

Japan, Taiwan and the “One China” Framework after 50 Years

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Abstract

This study analyses the “one China” framework’s significance for Japan–Taiwan relations since Tokyo switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1972. Drawing on Chinese-, Japanese- and English-language sources, it examines developments since the breakthrough Japan–PRC normalization communiqué and the “Japan formula,” which enabled Tokyo to normalize relations – six years before Washington – without recognizing Beijing’s claim of sovereignty over Taiwan, and while maintaining robust, if unofficial, ties with Taipei thenceforth. Highlighting distinctions between Beijing’s self-asserted “one-China principle” and Japan’s ambiguous official position and subsequent effective policies, it assesses incremental but practically significant evolutions of Japan–Taiwan relations over the past half-century. In the 21st century, the trend towards incrementally closer ties has proven strikingly resilient to political transitions in Japan and Taiwan, China’s growing power, pushback from Beijing and worsening cross-Strait frictions. Beyond Japan–Taiwan relations and theoretical debates on “one China,” this article’s findings carry significant implications for Taiwan’s international space, cross-Strait dynamics and China–Japan–United States relations.

Keywords: Japan; Taiwan; China; United States; “one China”; cross-Strait

In its authoritative 2020 *Diplomatic Blue Book*, the government of Japan (GOJ) identifies Taiwan as “an extremely crucial partner and an important friend, with which Japan shares universal values such as freedom, democracy, basic human rights and the rule of law, and enjoys close economic relations and people-to-people exchanges.”¹ This new language marks only the latest instance of the GOJ’s quiet official reframing of Taiwan’s importance to Japan over the past decade. Recent shifts in Tokyo’s engagement with, and rhetoric and policy towards, Taiwan are especially striking when baselined against Japan’s officially unchanging 50-year-old position on “one China” – established when Tokyo switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan (the Republic of China or the

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1 MOFA 2020a.



ROC) to the People’s Republic of China (PRC, hereafter also referred to as China) in 1972.

Recent shifts are subtle, but significant. As recently as 2012, the *Diplomatic Blue Book* had relegated Taiwan to the status of merely an “important region with which Japan has close economic relations.”² Yet by 2015 it began implicitly granting Taiwan status and agency as a distinct political entity, rather than just geographical space; upgraded Taiwan’s political and diplomatic importance to that of a “crucial partner and an important friend,” rather than just an economy; and newly emphasized shared “fundamental values” – language theretofore reserved primarily for Japan’s treaty ally the United States and a select group of advanced democracies and other US treaty allies.³ In short, the past decade has witnessed the GOJ quietly but authoritatively upgrading its official conception of Taiwan and Taiwan’s significance to Japan. Notably, its *Diplomatic Blue Books* have done so despite also including boilerplate reiterating the relationship’s “non-governmental” nature – in accordance with the GOJ’s unchanging official 1972 position on “one China.”

Beyond official Japanese government rhetoric about Taiwan’s importance, recent years have also witnessed significant expansions of practical cooperation and symbolic signalling – further de facto upgrading the nominally unofficial Japan–Taiwan relationship. Since 2016, Japan’s leaders sent unprecedented congratulatory messages to Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文 (2016–present) upon her two electoral victories;⁴ dispatched the highest-level government representative to visit Taipei officially since 1972;⁵ and upgraded the 1970s-era name for Japan’s de facto embassy in Taiwan from the conspicuously vague “Interchange Association” to the “Japan–Taiwan Exchange Association.”⁶ The GOJ has also enhanced and expanded coordination on Taiwan policy with its ally the US – Taiwan’s and Japan’s most important political partner and de facto security guarantor – and other partners, through new initiatives such as the Global Cooperation and Training Framework, which Japan formally joined in 2019.⁷

Importantly, the recent deepening of bilateral ties and Japan’s expanded expressions of concern about and support for Taiwan does not unfold in a political or strategic vacuum, and occurs despite the PRC being Japan’s top trading partner. Amid a regional power shift, leaders in Tokyo and Washington are, inter alia, identifying what they generally perceive as the PRC’s attempts to unilaterally change the status quo and coercive economic policies as national and

2 MOFA 2012, 52. Emphasis added.

3 MOFA 2015, 41. In 2020 “extremely” was added before “crucial partner” and “fundamental values” were changed to “universal values.” See MOFA 2020a.

