allies would “take action” if Beijing sought “to use force to disrupt the status quo,”11 this article draws extensively on Japanese-language sources to analyze key questions concerning understudied Japanese perspectives on the U.S.-Japan alliance and a “Taiwan contingency” today. Though the Government of Japan’s (GOJ) nuanced positions, policies, and approach—including the role its leaders see for the alliance—are generally neglected in the U.S.-centric English-language literature and policy discourse on the Taiwan Strait, they deserve more careful, mainstream attention. This

---

7 Ely Ratner, Testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, December 8, 2021.
is especially true in Washington. After all, Japan’s choices are, and will inevitably remain, a crucial variable affecting U.S. options, cross-Strait deterrence, and how a conflict would play out if deterrence fails.

2021: A Revolution in Japan’s Posture vis-a-vis a ‘Taiwan Contingency’? Not so Fast

In April 2021, then-Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide and President Biden made global headlines when they jointly “underscored the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encouraged the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues”—the first such reference in a U.S.-Japan summit-level statement since 1969. This landmark statement spearheaded an extraordinary cascade of similar statements involving the U.S., Japan, and other major U.S. allies in Asia and Europe, including at the June G7 summit in the United Kingdom—a historic internationalization and multilateralization of concerns.

Beyond its international effects, the April 2021 Biden-Suga summit also catalyzed remarkably mainstream, public discussions within Japan about the importance of Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait to Japan’s own national security and regional stability. These included high-profile statements and remarks by Japanese leaders and influential politicians. In April, Suga highlighted U.S.-Japan links as important for “maintaining deterrence and creating an environment for [the Taiwan issue’s] peaceful resolution.” In June, Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo stated that “Taiwan’s peace and stability are directly connected to Japan” and that the cross-Strait military balance is shifting in China’s favor. Several weeks later, Japan’s 2021 defense white paper contained detailed coverage of cross-Strait dynamics, noted an explicit link between “stability of Taiwan’s situation” and “both Japan’s security and the stability of the international community.” It further noted that Japan “must pay close attention to the situation with a greater sense of anxiety.” In informal but nevertheless global headline-making remarks at a private political fundraiser at a Tokyo hotel that July, Japan’s famously outspoken then-deputy prime minister Aso

---

14 Yomiuri Shimbun, April 4, 2021.  
16 MOD, “Boei Hakusho,” 51.
Taro reportedly said that a major incident over Taiwan “may” constitute a “survival-threatening situation”—referring to one of three self-imposed, limiting conditions for Japan to exercise the UN-sanctioned right of collective self-defense. “If that happens” (emphasis added), he said, Japan and the U.S. “must defend Taiwan together.” And though also not representing an official GOJ position, influential politician (and former prime minister) Abe Shinzo made headlines when he argued that Japan’s geographical proximity and economic reality all-but-guarantee that a “Taiwan contingency” would have profound economic and security consequences, and emphasized the importance of U.S.-Japan cooperation.

Given Japan’s geographical proximity to the Taiwan Strait, its security alliance with the U.S., Taiwan’s de facto security guarantor, and its extensive economic and other ties with China, Taiwan, and the United States, such statements rightly attracted global attention. Less clear is what policymakers and scholars should make of the past year’s developments. Most importantly, is it correct to infer, as many Western journalists, commentators, and scholars asserted last year, usually based on non-Japanese language sources, that Japan’s Taiwan posture vis-à-vis a cross-Strait conflict has undergone a “revolutionary” shift toward consensus and “the Japanese security establishment appears willing to defend Taiwan;” that Tokyo has made a commitment and “abandoned its long-held ambiguity on the subject, affirming...that it would be ready to join the United States in a fight to defend the island;” and/or that Japan “has said it would join America in defending Taiwan against a Chinese invasion”?

The short answer is no. The extremely high stakes for regional and global peace and stability demand more careful, historically-grounded analysis of GOJ’s nuanced positions and associated policies—which when it comes to Japan’s response in a cross-Strait conflict, remain intentionally ambiguous, at least publicly.

On the one hand, developments and discourse in Japan over the past year-plus clearly indicate increasingly mainstream concerns in Tokyo about cross-Strait peace and stability, interest in bolstering discussions with its U.S. ally and other democracies about how to support Taipei’s

---

17 Jiji, July 5, 2021.
18 INPR, 2021.
democracy and effective autonomy, and efforts to send subtle deterrence signals to Beijing to support a peaceful resolution. But Japan’s official core (and decades-old) government positions—especially concerning Taiwan’s ambiguous status and whether possible future PRC aggression against Taiwan would fall within the scope of the U.S.-Japan alliance—have not fundamentally changed. Widespread assertions in recent months to the contrary, since severing diplomatic ties with Taipei in 1972, GOJ has never publicly committed to backing the U.S. if the PRC attacks Taiwan, much less “defending Taiwan” independently if Washington chooses to sit out the fight. Nor, and this is of critical importance, has Tokyo ever said it would not do so. Framings of Japan’s posture as a simplistic binary of extremes grossly over-simplifies a complicated reality. Rather, longstanding Japanese policy holds, and repeated authoritative government statements last year reaffirmed, that whether and how Japan/the alliance would respond will depend on political judgments based on the actual contingency’s specific circumstances. In short, Japan’s posture remains far more ambiguous than a lot of recent commentary suggests.

Nevertheless, as detailed below, major reforms to national security institutions and policies, especially over the past decade—albeit mostly still long before 2021—have incrementally expanded the roles that the JSDF—and the U.S.-Japan alliance—effectively play in cross-Strait deterrence, if indirectly, and could conceivably play in a conflict if deterrence fails. There is also some anecdotal evidence that internal discussions specific to a Taiwan contingency, perhaps to include even some preliminary planning, are increasingly robust. Nevertheless, it is critical that the media, public, and scholarly discourse carefully distinguish between what is known publicly about what Japan could do (legally, constitutionally, or otherwise), and how it would respond in the event of a cross-Strait conflict. Based on publicly-available sources, far more is known about the former than the latter. The “could” versus “would” distinction is critically important for separating signal from noise. The two terms are not interchangeable.

That Japan has not publicly pre-committed to any particular course of action if war occurs in the Taiwan Strait should not be surprising. Even longstanding and far more publicly forward-leaning U.S. policy, often referred to as “strategic ambiguity” or “dual deterrence,” is also

20 For example, an April 2021 media report misinterpreted a nuanced statement by prime minister Suga to assert “there is no possibility of Japanese forces being committed to any military contingency surrounding Taiwan.” “Japan Troops Won’t Get Involved If China Invades Taiwan, PM Yoshihide Suga Says,” SCMP, April 21, 2021. https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3130423/japan-troops-wont-get-involved-if-china-invades-taiwan-pm.
famously non-committal. In both cases, ambiguity is by design. The shared intent of the allies’ respective policies is to deter destabilizing actions by either Beijing (e.g., use of force) or Taipei (e.g., a de jure declaration of independence) that could upset an already precarious cross-Strait détente, while simultaneously trying to maintain mutually-beneficial ties with both and encourage a “peaceful resolution.”

