

Country Briefing – Japan

Political Briefing

Introduction

Japan is a major strategic power in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific, in a long-standing formal defence alliance with the United States. In 2022, it ranked 5th in terms of overall military strength globally, with the 8th largest defence budget in the world. Historically, Japan's regional military role has been constrained by its post-war 'peace constitution' and domestic political constraints. However, during the last 10 years, the domestic political debate has 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 recognise 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 has 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, recently Japan declared in a thinly veiled statement that it would be willing to defend Taiwan in the event of an attack.

This will be put to the test following news of the Chinese seizure of Pratas Island (owned by Taiwan) and Minami Kojima (claimed by Japan, Taiwan, and China). The Japan Self-Defense Forces have been put on high alert and the Diet is meeting discussing what should be done.

Strategic Objectives

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

1. Peaceful resolution by diplomatic means
 - a. When it comes to authorising use of military force and participation in conflicts outside Japan, the government faces a higher threshold than other regional actors due to domestic political constraints. War is generally considered the absolute last resort in times of "existential threat."
2. Maintaining strength and credibility of US-Japan military alliance
 - a. Japan cannot afford to have China prevail, as it will likely result in a strategic retreat by the United States and the need for Japan to rethink its entire military doctrine and posture.
3. 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 taking Taiwan, China will break out of the so-called First Island Chain, potentially threatening Japan's territory, and maritime security. It may also reorient much of Taiwan's current trade and investment flows away from Japan.
4. 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.

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 becomes “internationalised” (for example seen in the recent spat between China and Lithuania), Japan is well positioned to rally the fraternity of “free and democratic” nations around Taiwan’s cause.

The lynchpin of Japan’s defence and national security is its long-standing alliance with the United States which has 50,000 troops permanently stationed across naval and air force bases in the country. Japan’s large, well-equipped, and well-trained army, navy, and air force are considered to be some of the best trained and motivated in the world and can be deployed to support the United States in any potential crisis over Taiwan. The only issue is political: Article 9 of Japan’s pacifist constitution prevents it from fighting wars overseas, *unless* the situation is deemed an “existential threat.” Also, Japan’s government must engage with the United States in consultations prior to approving the use of its territory and facilities for the United States to wage war in the region.

Being the world’s third largest economy, Japan has massive economic and financial clout, especially in Asia. It can project economic and financial power via “check-book diplomacy.” On the other hand, it also means that Japan is vulnerable to disruptions in supply chains, international trade, and investment flows. It imports most of its energy and natural resources and needs reliable access to maritime routes. Over 70% of its trade flows through the South China Sea and through the Taiwan Strait. Its long-standing dispute with China over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, coupled with its concerns over China’s territorial claims over islands in the South China Sea, only add to Japan’s anxieties over the possible crisis around Taiwan and its potential impact on Japan’s economy.

The ideal outcome is to ensure that Taiwan does not fall into China’s hands, while avoiding a hot war, proving Japan’s worth in the US-Japan alliance, and burnishing Japan’s credentials as a champion of the liberal, rules-based international order.