4 MOFA 2016; 2020b.

5 Shimizu 2020, 271–272.

6 Liberty Times 2016. One leading expert calls this “the most significant breakthrough in their relationship since 1972.” Fukuda 2020, 27.

7 ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020.

economic security threats, highlighting concerns about a deepening competition between democracy and authoritarianism and advocating for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” – concepts that implicitly (or, in some cases, explicitly) identify democratic Taiwan as an essential partner.⁸ Despite opposition from Beijing, during 2021 the GOJ joined Washington and major US democratic allies in expressing support for Taiwan’s “meaningful participation” in the World Health Organization and membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), concerns about “peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait,” and encouragement of the “peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues.”⁹ Japan’s 2021 Ministry of Defense white paper noted that “stability of Taiwan’s situation is important for both Japan’s security and the stability of the international community,” and said Japan “must pay close attention to the situation with a greater sense of anxiety.”¹⁰ Thus, beyond the longer-term expansion of economic, popular and political ties, Japan’s political leaders have also become increasingly outspoken regarding a link between Taiwan’s security and that of Japan and the region.¹¹

The recent incremental deepening of Japan–Taiwan ties carries significant implications beyond the “unofficial” bilateral relationship between them, including for China’s and East Asian international relations more generally. Since 1949, no issue has proved more politically sensitive and potentially incendiary for Beijing than Taiwan’s status, which the PRC has never governed but which it asserts must be “unified” with the mainland, by force if necessary.¹² Leading scholars judge that in Beijing “the Taiwan issue is perceived as the most uncertain and the most serious problem facing China–Japan–US relations.”¹³ And Beijing’s leaders generally consider Tokyo the second-most important external player after Washington in cross-Strait dynamics – a view which has consolidated this century.¹⁴ For its part, Taiwan relies heavily on extensive economic, political and other ties to neighbouring Japan, and is itself a major variable in US–Japan–PRC relations. Japan’s westernmost territory is only around 70 miles from Taiwan and the US military’s large presence on Japanese soil, especially in nearby Okinawa, all but ensures the US–Japan alliance’s critical role in cross-Strait deterrence.¹⁵ Against this backdrop, it is no wonder that the recent deepening of Japan–Taiwan relations has attracted significant ire in Beijing.¹⁶

8 US State Department 2019; MOFA 2020b.

9 For example, MOFA 2021; G7 2021.

10 MOD 2021, 52.

11 Liff 2022.

12 NPC 2005.

13 Matsuda 2010, 123–124, 134.

14 Yun Sun 2001.

15 Liff 2022.

16 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020a.

On the eve of the 1972 Japan–PRC normalization communiqué’s 50th anniversary, this study critically reflects on Japan’s interpretation and operationalization of “one China” since it switched official recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1972, especially how it manifests in Tokyo’s evolving policies towards Taiwan in the 21st century. An important case in its own right, the historical evolution and vicissitudes of Japan’s approach today also carry significant implications for scholars’ understanding of the past, present and potential future operation of the “one China” framework in international politics more generally, cross-Strait dynamics and China’s foreign relations. Taiwan’s emergence as a liberal democracy, coupled with changing power balances and worsening political, security and economic frictions across the Strait and between the PRC and the US and Washington’s key democratic allies and partners, further motivate this study. After all, the extent and nature of support Taiwan receives from, and its substantive exchange and cooperation with, Japan and other major democratic powers – or lack thereof – are crucial variables certain to shape the future of cross-Strait ties and China’s foreign relations.

This article is organized as follows: an opening section briefly introduces Beijing’s self-defined “one-China principle” and the myth of “consensus” that has allowed it to persist as an informal institution of international politics; one which has shaped but not determined Japan’s effective “one China *policy*” since 1972. Next, the article surveys Japan–ROC/Taiwan relations since 1945, with a particular focus on the period following the 1972 severance of official diplomatic relations and major developments in the 21st century. A penultimate section analyses contemporary challenges for, and the uncertain future of, Japan’s “one China policy” as the “one China” framework itself faces increasingly complicated challenges across the Strait and internationally. A final section concludes.