That said, despite a basically shared objective, the allies’ past and present policies toward Taipei and the extent and nature of their security engagements with it differ in important ways. Different history, geography, and domestic factors are all key variables. For example, unlike Washington, which had a mutual defense treaty with the ROC from 1954-1979, during the Cold War Tokyo never made any security commitment to Taipei or stationed forces there. Since switching diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1972, Japan’s National Diet (parliament) has never passed legislation remotely similar to the U.S. “Taiwan Relations Act,” or actively engaged in military cooperation with or sold defensive weapons to Taiwan. Furthermore, as discussed below, Japanese official statements, policies, and potential responses to a crisis must take into account the extensive domestic political, legal, and constitutional constraints on Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) operations in a regional contingency (i.e., one in which Japan has not itself suffered an armed attack), and which do not apply in the U.S. case. This includes any potential military conflict across the Taiwan Strait, even one in which the U.S. military was already involved. Much recent commentary—especially those asserting a Japanese pre-commitment to Taiwan’s defense, overlooks these complicated realities.

So, What Explains the Shifting Rhetoric in Japan since 2021? Three Major Developments over the Past Decade

To say that much recent commentary overreaches in claiming radical change in Japan’s (still) publicly ambiguous posture toward a possible cross-Strait conflict is not to say that the past decade has not witnessed significant developments affecting thinking in Tokyo (and Washington)

---

about the U.S.-Japan alliance’s possible role. The confluence of three over the past year has been particularly important in focusing Japanese leaders’ attention on cross-Strait peace and stability.

First, over the past decade a rapidly worsening strategic environment has become a dominant theme in contemporary Japanese security policy discourse. Specific to a possible Taiwan contingency, the military balance-of-power is objectively shifting in Beijing’s favor, heightening concerns in Tokyo about the robustness of Taiwan/U.S.-centered cross-Strait deterrence. Two developments last year directly contributed to focusing Japanese policymakers, politicians, commentators, and scholars on this changing reality. First, high-profile March 2021 testimonies by the then-current and nominee to head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command attracted significant attention in Japan. These testimonies sounded an alarm about the potentially short time horizon before Beijing may attempt forceful unification with Taiwan, and the possibility of success.23 Second, throughout the year the PLA engaged in live-fire drills, exercises, and increased air sorties largely unprecedented in scope, scale, and frequency, and which occurred near Taiwan (and thus Japan’s southwestern islands—including the contested Senkaku Islands, which Japan administers but which Beijing claims as “Diaoyu” and which have become a major flashpoint in Japan-PRC relations since 2012). Both these developments were widely reported in Japanese media and amplified by prominent defense experts and Taiwan-friendly voices within and outside the government.

Second, the historic April 2021 Biden-Suga summit statement gave unprecedentedly high-profile, mainstream and bilateral attention to “the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait” in a lengthy paragraph criticizing—by name—China for what the allies perceive as its coercive policies and “unilateral attempts to change the status quo.” The statement also called for Japan to “bolster its own national defense capabilities to further strengthen the Alliance and regional security,” to “enhance deterrence and response capabilities,” and “to deepen defense cooperation across all domains.”24 A decade of worsening Japanese threat perceptions vis-à-vis Beijing, especially owing to the latter’s more active/coercive assertion of its claim to the Senkakus (~100 miles from Taiwan), had already contributed to major shifts in JSDF force posture to southwestern Japan and a historic expansion of JSDF legal authorities and U.S.-Japan defense

24 “U.S.-Japan Joint Leaders’ Statement.”
cooperation during the 2014-2016 period. As discussed below, although at the time a possible Taiwan contingency was not a primary motivator of these reforms, they nevertheless carry major implications for cross-Strait deterrence and the JSDF’s and alliance’s potential roles in the event of one today. As reflected in the Biden-Suga statement, these general trends have heightened U.S. expectations for Japan to contribute more to regional security.

Third, a general worsening of authoritarian China’s image among most major democracies, exacerbated by the historic crackdown in Hong Kong, the COVID-19 pandemic, and external measures widely seen outside China as coercive toward its neighbors (including but not limited to Taiwan), has amplified calls in Japan for greater solidarity among “like-minded” democracies and to accelerate the years-long expansion of “unofficial” political, economic, and people-to-people ties as part of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” vision. Though—importantly—such calls for greater support for Taiwan as a fellow democracy and closer Japan-Taiwan cooperation generally stop far short of explicit calls for military-military cooperation, much less a defense commitment to Taiwan, extremely friendly people-to-people ties and increasingly robust legislative exchanges have reshaped the broader context in which Japanese leaders and the public react to perceived threats from Beijing to Taiwan’s democracy and effective autonomy. Most notably, last September LDP politician Kishida Fumio—then without a government post but just one month away from election as Japan’s 100th prime minister—highlighted Taiwan’s significance “on the front lines of the clash between authoritarianism and democracy,” noted the necessity of U.S.-Japan cooperation to address associated challenges, and called for robust discussions about a Taiwan contingency.

In sum, 2021 witnessed a remarkable mainstreaming of political and public discourse in Japan about Taiwan, cross-Strait peace and stability, and Japan-Taiwan relations. Especially outside Japan, however, much of it unfolded with insufficient nuance and recognition of the longstanding ambiguities of Japan’s Taiwan policy, especially as it concerns its response to a possible cross-Strait conflict, and the globally unique domestic political, legal, and constitutional

---


constraints that would inevitably factor into the response of Japan’s leaders, even in a scenario in which its U.S. ally was actively defending Taiwan. One consequence has been a noisy discourse that favors simplistic binaries rather than nuance, and which sometimes confuses more than it enlightens.

To begin identifying the signal and critically assessing whether Japan’s, and, by extension, the U.S.-Japan alliance’s, posture vis-a-vis a possible “Taiwan contingency” in fact underwent the transformative change in 2021 that many outside Japan asserted, a necessary first step is to baseline historically and to descry the status quo ex ante, with careful attention paid to Japanese-language primary and secondary sources, and perspectives.

**Japan, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and a “Taiwan Contingency” in Brief**

**Historical Perspective**

*Cold War Roots and Contemporary Legacies*

In the years following the effective end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 and throughout the early Cold War, there were important and formative differences between GOJ and U.S. government perspectives on, policies toward, and relations with Taiwan. Different approaches back then carried important legacies into the future, including today. Most importantly, Japan never made any security commitment to Taiwan or stationed JSDF personnel there, and throughout the Cold War Japan’s government effectively resisted U.S. efforts to hold robust bilateral discussions on potential allied cooperation in a regional contingency, including a cross-Strait conflict.

Although under significant U.S. pressure in 1952 Japan’s newly sovereign and U.S.-aligned government recognized the anti-communist ROC government seated in Taipei as “China,” at no point during the Cold War did GOJ (nor any other U.S. treaty ally) make a defense commitment to the ROC, much less deploy military forces there. This approach was in stark contrast to the U.S. government, which in response to perceived PRC aggression against Taiwan in 1954-55 (aka the “First Taiwan Strait Crisis”) signed a mutual defense treaty with Taipei and began stationing U.S. forces in Taiwan. For good measure, in January 1955 Congress also passed the Formosa Resolution authorizing President Eisenhower to employ the U.S. military “for the
specific purpose of securing and protecting Formosa and the Pescadores against armed attack.””28 Although then and during a second cross-Strait crisis in 1958 GOJ leaders expressed both their concerns about the threat to “East Asia’s peace and stability” and their hope for a “peaceful resolution” (heiwateki kaiketsu), they basically judged that Japan had neither an interest in, nor the ability to actively play, a meaningful role.29 Coupled with the U.S.’s 1945-1972 occupation of 450-mile-long Okinawa prefecture, whose western-most tip is ~70 miles from Taiwan’s east coast), throughout the early Cold War Tokyo generally saw a possible cross-Strait conflict primarily as a concern for Washington and its ROC ally—not for Japan or the U.S.-Japan security partnership.

