

SOUTH ASIA

Emerging Dynamics: Japan-Taiwan Relations in the Era of Chinese Dominance

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Introduction

Against a backdrop of ever-increasing Chinese aggression and coercion in the South China Sea, Taiwan has sought to emerge from the shadow of its colossal neighbor and colonizer-to-be. As such, several regional nations have emerged as partners to Taipei in an effort to exert pressure on Beijing and to galvanize increased economic and political connectivity in the Indo-Pacific. In addition to India and a slew of Southeast Asian nations, it is Japan that has the potential to support Taiwan's sovereignty through a multifaceted partnership. While Japan-Taiwan diplomatic engagements face a handful of challenges, Tokyo's gestures to Taiwan offer a silver lining for a nation under duress.

Shifting Political Landscape

Despite Japan appearing to adhere to Beijing's '[One-China](#)' policy, Tokyo has presented a strong level of firmness towards the defense of Taiwan's existence and has [publicly been vocal](#) about Japan's role in the event of a Taiwan-focused conflict. This presents a significant departure from Japan's previous ambivalence on the topic of Taiwan. Japan-Taiwan defense cooperation took a turn towards increased collaboration on [25 September 2024](#), when the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) sent a naval vessel through the Taiwan Strait between Taiwan and China, making history. The move, orchestrated by then-Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, was meant to convey a message directed towards China's recalcitrance, in an effort to strengthen a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Japan has previously been cautious about raising the stakes and has veered away from increasing tension through carrying out

maritime patrols. In a last ditch move shortly before leaving office on 1 October, Kishida likely wanted Japan to appear as a condemning force against any would-be Chinese violation of international law, especially with the [United States](#), [India](#) and [other nations](#) ramping up a response to China's military stratagem.

However, despite Japan's defense engagements with Taiwan, or perhaps, *in spite of them*, China has ramped up its coercive activity in the region. As such, the security environment in East Asia continues to decay, trending towards increased military confrontation and a volumization of maritime tension. A week prior to JMSDF's naval mission through the Strait, China sent aircraft carrier [Liaoning](#) through Japan's self-proscribed 'contiguous zone,' coming very close to Japan's territorial shores. The move threatens regional stability and makes China's maximum pressure strategy all the more alarming.

Economic Ties and Trade

Despite fluctuations in political and diplomatic engagement, Japan and Taiwan enjoy a large amount of trade. In 2023, bilateral trade between Japan and Taiwan totaled [over \\$75 billion](#), with [machinery, cars and integrated circuits](#) making up the majority of exports from Tokyo to Taipei. Taiwan's main exports to Japan [include](#) memory hardware, polyethylene terephthalate, turbojet engines, mechanical parts, processors, controllers and steel products.

Additionally, both nations harbor great capability for advanced technological development, especially in the semiconductor industry. Japan is readily strengthening its supply chain for semiconductors, both in light of its economic relations with Taiwan and in an effort to fortify its indigenous capability to reduce reliance on external parts procurement. After successfully establishing two domestic factories to mass produce 1.4 nanometer wafers, Japanese chip developer Rapidus [aims to break ground](#) on a third plant to produce 2 nanometer chips as early as 2030. The move signifies a shift towards self-reliance but also serves to better reinforce the Taiwan-Japan economic partnership through shared enhanced research and development, [affirmed by](#) the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry Taipei (JCCI).

Military Alignment

While Japan has remained committed to the 'One-China' policy, Tokyo views Taiwan as a key strategic partner. The two neighbors have indirectly cooperated in the defense sector via the United States' [Valiant Shield](#) exercise. Japan's participation in the initiative indicates a shift towards Washington's Indo-Pacific policy and therefore the implicit safety and sovereignty of Taiwan. In order to counter and deter aggression in the Taiwan Strait, Japan has boosted its military capabilities. In [late April 2024](#), Japan committed to increase its defense spending, aiming to reach 1.6% of GDP by 2027. To enhance deterrence, Tokyo has [sought to acquire](#) U.S.-made Tomahawk cruise missiles and to indigenously produce extended-range Type 12 surface-to-ship missiles, aiming to be able to strike targets 1,000km away. With its eye on China and North Korea, Japan has successfully developed a high-powered 10kW anti-drone laser weapon.. The technology [entered the service](#) of the Japanese Army on 10 Nov 2024 and can be deployed to counter drones and perhaps even missiles. Indicating Japan's interest in proliferating naval carrier vessels, the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) seeks to expand its fleet to include F-35B fighter jets, using the [Izumo-class destroyer JS Kaga](#) to carry out trial flights in coordination with the United States Pacific Fleet. Additionally, at the Japan International Aerospace convention in Tokyo in late October 2024, Japanese manufacturer Mitsubishi unveiled concepts of its new tactical support drones. The unmanned aircraft, designed for intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), aim to gather intelligence and maximize covert capabilities. Aware of its proximity to China and North Korea, Japan has quietly built up its military in order to deter any form of aggression that encroaches its border. Japan has gradually moved away from its pacifist stance and towards a more robust and malleable defense posture under the realization that a strong defensive orientation is what is required to respond to a "[severe and complex security environment](#)" in the region.

American Interests

Burgeoning cooperation between Japan and Taiwan has a plethora of implications for the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy. Tokyo's status as a key ally of Washington means that its movements closer to Taiwan aligns with US interests, particularly in the promotion of a free and open Indian Ocean Region (IOR). A closer relationship between the two island nations allows for the development of a more full-bodied regional security framework. [Japan's](#)

[commitment to defending Taiwan's sovereignty](#) enhances the strategic posture of both Tokyo and Washington, as, in the event of any conflict, American troops deployed in Japan would engage with Chinese forces, thereby [strengthening multilateral deterrence](#) against any form of Chinese aggression. While the United States is an adherent of the One-China policy, its advocacy for Taiwan's sovereignty is no secret. In this sphere, Tokyo's growing diplomacy with Taiwan could cloud relations between Washington and Beijing, but Japan's disposition [provides the United States](#) with a formidable alliance in East Asian diplomacy.

Economically, Taiwan's status as a mega-developer of semiconductors is a critical component of global technological supply chains, meaning amplified bilateralism between Japan and Taiwan allows for increased economic stability. Subsequently, through its economic support of Taiwan, Japan assists in sequestering Taiwan from Chinese economic coercion. This aligns well with Washington's strategy to promote a rules-based order. Further, Japan's engagement with Taiwan economically aligns with the United States' desire for the diversification of supply chains. For American companies looking to steer clear of China, Japan's emboldenment of Taiwan's economic prowess supports this diversification effort. Additionally, Tokyo's support of Taiwan might facilitate increased economic relations between Washington and Taipei, potentially through more direct means or through the promotion of Taiwan's involvement in global economic fora, from which Taiwan is currently shunned.

Conclusion

For Japan and Taiwan, an uncertain future is ahead. While there are many areas of cooperation and strategic alignment, the 'One-China' policy and the unpredictability of Beijing in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea delineate the possibility of quickly developing high-risk conflict. However, in light of this, an indirect military-economic relationship has grown between Tokyo and Taipei in order to thwart the battle for hegemony in East Asia. The United States watches on cautiously, invigorated by the island nations' closer ties but weary of China's looming shadow.

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