Beijing’s “One-China Principle” versus Others’ “One China” Policies

As discussed in this special section’s lead article, Beijing defines its “one-China principle” (*yige Zhongguo yuanze* 一个中国原则) as “there is only one China in the world, Taiwan is a part of China and the government of the PRC is the sole legal government representing the whole of China.”¹⁷ Though the PRC has never governed Taiwan, seven-plus decades after Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang (KMT) fled to Taiwan and forcefully established a new ROC capital in Taipei in 1949, CCP leaders continue to define Taiwan as an “inseparable part of China” whose unification with the PRC, by force if necessary, is a “core interest,” and part of a “historic trend of national rejuvenation and national strengthening...that cannot be stopped by anyone or any force.”¹⁸

17 TAO 2000; Liff and Lin, this issue.

18 Li 2020.

In support of this goal, Beijing today frequently champions a false narrative that its self-defined “one-China principle” is a “basic norm (*jiben zhunze* 基本准则) of international relations and universal consensus (*pubian gongshi* 普遍共识) in international society.” Furthermore, its rhetoric implies – often misleadingly – that Japan (and its ally the US) have agreed to it.¹⁹ Beijing openly castigates any party perceived to be violating their (alleged) commitment to said “principle.” For example, Beijing publicly lambasted Tokyo for adding “Japan–Taiwan” to the official name of its Exchange Association (de facto embassy) in Taiwan in 2017, expressing “strong opposition” against “any attempt to create a framework of ‘one China, one Taiwan’ or ‘two Chinas’.” It called on Tokyo to “adhere to the principles set forth in the Japan–China Joint Communiqué and honour the promises it has made to China, uphold the ‘one-China principle’ and refrain from sending false signals to Taiwan and the international community, thereby causing new problems to China–Japan relations.”²⁰

Yet the empirical record demonstrates clearly that, rather than the “universal consensus” that the PRC government claims, Beijing’s “one-China principle” is best understood as the PRC/CCP’s self-asserted claim of sovereignty over Taiwan.²¹ The US’s “one China policy” and forward-leaning engagement of Taiwan after 1979 are the most famous examples evincing a practically consequential disconnect between Beijing’s position and that of other nations. Japan’s vague, officially static 1972 position on Taiwan’s status, together with its variable engagement with and effective policies towards Taipei ever since, are another (see the following section).

The lack of “universal consensus” and demonstrable subjectivity of and contestation regarding “one China’s” definition – Beijing’s unilateral assertions to the contrary – are also observable beyond the cases of the US and Japan. Today, this contestation is most conspicuous across the Taiwan Strait, where the CCP, the KMT, and Taiwan’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) disagree fundamentally.²² Meanwhile, the percentages of people in Taiwan identifying as Chinese or supporting eventual “unification” have plummeted to historic lows.²³ Diverse and dynamic policies across Europe, and increasingly extensive engagement of Taiwan by some major European powers today, are also salient examples.²⁴ So too are variegated national responses to Taiwan’s effort to contribute to the global fight against COVID-19.²⁵

19 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020a; Liff and Lin, this issue.

20 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016; “Waijiaobu huiying Tai dui Ri jiaoliu chuankou gaiming” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC responds to name change of Taiwan’s exchange window with Japan), *Xinhua*, 17 May 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-05/17/c_1120990031.htm.

21 Liff and Lin, this issue.

22 Chen, this issue; Lin, this issue.

23 ESC 2020.

24 Brown, this issue.

25 Kastner et al., this issue.

Simply put, since 1949 the meaning, significance and acceptability of Beijing’s self-defined “one-China principle” have always been contested outside the formal boundaries of CCP-administered territory. There is no global consensus on the question of “one China.” Yet PRC claims of a myth of “consensus” to shape international discourse in its favour abound.²⁶ For example, a 2000 PRC white paper on “one China” implied that the GOJ agreed to Beijing’s interpretation of the “one-China principle” and that every country with which the PRC has normalized diplomatic relations shares Beijing’s position on Taiwan in principle and in practise.²⁷ To be sure, some foreign governments recognize Beijing’s claim of PRC sovereignty over Taiwan. However, others adopt ambiguous positions, or avoid mentioning Taiwan in their normalization communiqués.²⁸ Furthermore, the empirical record evinces considerable diversity in approaches to Taiwan in any practical sense – even among the US and its key democratic allies.²⁹ Indeed, separate from the question of a foreign government’s official position on Taiwan’s status, there is significant variability – both across cases and over time – in how each country chooses to *operationalize* its position in terms of concrete policies vis-à-vis, and the degree and nature of engagement with, Taipei.³⁰ The Japan case demonstrates this clearly.