By the 1970s, geopolitical developments—especially U.S.-China rapprochement—significantly reduced U.S. and Japanese concerns about a cross-Strait conflict. President Nixon’s historic 1972 opening and visit to the PRC, Tokyo’s and Washington’s subsequent decisions to switch diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1972 and 1979, respectively, and diminished cross-Strait tensions after Chiang Kai-shek’s and Mao Zedong’s deaths in 1975 and 1976, respectively, lowered tensions significantly. Against this backdrop of improving U.S.-PRC relations, the Carter Administration’s unilateral abrogation of the U.S.-ROC mutual defense pact and withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Taiwan (a condition for normalizing ties with Beijing) further reduced Japanese concerns. In short, by the Cold War’s second half (the 1970s-1980s), the “Golden Age” of extensive U.S.-Japan-PRC strategic alignment against Moscow, coupled with significant economic cooperation,30 caused concerns about escalation over Taiwan to fade significantly.

Nevertheless, at key moments during the Cold War the U.S. did attempt to get Japan to discuss allied cooperation in a hypothetical regional contingency, including one involving Taiwan. But U.S. efforts bore little fruit. As Michael Green notes, Washington “squeezed an official expression of support from Japan for the U.S. defense commitment to Taiwan only once—in the

29 Author’s review of dozens of Diet meeting records from 1954-1955; 1958. Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shitsutemu (National Diet Minutes Archive), https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/. Beyond the question of leaders’ political will and judgments about national interests, the capabilities of Japan’s recently-established Self-Defense Forces (JSDF; est 1954) were extremely limiting. So, too, were, the unique constraints on JSDF development and employment under GOJ’s interpretation of the (U.S.-drafted) 1947 Constitution’s Article 9 “peace clause.” The interpretation at the time, inter alia, prohibited “offensive” capabilities and using force in any scenario in which Japan itself had not suffered an armed attack.
1969 Nixon-Sato communique—when negotiating pressure to secure the return of Okinawa led the Japanese government to concede that ‘maintaining peace in Taiwan region is also an important element in Japan’s national security.’”  

Importantly, even in this case the statement of support was for the U.S. commitment to Taiwan; Japan made no commitment of its own, much less reference the possibility of U.S.-Japan cooperation or a JSDF role if conflict broke out.

A decade later, during negotiations over the 1978 U.S.-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation, which for the first time laid down how the allies could actually cooperate in a conflict, Washington again failed to extract a GOJ commitment to support the defense of Taiwan. Negotiations over the Guidelines focused narrowly on how the allies would respond in the event Japan itself suffered a direct attack (e.g., a Soviet invasion). GOJ successfully resisted U.S. pressure to include a response to a regional contingency. Instead, the U.S.-Japan alliance’s first-ever Guidelines merely called vaguely for future consultations and “studies” on cooperation “in the case of situations in the Far East outside of Japan which will have an important influence on the security of Japan.”

In short, the Cold War came to an end without the allies having ever carried robust consultations on cooperation in a Taiwan contingency. Japan’s leaders effectively parried U.S. requests to do so. They were not ambivalent about Taiwan or cross-Strait peace and stability; rather, they generally saw a possible cross-Strait conflict as a U.S./U.S.-ROC alliance concern—not one in which the JSDF would play any role. More generally, GOJ negotiators resisted U.S. efforts even to discuss, much less formally commit Japan (or the JSDF) to a role in, any regional contingency.

Nevertheless, three Cold-War-era alliance-related developments carry important legacies for thinking about possible U.S.-Japan cooperation in a potential cross-strait conflict today:

1. **The “Far East” clause (Article VI) of the revised (1960) U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty**, which is still in effect, reads: “For the purpose of contributing to the security of Japan and the maintenance of international peace and security in the Far East, the United States of America

---

31 Michael J. Green, Japan’s Reluctant Realism: Foreign Policy Challenges in an Era of Uncertain Power (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 88–89.
32 Ibid.
33 Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shitsutemu, April 26, 1979; Akihiro Sado, “Nihon no anzen hosho seisaku to Taiwan,” Chukyo Hogaku 51, 2-3 (2017): 188.
is granted the use by its land, air and naval forces of facilities and areas in Japan.” Though Tokyo and Washington defined “the Far East” (kyokutō) vaguely, they stipulated that it includes areas north of the Philippines, including South Korea and those “under the Republic of China’s control.” (Readers should note, however, that Article VI refers only to potential operations by U.S. forces in Japan—it says nothing about a JSDF role in a regional contingency, much less commits it to one.) Furthermore, a 1960 exchange of diplomatic notes committed Washington to engage in “prior consultation” (jizen kyōgi) before deploying U.S. forces in Japan for combat operations in a regional (non-“defense of Japan”) contingency. GOJ’s official position today continues to assume the U.S. government is committed not to act against its wishes, though whether that implies a potential veto seems ambiguous.

2. The 1969 Nixon-Sato Communique’s “Taiwan Clause,” which reads: “The Prime Minister [Sato Eisaku] said that the maintenance of peace and security in the Taiwan area was also a most important factor for the security of Japan.” Importantly, this statement directly links Japan’s security to “peace and security in the Taiwan area.” That said, as noted above, historical context is key for interpreting the 1969 statement’s significance. This conspicuously unilateral single sentence—the only reference to “the Taiwan area” in a 20th-century U.S.-Japan joint statement—was a major Japanese concession amid intense negotiations over the reversion of U.S.-occupied Okinawa to GOJ administration. (The U.S. side sought reassurance that it would be able to use its bases there (near Taiwan) in the event of a cross-Strait contingency) As with Article VI, however, the clause related only to whether Tokyo might support the U.S. military’s deploying from bases in Japan for combat operations in a regional contingency. This unilateral 1969 statement neither said nor implied JSDF playing a role, even supporting U.S. forces. If JSDF were mobilized in a contingency, it was to be in defense of Japan; not Taiwan itself. Also worth noting as it concerns historical context: Japanese leaders agreed to include this single sentence assuming

---

38 “Nichibei anpo taisei Q&A.”
a cross-Strait conflict was extremely unlikely. Prime Minister Sato himself noted at the time that an armed attack against Taiwan “cannot be foreseen.”

Those important caveats aside, according to Sato, with the 1969 “Taiwan Clause” Japan had for the first time identified an “external armed attack” against the ROC as “a threat to the peace and security of the Far East, including Japan’s.” He called abstractly for GOJ to factor that into any Japanese response to a U.S. request to use U.S. forces in Japan to uphold Washington’s treaty commitment to Taiwan. Sato’s framing again makes clear that GOJ primarily saw Taiwan’s defense through the lens of the U.S.-ROC alliance, not as a contingency in which JSDF had a role to play—either direct or supporting the U.S. military.

