

Country Briefing – Japan

Political Briefing

Introduction

Japan is a major strategic power in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific, in a long-standing formal defense alliance with the United States. It maintains a large military that is modernizing and changing focus from humanitarian and disaster relief operations to fighting China. Historically, Japan's regional military role had been constrained by its post-war 'peace constitution' and domestic political constraints. However, during the last 10 years, the domestic political debate shifted, focusing more on Japan's security needs, not least with respect to the increasingly fraught US-China relationship and the problem of Taiwan.

While Japan does not recognize Taiwan diplomatically, it has a long history of friendship and close unofficial cooperation across multiple domains (commerce, trade, investment, education, health, culture, etc.). In recent polls, 67% of Japanese respondents described Taiwan as a "trustworthy ally," while 74% supported active Japanese engagement towards "stability in the Taiwan Strait." In 2021, this sentiment was reflected in several surprisingly pro-Taiwan statements by senior LDP politicians (the extremely dominant political party). However, Japan's official position on Taiwan has not changed: its government never made an explicit commitment to defend the island or to necessarily assist a possible United States military response if a cross-strait conflict occurs. However, in the past year Japan declared in a thinly veiled statement that it would be willing to defend Taiwan in the event of an attack. That statement has been put to the test, and Japan has defended Taiwan with the blood of its sailors, pilots, and soldiers.

Strategic Objectives

Broadly speaking, Japan has four major strategic objectives when it comes to the cross-strait conflict around Taiwan:

1. Maintaining strength and credibility of the US-Japan military alliance
 - a. Japan's security is underpinned by a US commitment to assist it in times of war, including the extension of the US nuclear umbrella to cover Japan. This forms part of a larger regional security framework of which the US is a lynchpin, but Japan is an ever-growing player in.
2. Keeping Taiwan aligned with the "free and democratic" nations of the Indo-Pacific
 - a. This is dictated by both national security and economic considerations. By controlling Taiwan, China would break out of the so-called First Island Chain, potentially threatening Japan's territory, and maritime security. It could also reorient much of Taiwan's current trade and investment flows away from Japan.
3. Cementing Japan's role as a leader in the "liberal, rules-based international order"
 - a. Japan believes that the best way to secure its long-term national interests is by integrating itself into and becoming a responsible stakeholder within a regional and global system of alliances, connecting free and democratic nations with market economies and the rule of law.

In addition, Japan also has a major territorial conflict with China over the East China Sea, much of which China claims. Previously Chinese coast guard vessels and warships

routinely attempt to project influence into the area in an attempt to exert control over it. Now, Chinese submarines and warships cut through its waters as we fight them.

National Strategy

Japan has many assets it can meaningfully deploy to achieve its strategic objectives. On the diplomatic front, it commands respect and influence amongst ASEAN countries in South-East Asia, including Vietnam and the Philippines. It is also an influential member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which includes the US, Japan, Australia, and India. Finally, Japan has strong diplomatic and military ties to NATO and the European Union. As the Taiwan issue has become internationalized Japan has been well positioned to rally the fraternity of “free and democratic” nations around Taiwan’s cause.

The lynchpin of Japan’s defense and national security is its long-standing alliance with the United States which has had 50,000 troops permanently stationed across naval and air force bases in the country. Japan has a large, well-equipped, and well-trained army, navy, and air force that have been engaged in the fighting. In addition the Japan-UK Reciprocal Access Agreement has allowed the UK to base aircraft in Japan as has the Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement, and discussions have been had with other nations over providing basing for their aircraft to engage in the fight.

Chinese attempts to influence Taiwan by force should be stopped. This is an ideal time to prove Japan’s worth in the US-Japan alliance by supporting the US, and burnish Japan’s credentials as a champion of the liberal, rules-based international order.

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