Japan’s Dynamic “One China Policy” (and Relations with Taiwan)

Since the Chinese Civil War effectively ended in 1949, Japan has emerged as the most significant external factor in cross-Strait dynamics after the US. When the GOJ switched official diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1972 it did not give in to PRC pressure to recognize Beijing’s “one-China principle” as it relates to Taiwan. Furthermore, Tokyo’s breakthrough “Japan formula” enabled de facto representation in Taipei and Tokyo, which in turn facilitated practically significant, if officially “unofficial,” non-governmental ties with Taiwan. Far from being frozen by some putative consensus in 1972, and especially following the denouement of late-Cold War US–Japan–PRC anti-Soviet alignment, Taiwan’s democratization and deepening concerns about the PRC’s trajectory and cross-Strait balance of power, Tokyo’s “one China *policy*” has demonstrated considerable practical flexibility since 1949.

Japan’s effective “one China policy” in the early Cold War basically had two defining elements: (1) a de facto “two Chinas” policy; and (2) efforts to “separate politics from economics” (*zhengjing fenli* 政经分离).³¹ The former vaguely addressed the political aspect of the “one China” issue – the PRC’s and ROC’s

26 Liff and Lin, this issue.

27 TAO 2000.

28 Drun 2017.

29 For example, though Seoul’s vague official 1992 position on Taiwan’s status resembles that of Tokyo or Washington, it has appeared far more reluctant to risk Beijing’s ire on Taiwan-related issues. Lee and Liff forthcoming.

30 Liff and Lin, this issue.

31 Soeya 2001.

intractable positions on “one China” – while the latter sought to facilitate Japan’s mutually beneficial economic engagement with “both” Chinas simultaneously. Despite officially recognizing only one “China” at a time, both before and after 1972 Japan pursued a flexible policy towards the “other.” Though Japan’s leaders have exercised far greater agency in formulating Tokyo’s “one China policy” than is often appreciated, the effective implementation and viability of Japan’s approach has also been powerfully shaped by its regional strategic environment – vicissitudes in US–PRC relations, above all.

1952–1972: Origins of Japan’s “De Facto ‘Two Chinas’” Policy

Though Japan relinquished all claim to Taiwan after its 1945 surrender, close geographical proximity, extensive links with its former colony and relative Japanese-language fluency on Taiwan provided ballast to Japan–ROC relations during the early Cold War. After the Allied Occupation ended in 1952, US pressure led newly sovereign Japan’s leaders to sign a separate peace treaty with and recognize the ROC as “China.” Yet Tokyo insisted that the treaty apply only to territory under the KMT’s control, which excluded the mainland. Following the Korean War and the consolidation of US-centred “hub-and-spokes” bilateral alliance system, by the mid-1950s Japan was closely aligned with the US’s early Cold War strategy focused on containment of international communism. Two major consequences were Tokyo’s official diplomatic recognition of and close ties with the staunchly anti-communist ROC, and non-recognition of the CCP-led PRC.³²

In stark contrast to Washington, however, Tokyo pursued meaningful engagement with *both* Chinas long before Nixon’s landmark 1971 announcement of US–China rapprochement. As scholar Ishii Akira later noted, “every post-war Japanese government’s policy towards China has been, with minor differences, basically an unofficial policy of ‘two Chinas’ or ‘one China, one Taiwan.’”³³ Though Japan was not ambivalent about cross-Straits peace and stability – at a 1969 US–Japan summit Japan’s prime minister noted that “the maintenance of peace and security in the Taiwan area was also a most important factor for the security of Japan”³⁴ – for manifold reasons, including constraints imposed by Article 9 (the “peace clause”) of its US-drafted 1947 constitution, Tokyo effectively delegated responsibility to the US and ROC, who signed a mutual-defence pact in 1954. Unlike the US, post-war Japan’s government never made a defence commitment or forward-deployed forces in Taiwan.³⁵ Furthermore, many Japanese leaders were eager to engage both “Chinas” to the extent that Cold War geopolitics, Mao-era volatility within the PRC and Beijing’s and Taipei’s

32 Kokubun et al. 2013, ch. 1.

33 Takahashi and Wakayama 2003, 70.

34 Nixon and Sato 1969.

35 Liff 2022.

irreconcilable “one-China principle(s)” allowed. Regardless of ideological considerations, geographical proximity and economic interests motivated post-war Japan’s informal exchange with the mainland in the 1950s and 1960s.