Nevertheless, the 1969 “Taiwan clause” was historically significant. It constituted Japan’s political—though not legal—statement of interest in cooperating with Washington for regional peace and stability. It reduced the likelihood of Japan resisting through the “prior consultation” mechanism a potential U.S. effort to deploy U.S. forces from Japan in a cross-Strait contingency. And it demonstrates that contemporary GOJ acknowledgments of a link between “the Taiwan area” and both Japan’s security and regional stability have a more than half-century-old precedent—undermining recent assertions that similar language from Japanese leaders and politicians over the past year-plus is unprecedented.

However, the 1969 “Taiwan Clause’s” timing also raises questions about its lasting legacy, and contemporary significance. After all, the Nixon-Sato communique was promulgated at a time when both Japan and the United States had diplomatic relations with Taipei, and the U.S.-ROC mutual defense agreement was still in effect. Just three years later, however, GOJ switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to the PRC, effectively ending official ties with Taiwan. And in 1979, the Carter Administration followed suit—simultaneously abrogating the U.S. defense commitment to Taipei that had been central to Sato’s linkage of an “external armed attack” against the ROC and “the peace and security of the Far East, including Japan’s.” It would not be until 2005—under vastly different geopolitical circumstances 36 years later—that the allies would again even mention the Taiwan Strait in a joint statement.

---

42 Ibid.
43 Akihiro Sado, “Nihon no anzen hosho seisaku to Taiwan,” 180.
3. **GOJ’s official 1972 positions on Taiwan’s status and “peaceful resolution” of cross-Strait frictions.** As noted above, in September 1972 GOJ formally recognized Beijing “as the sole legal Government of China,” effectively ending diplomatic relations with Taipei. However, Tokyo did not officially recognize Beijing’s claim that Taiwan is part of the PRC.45

GOJ’s vague 1972 position on Taiwan’s status carries three important legacies with continued relevance today, the first two of which relate directly to potential U.S.-Japan security cooperation in a cross-Strait conflict: First, it enabled Tokyo to resist significant pressure from Beijing (and within Japan) to use U.S.-PRC rapprochement and Japan-PRC diplomatic normalization to reinterpret or revise the 1960 U.S.-Japan security treaty to exclude Taiwan from “the Far East.”46 Second, it facilitated GOJ’s subsequent adoption of an official, if neutral, position expressing “hope for the issues relating to Taiwan to be resolved peacefully through direct talks between concerned parties on both sides of the Strait.”47 By GOJ’s own admission, these twin 1972 positions remain the core pillars of Japan’s Taiwan policy 50 years later.48 Lastly, beyond the security domain it has allowed Japan-Taiwan ties and practical cooperation to expand significantly, even if their relationship remains officially “non-governmental.”49

**Post-Cold War Allied Concerns about a Regional Contingency and Contemporary Legacies**

The Soviet Union’s 1991 collapse eliminated both the primary geostrategic rationale motivating the post-1972 U.S.-Japan-PRC “golden age” of strategic cooperation and the feared armed invasion scenario upon which the only (1978) U.S.-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation had focused. Together with a 1993-1994 war scare on the Korean Peninsula after revelations about North Korea’s secret nuclear weapons program, this transformed regional reality motivated the Clinton administration to conduct major reviews of U.S. East Asia strategy.50 This effort was well under way before the PLA commenced large-scale military exercises to intimidate rapidly democratizing Taiwan, especially on the eve of its first direct presidential election in March

---

49 Adam P. Liff (accepted subject to minor revisions), “Japan, Taiwan, and the ‘One China’ Framework after 50 Years,” The China Quarterly.
1996. However, the so-called 1995-1996 “Third Taiwan Strait Crisis”—the first since 1958—contributed to growing calls for Japan and the alliance to play greater roles in regional stability. Of particular concern for Japan, the 1996 crisis entailed PLA missile tests that splashed down less than 40 miles from Japanese territory, and Washington’s decision to deploy two aircraft battle groups (one without even informing Tokyo). 51

Though a robust discussion of the “Third Taiwan Strait Crisis” is beyond this article’s scope, one consequence was that the crisis revealed how poorly prepared Japan and the U.S.-Japan alliance were for an actual regional contingency, especially one across the Taiwan Strait. 52 The decades of GOJ resistance to robust alliance discussions introduced above, the 1978 Guidelines’ effective punting on future consultations and “studies” about allied cooperation outside a strict “defense of Japan” scenario, and an apparent U.S. assumption that its overwhelming conventional superiority meant it did not need Japan’s help deterring China, all present as factors in the allies’ failure to coordinate effectively in 1995-1996. As the U.S. deputy chief of mission in Tokyo during the crisis later reflected: “there were no discussions whatsoever during the China-Taiwan crisis on how the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty would be applied or how both countries would respond in terms of the treaty.” 53 Even after the crisis was over, the allies remained reluctant to jointly comment publicly. For example, although the landmark April 1996 U.S.-Japan Joint Declaration on Security—released just a few weeks after the last and most provocative round of PLA exercises—recognized the urgency of U.S.-Japan cooperation in a regional contingency, it referred only to the Korean Peninsula. It did not mention Taiwan or the Taiwan Strait. 54

Nevertheless, the combination of the Soviet Union’s collapse, the 1993-1994 nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula, and the first major military crisis across the Taiwan Strait since the 1950s prompted extensive consultations about U.S.-Japan security cooperation beyond a strict “defense of Japan” scenario. The public result of greatest consequence was the **first-ever (1997) revision of the 1978 U.S.-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation**. Though not legally binding, the 1997 Guidelines expanded the alliance’s mandate beyond peacetime deterrence and “an armed attack against Japan” to include Japan potentially providing facilities; rear-area support, such as

---

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 398.
supply, transportation, and maintenance “primarily in Japanese territory”; and intelligence gathering, surveillance and minesweeping to U.S. forces operating in “areas surrounding Japan that will have an important influence on Japan’s peace and security.” Japan’s 1999 legislation, which enshrined key aspects of the Guidelines in domestic law, defined such “situations in areas surrounding Japan” (SIAS-J) as those “which could lead to a direct attack on [Japan] if no action is taken.”

The 1997 Guidelines’ applicability to a Taiwan-related contingency was left rather ambiguous, however. To avoid upsetting Beijing and give Japan flexibility in a crisis, neither the bilateral Guidelines nor Japan’s 1999 legislation contained any reference to “Taiwan” or the “Taiwan area/Strait.” Furthermore, the allies defined the Guidelines’ scope vaguely as “not geographic but situational.” Though GOJ successfully resisted pressure from Beijing to explicitly exclude a Taiwan contingency, signals from Japan’s political leaders were mixed. In 1997, the then-LDP secretary-general reportedly told PRC counterparts that the Guidelines’ focus was a Korean Peninsula contingency, and that the Taiwan Strait was an issue for U.S.-PRC relations, not Japan-PRC relations. Fearing that Beijing would misinterpret this LDP official’s statement as the official Japanese government position, however, Japan’s chief cabinet secretary publicly suggested that the Guidelines could include a cross-Strait conflict. Behind closed doors, Japanese diplomats also sent similar signals to Beijing. In the end, GOJ’s public position on the Guidelines’ applicability to a Taiwan Strait contingency was the impressively vague “it couldn’t be said that Taiwan wasn’t included.”

