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Japan's Dilemma over the Taiwan Strait Crisis

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Japan, being an East Asian country and the world's third-largest economy, has been deeply invested in shaping a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. However, due to China's rampant encroachments in the East and South China Seas, Japan is increasingly concerned about stability across the Taiwan Strait. According to a recent survey conducted by Japan's daily newspaper Asahi Shimbun, 80 per cent of the Japanese public is concerned about Japan being caught up in the Taiwan-China conflict if China attacks Taiwan.¹ Therefore, the majority of the Japanese public opposes Japan's support of the Taiwan Strait crisis in this regard.

Japan's Stance on Taiwan Issue

Japan has, over time, been even more concerned and apprehensive regarding China's increasing military power, to which Japan has responded by trying to strengthen its alliance with the US. Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was the main man behind the vision of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' and the Quad framework to counter China's expansionist behaviour. He also warned regarding the Taiwan crisis and how stability in Taiwan is vital for Japan's security environment, owing to their geopolitical position. Therefore, China's assertive behaviour and its military exercises around Taiwan would lead Japan to reinforce ways to counter China's behaviour in the region.

Even though Article 9 of Japan's Constitution renounces war and the use of force, Japan has, over time, built its military capability in the form of 'self-defence forces' aimed at deterring an attack on Japan. In recent years, China's expansionist behaviour has become a grave concern for Japan. The G7 members, such as Japan and the United States, have taken a strong stance towards defending Taiwan. Hence, Japan's government is attempting to support US military operations in any such situation that would harm Japan's security environment, like the Taiwan conundrum. In addition, many developed countries have become concerned about China's military expansionism, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine raised the issue that China may eventually attempt to change the status quo in Taiwan unilaterally. Moreover, Tokyo took a tough stance against Russia after the Ukraine invasion by imposing sanctions, which showed that Japan has the potential to take tougher stances.

Evolving Nature of Japan-Taiwan Relations

Japan's take on the Taiwan issue has been quite ambiguous for many years due to internal domestic politics. Taiwan is a sensitive issue for Japan's ties with both the US and China, and within Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), pro-Taiwan factions have been opposed. This is mainly because Japan's participation in a potential conflict over the Taiwan Strait would affect Japan's Constitution, which restricts the use of military force. In a 1969 joint statement between the US and Japan, a 'Taiwan clause' was included, which stated that

in a situation of conflict over Taiwan, the Japanese government would deploy US military personnel stationed in Japan.²

In a 1972 joint communique between Japan and China, China stated that Taiwan was an ‘alienable’ part of Chinese territory, to which Japan displayed a level of understanding and respect. The Japanese government respected the ‘One China’ policy and further aimed for a peaceful resolution of the China-Taiwan issue. However, the peace and security laws of Japan passed in 2015 under former PM Shinzo Abe aimed to enable the partial exercise of collective self-defence. Over time, amidst the US-China rivalry and China’s growing expansionism, Japan shifted its stance of ambiguity to make it clearer that it would be involved in the defence of Taiwan. In 2021, Abe also stated that “a Taiwan crisis is a Japan crisis,” which in itself implied that Taiwan’s stability is vital for Japan and the wider international community.³

Japan Moves Away from Pacifism

In December 2022, Japan came up with its revised National Security Strategy, turning away from its pacifist nature and identifying China as an immediate threat to its security. The revised strategy aimed at Japan possessing counterstrike capabilities to forestall an enemy attack. Japan also aims to increase the defence budget to 2 per cent of its GDP in a span of five years, that is, by 2027. Due to the adverse security environment, Japan is attempting to move towards a robust, comprehensive approach with a focus on enhancing its military capabilities. Furthermore, Japan’s PM Fumio Kishida stated that “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow,” which explicitly points to the volatile security environment in East Asia regarding China’s rise, North Korea’s nuclear ambitions, and the Taiwan crisis.⁴

It is quite evident that the US would be at Taiwan’s rescue in any such assault and China’s invasion of Taiwan would also pose a crucial threat to Japan as Beijing would be controlling the sea lanes, which are used to transport 90 per cent of the nation’s energy needs. Japan’s increased defence spending and upgrading of its naval and air capabilities show that the military has been preparing itself for a potential conflict over the Taiwan issue. In a recent survey, it was indicated that around 56 per cent of Japanese are in favour of Japan supporting the US forces in terms of assistance with fuel, medical aid, and fuel. In comparison, only 11 per cent want the Japanese military to join forces with the US.⁵

Taiwan requires foreign support to enhance its self-defence capabilities, and since Japan is a close neighbour to Taiwan, it would be vulnerable to Chinese attacks in the East China Sea. Therefore, it has become clear that Taiwan’s problem is also Japan’s problem. Japan needs to work with the US and Taiwan to deter Chinese attacks by preparing a joint response. As Japan has been working on building its military, perceptions regarding its use during a potential conflict between Taiwan and China have differed between international

scenarios and domestic views. Japan and Taiwan have become closer with time due to their cultural ties and efforts by Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and PM Shinzo Abe.

The Japanese government will have to decide between committing to support the US military or engaging in joint strategies by exercising collective self-defence and supporting it through logistics and assistance. The Japanese government does not have enough support from the Japanese public regarding Japan's bearing the risk of being involved in a war with China over Taiwan. However, Japan may play an auxiliary role due to its strong relationship and alliance with the US.

NOTES:

¹ "Japan: Public reluctant to defend Taiwan should China invade", *CBN News*, May 12, 2023, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/overseas/05/12/23/japan-public-reluctant-to-defend-taiwan-should-china-invade>. Accessed on May 14, 2023.

² Masaya Inoue, "Japan's stance on the Taiwan Strait", *East Asia Forum*, September 09, 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/09/09/japans-stance-on-the-taiwan-strait/>. Accessed on May 14, 2023.

³ Sabrina Shaffer, "Why Japan needs to talk to Taiwan", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/09/why-japan-needs-to-talk-to-taiwan/>. Accessed on May 15, 2023.

⁴ "Japan PM: East Asia Could Be Next Ukraine", *VOA News*, January 14, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/kishida-says-g7-should-show-strong-will-on-russia-s-ukraine-invasion/6918474.html>. Accessed on May 15, 2023.

⁵ Ayndrila Banerjee, "Stay out of it: 80% Japanese do not want Tokyo to involve itself if China invades Taiwan", *Firstpost*, May 12, 2023, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/stay-out-of-it-80-japanese-do-not-want-tokyo-to-involve-itself-if-china-invades-taiwan-12585922.html>. Accessed on May 15, 2023.