This approach was consistent with the GOJ’s post-war diplomatic preference for “separating politics from economics.” As Soeya sums up Japan’s “de facto ‘two Chinas’” policy, Tokyo wished to “support Taiwan’s existence” through US–Japan security ties, but believed strict ideological containment of China was not in Japan’s interests. Accordingly, Tokyo sought to “have good relations,” and benefit from economic exchange, with both Beijing and Taipei.³⁶ Thus, despite lacking official relations with Beijing between 1952 and 1972, thousands of Japanese citizens and scores of Diet members visited the PRC. The two sides also engaged in increasingly extensive “friendly trade” through “quasi-governmental agencies.” By 1964, Japan’s trade with the PRC exceeded that with the ROC. By 1970, Japan had become Beijing’s top trade partner.³⁷

Nevertheless, based on Beijing’s and Taipei’s own respective interpretations of the “one-China principle,” throughout the Cold War a formalization of “two Chinas” was anathema for both sides of the Strait. After geopolitical winds shifted and Richard Nixon “shocked” the world (and Japanese leaders) in July 1971 by announcing plans to become the first US president to visit the PRC, however, the door to Japan–PRC normalization was unlocked.³⁸ In determining what came next, Japanese leaders demonstrated considerable agency. Just seven months after Nixon’s historic February 1972 visit and two months after taking office, Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka and Zhou Enlai 周恩来 signed the Japan–PRC normalization communiqué in Beijing.

1972–1992: The Japan(/US)–PRC “Golden Age” and Japan’s “Unofficial” Ties with Taiwan

Tokyo moved with remarkable speed, normalizing diplomatic relations with Beijing in September 1972 – more than six years ahead of Washington. Importantly, it did so while both refusing PRC demands to fully recognize Beijing’s “one-China principle” and successfully maintaining extensive, if “unofficial,” links with Taiwan. Though vague and controversial in both capitals, alongside Nixon’s historic visit that February the effective compromise between Tokyo and Beijing further established 1972 as a historic inflection point in the Cold War in Asia and set powerful precedents for subsequent US–PRC normalization negotiations. It also contributed to what Vogel calls a two-decade “golden age” of Japan–US–PRC strategic and economic cooperation.³⁹ The logic of anti-Soviet strategic alignment, coupled with Beijing’s desire for a massive influx

36 Soeya 2001, 137.

37 Vogel 2019, 315–326.

38 *Ibid.*, 315–316, 323.

39 *Ibid.*, ch. 10.

of Japanese investment and trade under Deng-era “reform and opening up” (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) disincentivized any effort by Beijing to rock the boat on “one China” or Japan’s continued engagement of Taiwan. Consequently, those critical first two decades consolidated the post-1972 effective status quo: Japan’s official diplomatic recognition of the PRC coupled with non-recognition of Beijing’s claim to sovereignty over Taiwan and significant, though officially unofficial and non-governmental, ties with Taipei.

The 1972 Japan–PRC normalization communiqué, Japan’s official position on “one China” and the Japan formula

Nixon’s 1972 visit to China and the resulting US–PRC “Shanghai Communiqué” are widely credited as marking a “week that changed the world.” Nevertheless, Washington did not actually achieve diplomatic normalization with Beijing until more than six years later. In contrast, Tokyo and Beijing signed their normalization communiqué on 29 September 1972 – just seven months after Nixon left China. Two aspects of Japan–PRC normalization were especially significant in contributing to the ambiguity central to the “one China” framework discussed in this issue’s lead article, and Japan’s evolving effective operationalization of it, in the 50 years since.⁴⁰

First, Beijing normalized relations with Tokyo despite the GOJ’s refusal to recognize two of Beijing’s three “principles” for diplomatic restoration, which centred on Taiwan:

1. The PRC government is the sole legal government of China.
2. Taiwan is an inalienable part of the PRC.
3. The Japan–ROC Peace Treaty is illegal, void, and should be denounced.⁴¹

Japan accepted the first principle, but took no explicit position on the second and third, refusing to comment on Taiwan’s legal status.⁴² Thus, in the 1972 Japan–PRC normalization communiqué, the GOJ officially “recognizes” (*chengren* 承认) the PRC as “the sole legal government of China,” but states merely that it “fully understands and respects” (*chongfen lijie he zunzhong* 充分理解和尊重) Beijing’s position on Taiwan.⁴³ By normalizing diplomatic relations without recognizing the PRC’s claim of sovereignty over Taiwan, Japanese negotiators adopted an ambiguous position that, especially when combined with vague stances of other major players – most significantly, its ally the US – demonstrates the *lack of* international consensus on Taiwan’s status. In subsequent decades,

40 Liff and Lin, this issue.

41 Ogata 1988, 44.

42 He 2017.

43 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1972. Lest one misinterpret the ambiguity of “fully understand and respect,” US President Ronald Reagan’s 1982 position on PRC opposition to US arms sales to Taiwan used identical phrasing. See US State Department 1985, 1028. US arms sales to Taiwan continue to this day.

this ambiguity enabled *both* robust, mutually beneficial Japan–PRC cooperation *and* considerable flexibility in Japan’s effective policies vis-à-vis Taiwan.

A second foundational pillar of Japan’s effective “one China policy” after 1972 resulted from Beijing’s tacit acceptance of the GOJ’s insistence on maintaining extensive, if “unofficial,” links with Taipei.⁴⁴ Japan’s innovative approach, often referred to as the Japan formula, drew on its flexible engagement of the PRC before 1972. It helped address the “two Chinas’ dilemma” through a creative framework that enabled substantive relations with Taiwan through nominally non-governmental actors and economic, cultural and other private – officially non-political – relations.⁴⁵ Japan and Taiwan established permanent, if “unofficial,” *de facto* embassies. To avoid a brazen violation of the myth of consensus on “one China,” however, both institutions were labelled euphemistically: the “East Asian Relations Association” represented Taipei in Tokyo and the “Interchange Association” represented Tokyo in Taipei.

Though some Japanese business and political leaders continued to covet official relations with *both* “Chinas,” the mutual incompatibility of the ROC’s and PRC’s “one-China principle(s)” made that impossible.⁴⁶ However, Beijing’s tacit acceptance of the Japan formula allowed it to consolidate as a core element of the “one China” framework in practise after 1972, both in Japan’s case and in the international community. In fact, other countries ultimately followed suit. Remarkably, to Henry Kissinger and other US leaders’ reported chagrin, Beijing reportedly demanded that the US follow Japan’s lead and adopt the same basic formula.⁴⁷

Thus, these two foundational pillars established in 1972 – Japan’s non-position on Taiwan’s status and the Japan formula – had profound consequences for “one China” generally, and the Japan–Taiwan relationship specifically. They affected the course of US–PRC normalization negotiations. And they allowed Japan and Taiwan to maintain robust, if officially non-governmental, relations. For example, for several years Japan’s trade volume with Taiwan stayed roughly comparable to that with mainland China. Personal and business ties were also sustained, and in 1973 40 times as many Japanese travelled to Taiwan as to the mainland.⁴⁸ From the perspective of cross-Strait peace and stability and the US–Japan security alliance, Japan’s vague position carried additional significance: it enabled Tokyo to (1) resist pressure from Beijing to explicitly exclude Taiwan from the US–Japan mutual security treaty’s geographical scope and (2) adopt for the past half-century an official, if anodyne, position expressing “hope for the issues relating to Taiwan to be resolved peacefully through direct talks between concerned parties on both sides of the Strait.”⁴⁹

44 Takahashi and Wakayama 2003, 69.

45 Hirakawa 2006.

46 Vogel 2019, 329; Takahashi and Wakayama 2003.

47 Hirakawa 2006.

48 Vogel 2019, 335.

49 Liff 2022.

Though official visits to Taiwan by senior Japanese government officials or sitting cabinet ministers ceased, politicians continued to travel there – immediately undermining the myth that Japan–Taiwan relations after 1972 have been strictly “economic and cultural.” Over time, practically significant “unofficial,” “semi-official” and “virtual political” relations not only persisted but expanded.⁵⁰ Through prominent groups like the Japan–ROC Diet Members’ Consultative Council, established in 1973, Japanese politicians – including former prime ministers – have served as informal channels and complements to government-supported, but nominally unofficial, channels such as the *de facto* embassies, facilitated links between political and business figures, and attended important ceremonies in Taiwan.⁵¹