Nevertheless, in the 1997 Guidelines the allies achieved what the U.S. had for decades sought but which GOJ had successfully resisted throughout the Cold War: bilateral agreement on a framework for possible cooperation in a regional contingency, including (theoretically, at least) one involving Taiwan. Importantly, however, the Guidelines did not commit either country to respond to a potential PRC attack on Taiwan, to do so together, or to play any specific roles in one.

58 Hitoshi Tanaka and Soichiro Tahara, Kokka to gaiko (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2005), 160-61.
59 Funabashi, Alliance Adrift, 399–400.
As a young LDP lawmaker named Abe Shinzo interpreted their implication in 1999, Japan’s goal was “strategic ambiguity (senryakutekina aimaisa), and to avoid an extreme worsening of diplomatic ties [with China] that would come from being more specific.” This approach mirrored the Clinton administration’s explicit, but also intentionally ambiguous, message to Beijing: that the U.S. response to a threat to Taiwan would “depend on the circumstances.”

The U.S.-Japan Alliance and a “Taiwan Contingency” Today

China’s rapid 21st-century economic growth and surging investment in military modernization and expansion has radically reshaped the cross-Strait and regional balance of power—something Japan’s defense minister now openly acknowledges. For example, whereas Taiwan’s and China’s respective defense budgets were roughly equivalent during the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis (and at the time both less than one-fourth Japan’s and one-twentieth the U.S.’), today Beijing spends roughly 20-times as much as Taiwan (and five-times Japan). Furthermore, though the U.S. spends significantly more, its military power is globally distributed and it has global commitments—something the recent deployment of thousands of U.S. troops to reinforce NATO allies throws into sharp relief. In contrast, since at least the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, developing the ability to coerce or use military force to subjugate Taiwan and deter, delay or defeat possible U.S. efforts to aid it have guided China’s rapid military modernization. China’s leaders deem “full reunification” with Taiwan to be the “greatest and final obstacle” for achieving the “national rejuvenation” that permeates contemporary CCP rhetoric, including major speeches by Xi Jinping. Simply put, opposing and containing “Taiwan independence” is Beijing’s core national defense aim.

Meanwhile, Taiwan’s 1990s democratization necessitates that any cross-Strait modus vivendi acceptable to Taipei now also be acceptable to its diverse electorate, which is deeply

60 Kokkai kaigiroku kensaku shitsutemu, April 1, 1999.
61 Then-U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye, quoted in Funabashi, Alliance Adrift, 395.
skeptical of Beijing’s intentions. Though neither major political party in Taiwan considers Taiwan part of the PRC, Beijing has particular contempt for the left-of-center Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which has been in power 14 of the past 21 years (2000-2008; 2016-) and basically rejects the idea of both sides of the Strait being part of even a vaguely-defined “One China.” This changing political, economic, and strategic context challenges Tokyo’s traditional approach across multiple fronts.\(^{67}\) And Beijing is watching Japan’s response closely. As a study in the PRC’s Ministry of State Security-affiliated journal cautioned about deepening Japan-Taiwan ties: the PRC “should be on high alert” (gaodu jingti).\(^{68}\)

Though after the 1969 Nixon-Sato communique the allies for decades avoided joint alliance comment on cross-Strait issues, that had actually changed long before the 2021 Biden-Suga statement recently attracted global attention. At the 2005 U.S.-Japan foreign and defense ministerial dialogue (“2+2”), worsening cross-Strait frictions under, and Beijing’s threats against, Taiwan’s first DPP president led the allies to list “Encourag[ing] the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait through dialogue” as a “common strategic objective.”\(^{69}\) After cross-strait tensions relaxed considerably under KMT President Ma Ying-jeou (2008-2016), the 2011 U.S.-Japan 2+2 joint statement “welcomed the progress to date in improving cross-Strait relations,” while reiterating the earlier call for “peaceful resolution [through dialogue].”\(^{70}\) The latter was the final public, bilateral, and official word from the allies on cross-Strait issues until the March 2021 2+2, followed by the Biden-Suga summit one month later.

Since Ma left office in 2016, by most objective measures cross-Strait stability has worsened considerably, and not only because of a changing power balance. Despite DPP President Tsai Ing-wen’s (2016-) pro-status quo orientation, the PRC has refused to engage in “quasi-official” dialogue and employed an increasingly diverse coercive toolkit toward Taiwan, escalating significantly in 2020-2021. These worsening cross-Strait frictions have combined with Beijing’s post-2020 crackdown in Hong Kong and the more general worsening of U.S.-PRC and Japan-PRC tensions to catalyze sea changes in Japanese and U.S. discourse about the urgency of more

---

\(^{67}\) Liff, “Japan, Taiwan, and the ‘One China’ Framework after 50 Years.”


proactive support of cross-Strait peace, and Taiwan’s democracy and effective autonomy. It was in this far more volatile context that the April 2021 Biden-Suga summit’s call for “peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait” and a “peaceful resolution” took on additional significance.

**Key Security Alliance-Related Developments since 2012: Implications for a Taiwan Contingency**

Against the backdrop of a rapidly worsening regional security environment, during the second prime-ministership of Shinzo Abe (2012-2020) GOJ accelerated major reforms to Japan’s national security-relevant institutions, policy, and posture and, together with Washington, significantly strengthened the U.S.-Japan alliance and expanded the scope of conceivable cooperation in a conflict scenario—including one not necessarily involving a direct attack on territory under Japan’s administration. Concomitant with the aforementioned efforts by Japan to bolster and reposition JSDF capabilities over the past decade, the allies have deepened interoperability, coordination, training, exercises and cooperation across the full spectrum of possible conflicts. Some of this cooperation also includes other U.S. security allies and partners (e.g., Australia). 71 Though the major reforms—most of which, incidentally, were achieved during 2012-2016, a period of relative cross-Strait calm—were not primarily motivated by a possible Taiwan contingency, some have important implications for both deterrence and how Japan—and the alliance—could conceivably respond to one today.

