

Taiwan-Japan Relations in an Era of Uncertainty

Thomas S. Wilkins



THOMAS S. WILKINS is a Senior Lecturer in International Security at the University of Sydney. He can be reached at <thomas.wilkins@sydney.edu.au>.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article examines the substance and dynamics of contemporary Taiwan-Japan relations and considers potential avenues for the consolidation and expansion of bilateral cooperation.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Taiwan and Japan are acutely affected by shifting power balances in the Asia-Pacific. While increasing economic interdependence with China works to secure economic prosperity and reduce tensions, negative shifts in the strategic balance portend adverse long-term implications for both countries' national security. Informal and formal alignment with the U.S. reassures Taipei and Tokyo in the face of a potential Chinese threat but simultaneously generates concerns that Sino-American rivalry will entrap them in a great power conflict. As a result of these external contexts and Taiwan's unofficial diplomatic status, moves to solidify bilateral relations, though mutually desirable, must be handled with caution. Instead of direct military-defense cooperation, Taiwan and Japan might profitably explore collaboration on nontraditional security issues such as climate change, pandemics, or transnational crime. In particular, both countries' recent national defense white papers place strong emphasis on disaster relief operations. Joint cooperation in this sphere would strengthen bilateral relations and lay the foundation for a deeper and expanded partnership. Such efforts would enhance Taiwan's international space and security, building on the close democratic, economic, and cultural ties that already unite Taipei and Tokyo.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Both Taiwan and Japan are feeling the pressure of a rising China and have every incentive to deepen their relations in the face of shared challenges. Bilateral cooperation on nontraditional security issues, especially disaster relief, provides such an opportunity.
- There are three main policy options for advancing the Taipei-Tokyo alignment: (1) continue a close bilateral relationship "as is," (2) form a strategic partnership based on the model of Japan's relations with Australia and India, or (3) enter into a virtual trilateral alliance with the U.S.

Examination of the foreign and security policies of the Republic of China (ROC), or Taiwan, is often subsumed into the dominant discourse on the rise of China, the great power rivalry between China and the United States, or the cross-strait military balance. This can obscure other more subtle but meaningful trends. “What is really happening,” Jing Sun observes, “though less dramatic, is a solid strengthening of relations between Japan and Taiwan, two countries commonly perceived as secondary players in this potentially explosive issue.”¹ Sun argues that Taipei and Tokyo share strong ties in terms of their economic, strategic, and political interests, which mark out their relations as “unofficial in name only.” As Lam Peng-Er notes, “Taiwan assiduously cultivates better ties with Japan to bolster its security and expand its international space.”² Mathieu Duchâtel provides additional context for why Japan comes third, behind only China and the United States, in Taipei’s strategic calculations:

Tokyo has engaged the active support of Taiwan’s participation as an observer in certain international organizations which do not require state status (such as the World Health Organization), in Track II trilateral security discussions with the United States and Taiwan, in increasing parliamentary exchanges with Taiwan, and in inter-military contacts with the Taiwanese.³

Such quiet but important developments make the burgeoning bilateral partnership worthy of further investigation.

Due to the sensitivities attending Taiwan’s anomalous diplomatic status, both official documentation of and scholarly inquiries into the bilateral relationship are relatively limited. The scarcity of primary and secondary source material, at least in English, is partially a result of the relevant issues being subsumed into the more high-profile issues of U.S.-China rivalry and cross-strait relations, which dominate the discourse.⁴ As Jing Sun notes, “the Taiwan issue is becoming a sub-field in the study of Sino-American relations.”⁵ Likewise, Philip Yang also suggests that “Japan’s Taiwan policy has historically been a subset of Tokyo’s policy toward China.”⁶ This article therefore seeks to

¹ Jing Sun, “Japan-Taiwan Relations: Unofficial in Name Only,” *Asian Survey* 47, no. 5 (2007): 791.

² Lam Peng-Er, “Japan-Taiwan Relations: Between Affinity and Reality,” *Asian Affairs* 30, no. 4 (2004): 249.

³ Mathieu Duchâtel, “Taiwan: The Security Policy of the Chen Government since 2000,” *China Perspectives*, no. 64 (2006): 8.

⁴ See “‘The World and Japan Database Project’: Documents Related to Japan-Taiwan Relations,” Institute of Advanced Studies on Asia, University of Tokyo, Database of Japanese Politics and International Relations, <http://www.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~worldjpn/documents/indices/JPTW/index-ENG.html>.

⁵ Sun, “Japan-Taiwan Relations: Unofficial in Name Only,” 791.

⁶ See Roy Kamphausen, “Introduction,” *NBR Analysis* 16, no. 1 (2005): 7.

disaggregate pertinent information on bilateralism from this blanket tendency and to present it in a meaningful and structured pattern.

This article proceeds in three steps. First, it examines the substance of the Taiwan-Japan relationship and the internal dynamics that shape relations. The second section places the bilateral relationship within its external context by considering the impact of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States on Taipei-Tokyo interaction. The article then concludes by putting forward potential schemes for continued and invigorated bilateral cooperation. Through this three-step process, it constructs a comprehensive picture of the problems and prospects for Taipei-Tokyo interaction and of the resulting regional implications. Note that this article does not specifically chart the history of Taiwan-Japan relations but only considers them insofar as they bear on contemporary issues.⁷

INTERNAL CONTEXTS

Taiwan and Japan interact in a series of functional or issue areas where actual or potential synergies exist. These include strategic security, economics, ideology and democratization, leadership and domestic constituencies, and history and culture.

Strategic Security Issues

The realm of military-defense cooperation, or wider security strategy, is the primary concern of realist analysts.⁸ While both countries are obliquely united by shared threat perceptions of the PRC, there is only minimal and informal cooperation in this sector, and the prospects for deeper and explicit cooperation are currently low. There is no formal pledge on the part of Japan to guarantee Taiwan's security in the event of a cross-strait conflict (and Taiwan has no commitment to Japan's defense). Instead, all that exists on Tokyo's part is an ambiguous commitment to Taiwan's integrity through the U.S.-Japan Joint Security Declaration (1996), which pronounced the stability of cross-strait relations a "joint strategic interest."⁹ Tokyo is unlikely to officially upgrade this weak *de jure* assurance and is therefore only tenuously committed to

⁷ A good survey of their joint history is enumerated in Yoshihide Soeya, "Taiwan in Japan's Security Considerations," *China Quarterly*, no. 165 (2001): 130–46.

⁸ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

⁹ "Japan-U.S. Joint Declaration on Security—Alliance for the 21st Century," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 17, 1996, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/security.html>.