Given Beijing’s severe frictions with Moscow and desire for massive Japanese economic cooperation under reform and opening up, this ambiguous post-1972 status quo proved grudgingly tolerable to China’s leaders – so tolerable, in fact, that they agreed not to even discuss Taiwan during negotiations over the 1978 Japan–PRC Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Significantly, the signed treaty does not even mention “Taiwan.”⁵² The absence of any “Taiwan” reference in the second major political document defining post-normalization Japan–PRC relations further established the 1972 normalization communiqué and Japan formula as institution-creating precedents whose vagueness, flexibility and *lack* of Japan–PRC consensus were fundamental to their viability. Furthermore, the two additional documents that Beijing officially considers, alongside the 1972 normalization agreement and 1978 peace treaty, as “the political foundation of PRC–Japan relations” after 1972⁵³ reaffirmed the vague status quo for the post-Cold War era. Regarding the “Taiwan issue,” both the 1998 and 2008 joint statements contain only a vague, unilateral statement that Tokyo “continues to maintain its [1972] stand.”⁵⁴

Legacies of the “one China” framework

That Japan signed a normalization communiqué (September 1972) and a peace treaty (August 1978) before Washington even normalized ties with Beijing (January 1979), coupled with Beijing’s insistence that Washington’s post-normalization ties with Taipei be modelled on the Japan formula, makes clear Japan’s foundational, if widely underappreciated, role in consolidating the flexibility (and myth of consensus) fundamental to the “one China” framework’s operation in international politics over the past 50 years. Japan achieved diplomatic normalization with the PRC without recognizing Beijing’s “one-China principle.” Meanwhile, the Japan formula enabled *de facto* embassies in Tokyo

50 Kawashima et al. 2020.

51 For example, Deans 2001, 152–158, 167.

52 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1978.

53 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020b.

54 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1998; 2008.

and Taipei and avoided a fundamental disruption in most “unofficial” bilateral exchanges between Japan and Taiwan.

As Taiwan’s closest neighbour and second-most important partner after the US, what Japan achieved in the 1970s left a significant legacy for Japan–Taiwan relations. It also served as a model for other countries. Most consequentially, US leaders ultimately achieved with Beijing an accommodation on Taiwan “something like the Japanese solution,” as Henry Kissinger reportedly put it in 1973.⁵⁵ Six years later, Washington similarly “acknowledge[d]” but avoided “recognizing” Beijing’s position on Taiwan; unilaterally asserted the continuation of economic, cultural and other unofficial relations with Taipei; and established the euphemistically named American Institute in Taiwan as the US’s *de facto* embassy. Beijing’s tacit acceptance of these vague stances *vis-à-vis* Taiwan by Taipei’s two most important international partners – which evinced their non-recognition of the PRC’s “one-China principle” – furthered their consolidation as influential pillars of much of the international community’s post-1970s effective operationalization of “one China.”

1992–2022: The Post-Cold War Evolution of Japan’s “One China Policy” and Deepening Relations with Democratic Taiwan

As noted above, the last two decades of the Cold War are generally considered a “golden age” of expanding trilateral economic and political cooperation and cultural and grassroots exchanges among Japan, the US and China.⁵⁶ Throughout, Japan’s leaders nevertheless continued to value unofficial exchange with Taiwan. Between 1972 and the 20th century’s end, Japan–Taiwan trade volume expanded 30-fold. Bilateral political exchanges continued.⁵⁷ Yet politically Taiwan “was largely a nonissue between Beijing and Tokyo”⁵⁸ – a clear indication of Beijing’s tolerance, if not tacit acceptance, of the post-1972 status quo under favourable geopolitical conditions.