Of arguably greatest significance for thinking about possible alliance cooperation in a Taiwan contingency today are three developments over the past decade: the April 2015 revision of the U.S.-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation, the “peace and security legislation” passed by Japan’s Diet several months later, and the fact that efforts to bolster deterrence against a feared PRC fait accompli vis-à-vis the Senkakus have resulted in major shifts in JSDF force structure and posture toward Japan’s southwestern islands in the East China Sea. These included Japan standing up amphibious forces for the first time since 1945, procuring F-35Bs and longer-range missiles, and deploying advanced radar, missile, and other capabilities on its theretofore

---

71 For an overview and post-mortem of these reforms under Abe, see Adam P. Liff, “Japan’s Defense Reforms under Abe.”
unmilitarized remote southwestern islands —i.e., those that are nearest the Senkakus (and which also happen to be relatively close to Taiwan).\footnote{Ibid; for a concise and general (not Taiwan-specific) overview of alliance obligations, expectations, and Japan’s post-2015 legal permissions, interpretations, and restrictions on the JSDF, see Hornung, “Japan’s Potential Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency,” chap. 8.}

It is important to note that, as was the case with their 1990s’ forebears, neither the 2015 Guidelines nor Japan’s security legislation refer to “Taiwan” or the “Taiwan Strait.” They also do not\footnote{Takahiro Tsuchiya, “Shin ‘chuka chitsujo’ shita no nichibei domei to Taiwan yuji.”} obligate either ally to play any role in any particular regional contingency (i.e., one in which Japan itself has not been attacked). In short, what role, if any, either party would play—separately or together—in a cross-Strait conflict remains ambiguous and will inevitably depend on the specifics of the contingency and political leaders’ judgments about the appropriate response.\footnote{For an overview, see Adam P. Liff, “Policy by Other Means: Collective Self-Defense and the Politics of Japan’s Postwar Constitutional Reinterpretations,” \textit{Asia Policy}, 24 (2017): 139–72. A summary of the three conditions can be found on 160-163. See also Hornung, “Japan’s Potential Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency”}

Though these three post-2012 developments were not motivated primarily by a hypothetical Taiwan contingency, Japanese and alliance-related security reforms over the past decade nevertheless significantly expand the options now available to Japanese leaders (and the allies) in the event of one. Of particular significance, a 2014 Cabinet Decision “reinterpreted” a decades-old Japanese constitutional prohibition on the UN-sanctioned right of collective self-defense to allow limited exercise under three conditions for use of force unique to Japan: Japan’s “national survival” (\textit{kuni no sonritsu}) must be threatened by a “clear danger” (\textit{meihakuna kiken}); no alternative means of addressing the threat can exist; and whatever force Japan uses must be limited to the minimum necessary. Inter alia, the reinterpretation allowed for the JSDF to use force when “an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan occurs and as a result threatens Japan’s survival.”\footnote{“Security laws usher in new era for pacifist Japan,” \textit{Japan Times}, March 29, 2016.}

Though the public attention at the time was on how this expanded Japan’s (and the alliance’s) options in a conflict—Abe famously declared “we [the U.S. and Japan] can defend eachother from now on”\footnote{“Security laws usher in new era for pacifist Japan,” \textit{Japan Times}, March 29, 2016.}—often missing from the discourse was an appreciation of their \textit{limited} and conditional nature. Eight years later, these conditions continue to operate as practically significant constraints on the circumstances under which the JSDF could use force outside a “defense of Japan” scenario. However, together with the new legal authorities that resulted from Japan’s 2015 security legislation, the net effect of the 2014-2015 reforms was to enable (but not
to oblige) the JSDF to play a far more robust support and, under certain strict conditions, combat role even if no armed attack against Japan has occurred (or is imminent). Additionally, the 2015 U.S.-Japan Guidelines newly facilitated and expanded other forms of bilateral security cooperation, planning, and real-time alliance coordination, including in peace-time or “gray zone” contingencies. All carry potential implications for possible preparations for, and cooperation in, a Taiwan contingency.

What Role Could Japan (Legally) Play in a Taiwan Contingency Today?

The nuances of Japan’s “positive list” legal authorities governing JSDF operations are famously complicated, as are constitutional and self-imposed policy constraints on use of force/use of weapons. Furthermore, judgments about whether and under what authorities the JSDF could be mobilized specifically in a cross-Strait crisis will inevitably hinge on political decisions in Tokyo based on specific circumstances. Thus, it could be said that Japan’s posture is doubly ambiguous—due to (1) its vague official position on Taiwan’s status and reluctance to pre-commit to any particular course of action in a Taiwan contingency, and, more generally, (2) Japan’s unique constitutional and legal constraints on developing and employing force.

For these reasons, widespread claims in recent months that Japan “would” take any particular action in a cross-Strait conflict are problematic. That said, in theory at least, since 2015 there are basically three roles that the JSDF could play in a military conflict over Taiwan. In the case of #2 and #3, the aforementioned three conditions stipulated in the 2014 (partial) reinterpretation of Article 9 would need to be met.

1) Non-combat logistical and other support activities for the U.S. military (or others): If the PRC had not attacked Japan but Japanese leaders judged that the contingency had an “important influence” on Japan’s peace and security, they could order the JSDF to provide various logistical and other non-combat support for U.S. (or other) military forces. These measures could include sharing intelligence, conducting surveillance or reconnaissance, refueling U.S. warships or aircraft, protecting U.S. bases in Japan, and assisting with evacuation of noncombatants (via Japan). Importantly, JSDF could undertake these activities only outside GOJ-defined “combat zones.”

Adam P. Liff, “Policy by Other Means.”
(2) **Countering attacks against the U.S. military (or others):** If Japan’s leaders judged that a PRC armed attack against a “foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan”—presumably, though not necessarily limited to, U.S. forces defending Taiwan—had escalated to constitute a “threat to Japan’s survival,” they could exercise the UN Charter-sanctioned right of collective self-defense and order the JSDF to get involved, up to and including possible use of force.

(3) **Countering attacks against Japan:** if China carried out an armed attack against Japanese territory (to include U.S. facilities in Japan), Japan’s leaders could exercise the UN Charter-sanctioned right of individual self-defense and order the JSDF to get involved, up to and including possible use of force.77

**Discussion: Separating Signal from Noise, Caveats, and Spaces to Watch**

As noted in this article’s introductory pages, developments over the past year-plus—and especially since the April 2021 Biden-Suga summit—have focused global attention on deepening concerns in Japan about the cross-Strait military balance, the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, and Japanese leaders emphasizing U.S.-Japan alliance-centered deterrence. Against the backdrop of longer-term alliance tightening, expanded security ties with other U.S. allies, general concerns about China’s military power and coercive policies, expanded JSDF capabilities in Japan’s southwest (near Taiwan), and new legal authorities introduced in 2015, GOJ and the U.S-Japan alliance are far more concerned about, and have a significantly expanded security toolkit to deter and—if deterrence fails—prepare to cooperate in a Taiwan contingency than ever before.

Nevertheless, that concerns have deepened and response options have expanded does not constitute evidence that GOJ’s core positions or policies have fundamentally changed, much less that Tokyo has somehow pre-committed to “defending Taiwan.” It has not. Widespread claims to the contrary the past year have drawn disproportionately—often exclusively—on English-language media headlines rather than careful, balanced, historically-grounded, and evidence-based analysis of Japan’s actual policies and positions, and reflect, to varying degrees, manifold analytical problems. Examples include:

---

• exaggerating the pace/scale of change by not adequately baselining historically (and thus overlooking the sustained ambiguity of and subtle shifts in Japan’s relevant positions before 2021, as well as past remarks by prominent leaders (see Table 1);
• inappropriately asserting that a few provocative and headline-making, but usually *unofficial*, remarks from famously outspoken and “pro-Taiwan” conservative politicians—key examples of which were distorted through problematic media reporting—reflect official government positions and policy, while discounting (or ignoring) contradictory evidence, especially repeated authoritative statements by GOJ officials;
• dubiously conflating the much longer-term deepening of political, economic, and people-to-people (if “unofficial”) ties between Japan and Taiwan outside the military domain—all very real—with an alleged defense commitment, operationally-relevant strategic shift, or deepening of Japan-Taiwan military ties (which basically do not exist);
• misleadingly using “would” and “could” interchangeably, when the latter is usually more appropriate given the dual ambiguities of Japan’s posture, while the former inappropriately implies ex ante certainty about Japan’s response to a cross-Strait conflict;
• drawing inappropriate inferences from often vague statements and poll questions that do not define ambiguous terms, such as “response,” “involvement,” and, most importantly, “Taiwan contingency” (*Taiwan yuji*);
• using imprecise and misleading language (e.g., claiming that “Japan commits to defend Taiwan” when what a given and usually vague statement or media report implies is only a possible JSDF role defending Japanese territory, or perhaps supporting the U.S. military; not defending Taiwan itself).

In short, much commentary over the past year has asserted transformative change where evidence is thin or mixed, at best. Going forward, carefully separating signal from noise will be important to accurately distill the truth from a complicated and evolving reality, and to prevent a possibly destabilizing misalignment of allied expectations, or worse, miscalculation, by policymakers in Washington or elsewhere. The stakes for regional peace and the global economy—and the millions of lives likely to be affected in Taiwan and beyond—are extremely high.
Viewed in appropriate historical context, claims of radical change in 2021 lose significant luster. Specifically, the past year’s developments, though significant, did not fundamentally shift Japan’s posture away from the allies’:

(1) 1960 agreements that the mutual security treaty includes Taiwan as part of the “Far East” and that Tokyo expects the U.S. to engage in “prior consultation” before deploying U.S. forces from Japan for combat operations in a regional contingency;

(2) respective vague 1970s’ positions on Taiwan’s status and repeated calls since 1972 for “peaceful resolution” of the cross-Strait dispute through dialogue;

(3) respective 1990s’ assertions that the applicability of the alliance to a cross-Strait contingency will “depend on the situation;”

(4) 2005 identification of “Encourag[ing] the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait through dialogue” as a “common strategic objective.” (Even the historic April 2021 Biden-Suga statements referred to “peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait”; conspicuously avoiding explicit mention of “Taiwan” or taking sides)

Carefully distinguishing between remarks by politicians and official government rhetoric/policy is also crucial. This is not to say that political rhetoric cannot be important, but it is often not representative and does not necessarily reflect official government policy. As such, it should be contextualized and discounted appropriately. For example, Abe’s global headline-making December 2021 remarks (partially quoted on page 1) were those of an influential politician, not a government official. Abe and his family are famously “pro-Taiwan” and have a long track record of forward-leaning statements dating back a quarter-century. It is worth noting that despite his longstanding personal views, he conspicuously avoided making any remotely similar statement while serving as Japan’s longest-ever-serving prime minister (2012-2020)—and, by many accounts, its most influential. Current Defense Minister Kishi, a former head of the supra-partisan Japan-Taiwan parliamentary friendship group (and Abe’s brother) is another example. Though Kishi is clearly concerned about Taiwan and has responded to worsening cross-Strait frictions and unprecedented domestic and global attention on a possible conflict by focusing the defense ministry more on the cross-Strait balance and Japan’s and the region’s stake in peace and stability,
even his most forward-leaning official statements as defense minister generally stick to longstanding GOJ positions, objective facts (e.g., Taiwan is close to Japanese territory; the cross-Strait balance is shifting), and vague calls to “pay more attention.”

Most importantly, important signals were lost in the noise of 2021: GOJ officials repeatedly reaffirmed the basic ambiguity at the heart of Japan’s posture—that Japan does not pre-commit to any particular course of action in the event of a conflict. For example, upon returning home from the April 2021 Biden-Suga summit, Suga clarified that although Japan sees an important role for the U.S.-Japan alliance in deterrence, GOJ does not “prejudge” whether it would be activated in a Taiwan contingency. Given repeated opportunities over the past year to endorse various headline-making remarks by conservative LDP politicians, e.g., several claims that a “Taiwan contingency” could constitute a “survival-threatening situation,” government officials replied vaguely. For example, they repeatedly stated that how Japan interprets a contingency and how it would respond depend on its “particular and concrete circumstances.” This official language in 2021 is roughly analogous to that from 1997, and nearly identical to what then-foreign minister in the Abe cabinet (and now PM) Kishida said in 2015.

None of this is to say that Japan is ambivalent about Taiwan or deterrence in the interest of peace and stability in the Strait, or that its posture or the role the JSDF could conceivably play in a cross-Strait conflict has been static as circumstances (and Japan’s capabilities and legal authorities) have evolved. Far from it. Since the 1970s, Japanese leaders have resisted pressure from Beijing to recognize the PRC’s claim of sovereignty over Taiwan, and to exclude Taiwan from the U.S.-Japan security treaty’s scope. They consistently call for peaceful resolution acceptable to both sides, and clearly believe that a war would have severe consequences for Japan. More recently, even official government rhetoric displays an interest in continuing to deepen “unofficial” ties with Taiwan and to explicitly identify Taipei as “an extremely crucial partner and an important friend, with which [Japan] shares basic values…” And outside the military domain the past decade has witnessed a remarkable deepening of practical Japan-Taiwan ties and cooperation, both independently and together with the United States and others.

78 Jiji, April 20, 2021.
80 MOFA, Diplomatic Bluebook 2021, 66.
81 Liff, “Japan, Taiwan, and the ‘One China’ Framework after 50 Years.”
But it is critical to also acknowledge what has not happened: Japan’s deepening cooperation with Taiwan remains non-military. Japan has never made a public commitment to support the U.S. military in a possible fight with China “over” Taiwan, much less to Taipei to defend Taiwan independently. Whatever action, if any, Japan would ultimately take if Beijing used military force against Taiwan will inevitably depend on top-level political judgments about the nature of the particular crisis, how it began, how Taiwan and the U.S. responded to PRC actions, the threat posed to Japan’s peace and security, and, at least to some extent, public opinion. Some recent hyperbolic commentary to the contrary, Japan’s government has for decades left as deliberately ambiguous Japan’s response to a Taiwan contingency. In this fundamental sense, Japan’s posture has not changed.

This should not be surprising, and not only because, as noted in the introduction, the position of Japan’s U.S. ally on both Taiwan’s status and how the U.S. would itself respond in the event of a cross-Strait military conflict are also ambiguous. Unlike NATO, the 1960 U.S.-Japan mutual security treaty does not give Japan fully reciprocal obligations; the latter’s Article V applies only to “an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan” (emphasis added). Though since 2015 the role(s) Japan (and the alliance) could play in a Taiwan contingency has expanded, neither the treaty itself, the non-binding 1978, 1997, or 2015 Guidelines, nor any Japanese legislation or declaratory policy legally obligates, much less pre-commits Japan to playing one—even if Washington decided to get involved militarily. And despite Japan’s historic 2014 constitutional reinterpretation to allow “limited collective self-defense,” the three conditions remain important. For example, unless Japan itself suffers an attack, the precondition for JSDF “use of force” remains an existential threat to Japan. And the “use of force” must be limited to “the minimum extent necessary.” Interpretations of both will inevitably be politically defined and approved.

**Looking ahead: Spaces to watch**

The most remarkable shift in 2021 was not official policy but, in response to political and geopolitical vicissitudes, an increased focus on and willingness of Japan’s leaders, both independently and together with their U.S. counterparts, to more candidly discuss the seriousness of the perceived threat to democratic Taiwan; the interests at stake; and, factoring in diplomatic, political, constitutional, and legal constraints, what can be done to bolster peacetime deterrence
and—possibly—to plan and prepare for a possible contingency. Though intra-alliance discussions are classified, recent media reports suggest more extensive dialogue than ever before, to include possible table-top exercises and/or operational planning focused specifically on a “Taiwan contingency.” Major changes may be on the horizon. A few questions to guide future research in assessing the pace and scope of change include:

- **What, if anything, will the Kishida administration’s review—currently underway—of Japan’s (2013) national security strategy and (2018) national defense program guidelines, as well as the next revision of the U.S.-Japan defense guidelines, say of relevance to a Taiwan contingency?**

- **Will the allies soon—for the first time—refer explicitly to “Taiwan” (rather than “the Taiwan Strait” or “cross-Strait issues”) in a joint statement, and if so, how?**

- **How, and to what extent, will the allies expand bilateral/multilateral operational planning for a Taiwan contingency?**

- **Do the allies have a shared understanding of what the U.S.’ 1960 commitment to “prior consultation” means for a cross-Strait contingency?**

- **Do the allies have a shared understanding of whether, and if so, how Taiwan’s ambiguous status might affect the role the JSDF could conceivably play in a conflict?**

- **What does public opinion say about the extent to which the Japanese public would support risking Japan’s first combat deaths and/or armed attacks against Japan since 1945 to aid the U.S. defending Taiwan against the PRC—Japan’s top trading partner, next-door neighbor, and the region’s most powerful military?**

---

83 Throughout 2021 many Japanese security experts raised an alleged lack of allied planning as a major concern, including to U.S. media. E.g., NPR, August 2, 2021.
85 Widespread popular affinity in Japan for Taiwan is well-established, but does not necessarily translate into popular support for fighting China in its defense. Limited polls on these questions to date, and their vague wording, provide ambiguous results (e.g., Nikkei Shim bun, April 26, 2021; TV Asahi, April 2021). Additionally, one recent Japanese expert group reportedly found that discussing a cross-Strait military conflict has been taboo in Japan for so long that “Japan has very little knowledge, concerns, and awareness about the Taiwan issue”—including, presumably, what the potential consequences of Japan supporting Taiwan in a U.S.-China war could be. Program on U.S.-Japan Relations. Until these circumstances change, it is difficult to judge where public opinion actually stands.
• **Will Japan and Taiwan develop bilateral military/intelligence ties/cooperation, either directly or through the United States?**

### Conclusion

Widespread claims to the contrary over the past year-plus, the foundational elements of Japan’s ambiguous official posture toward a possible Taiwan Strait contingency have not fundamentally changed—at least not publicly. Nevertheless, real-world cross-Strait vicissitudes have understandably focused Japanese media, officials, commentators, and scholars on peace and stability, and the impact a possible conflict could have on Japan, the U.S.-Japan alliance, the region, and the world. Amid rapidly changing regional balances-of-power, fears of weakening deterrence vis-à-vis China, and worsening cross-Strait and U.S.-China frictions, political elites in Japan, on balance, regard the current situation as increasingly precarious and appear more willing than ever to openly call for deeper allied cooperation. Implied, though as yet difficult to judge from publicly-available sources, is possible new urgency to deepen U.S.-Japan contingency and other forms of bilateral planning to enhance deterrence, and to prepare for the worst if deterrence fails.

But barring an unforeseen crisis, major changes to Japan’s longstanding public positions seem unlikely. Japan has not publicly committed to Taiwan’s defense, within or without an alliance framework. Rather, exactly 50 years after adopting a vague official stance on Taiwan’s status and expressing “hope for the issues relating to Taiwan to be resolved peacefully through direct talks” (1972), and exactly 25 years after officially stating the 1997 U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines’ applicability to a regional contingency was “situational, not geographical,” Japan’s position on the U.S.-Japan alliance’s applicability to a cross-Strait conflict remains ambiguous. Throughout 2021, GOJ officials, including the prime minister himself, reasserted their reluctance to publicly “pre-judge” how Japan—or the allies—would respond to a hypothetical contingency. Nevertheless, though themselves not primarily motivated by consideration of Taiwan, national security and alliance reforms since the 1990s, and especially since 2015, have significantly expanded the possibilities for allied cooperation and a more robust JSDF role in a regional contingency, in peacetime, in the context of an armed attack, or somewhere in between.

---

86 Japan has no active-duty military exchanges, training, or exercises with, nor does it sell or transfer military technology to, Taiwan.
As indicated by Abe’s December 2021 statement (page 1) and various commentary over the past year, even setting aside the possible response of its U.S. ally, an increasingly prominent school of thought among Japanese conservative politicians and security experts holds that a Taiwan contingency would have profound negative consequences for Japan’s national security. Reasons given include: Taiwan’s proximity to Japan’s southwestern islands (especially Yonaguni and the contested Senkakus) and vital sea lanes, thousands of Japanese citizens and economic interests there, and the potentially catastrophic impact a conflict may have on the global economy. Coupled with GOJ’s evolving official position on Taiwan’s importance to Japan as a “crucial partner and an important friend, with which [Japan] shares basic values,” some Japanese experts argue this makes it likely that if the U.S. decided to get involved militarily then Japan would at least provide some non-combat support for U.S. forces.87 But such assertions appear to be conjecture, well-informed though it may be in key cases. If a conflict over Taiwan ever occurs, the ultimate decision about how Japan responds will rest with its political leaders at the time—not all of whom may share the views of the most outspoken political and expert voices on these issues.

Regardless of how Japan would respond to a cross-Strait conflict, at least in peacetime alliance cooperation aimed at strengthening deterrence, including possible Taiwan-focused contingency planning, seems likely to deepen, even if declaratory policy does not change. For Japan’s leaders, Taiwan is not merely a security concern. In this regard, the famously-moderate Kishida’s remarks in the weeks before becoming prime minister last autumn are revealing of how much the political ground may have shifted in recent years. He highlighted democratic Taiwan’s status “on the front lines of the clash between authoritarianism and democracy,” noted the necessity of U.S.-Japan cooperation to address associated challenges, called for robust discussions about a Taiwan contingency,88 flagged cross-Strait dynamics as “a major issue for Japanese foreign policy,”89 and called on Japan to confront associated challenges in partnership with its U.S. ally and like-minded partners in Asia and Europe.90

Though the future remains uncertain, one thing is clear: this is an increasingly important space to watch. Careful historical baselining before asserting radical change, and continual efforts to separate the

---

89 Bloomberg, September 3, 2021.
signal from the noise—to appreciate the complexity of Japan’s nuanced and often vague positions, posture, and policies, to appreciate the unique constitutional and legal constraints its leaders must confront, and to carefully contextualize rhetoric emanating from Tokyo—will be critical to efforts by scholars and policymakers to accurately assess the status quo, manage expectations, and ensure sound decision-making, not only in Washington, Tokyo, and Taipei, but also in all countries with interests in continued peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia. The stakes for regional stability and the global economy—to say nothing of the millions of lives likely to be affected in Taiwan and elsewhere—are extremely high.