As the Cold War wound down, however, two major developments heralded the end of the Japan–US–PRC “golden age” and effectively planted the seeds for both greater Japan–PRC tensions and more robust Japan–Taiwan engagement. First, Beijing–Moscow rapprochement and the Soviet Union’s 1991 collapse eliminated the primary geopolitical rationale for close Japan–US–PRC cooperation, while the PRC’s rapid economic growth and military modernization presaged a transformed regional balance of power and elevated Japan’s security concerns about China. A second factor was Taiwan’s democratization and the resulting increased internal contestation *vis-à-vis* both its relationship with Beijing and “one China.” Taiwan’s liberalization, especially when juxtaposed

55 Hirakawa 2006, 141.

56 Vogel 2019, ch. 10.

57 Lam and Chong 2004, 254.

58 Wan 2007, 163.

against Beijing's violent 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square and growing security concerns vis-à-vis Beijing after the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, also led many Japanese to see rapidly democratizing Taiwan and authoritarian China very differently.⁵⁹

Deepening Japan–Taiwan exchange in the 1990s

Taiwan's democratization had significant implications – direct and indirect – for Japan–Taiwan relations. First, it heightened cross-Strait tensions and, by extension, Japan's concerns about peace and stability. Taiwan's democratically elected national leaders increasingly spoke of cross-Strait relations in a manner incompatible with the PRC's (or the ROC's pre-1991) conceptualization of “one China.” By the late 1990s, Taiwan's first popularly elected president – the Taiwan-born, Japanese-speaking and Cornell University-educated Lee Teng-hui 李登輝 – referred to cross-Strait ties as special “state-to-state” relations. Under his successor, President Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 (2000–2008) of the DPP, the first non-KMT administration often referred to “Taiwan” – rather than the “ROC” – and adopted measures widely seen as flirting with de jure independence.⁶⁰ The resulting cross-Strait frictions significantly heightened Japan's security concerns vis-à-vis the Taiwan Strait.⁶¹

Second, Taiwan's democratization created new opportunities for expanding officially “non-governmental” Japan–Taiwan ties, including among politicians. Though Japan–Taiwan political exchanges had continued after 1972, they expanded significantly in the 1990s. For the first time, sitting cabinet members from Taiwan travelled to Japan in “private” and official capacities.⁶² Both sides' increasingly influential left-of-centre opposition parties – the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and the DPP – also deepened exchanges.⁶³ Partially in response, the erstwhile Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)/KMT-centric Japan–ROC Diet Members' Consultative Council changed its name and became supra-partisan. Meanwhile, Japan–PRC tensions over territory and history were becoming more prominent, and the older generation of Japanese politicians who had spearheaded diplomatic normalization in the 1970s were passing from the scene. Further deepening concerns were PLA military exercises in 1995–1996 in the runup to Taiwan's first ever direct presidential election. These exercises included missile launches that splashed down less than 100 miles from Japanese territory. Together with a 1993–1994 war scare on the Korean Peninsula, this crisis contributed to Washington and Tokyo's decision to include in what would become the 1997 “Guidelines for Japan–US Defense Cooperation” possible cooperation in a vaguely defined “situation in areas

59 Amae 2001; Wan 2007.

60 Chen, this issue.

61 Yang 2009.

62 Wang 2000, 363.

63 Soeya 2002, 54–55.

surrounding Japan.” Consistent with their post-1972 position regarding the importance of “peaceful resolution,” Japanese officials signalled that a cross-Straits conflict *could* theoretically be included, but intentionally left it ambiguous.⁶⁴

The cumulative effect was significant. As Deans argues, “There were probably more pro-Taiwan figures in the Japanese government [in] 1998–2000 than at any time [*sic*] since...1972.”⁶⁵ Remarkably, during visits to Japan by PRC leaders Jiang Zemin 江泽民 (1998) and Zhu Rongji 朱镕基 (1999) the GOJ reportedly refused to reiterate US President Bill Clinton’s so-called “three nos.”⁶⁶ During a meeting in Shanghai, Clinton had said, “we don’t support independence for Taiwan, or two Chinas, or one Taiwan-one China. And we don’t believe that Taiwan should be a member in any organization for which statehood is a requirement.”⁶⁷

Finally, Taiwan’s rapid democratization transformed popular and elite conceptions in Japan and Taiwan about the other’s political significance – especially when juxtaposed against authoritarian Beijing, whose brutal 1989 crackdowns on protesters had “shocked” Japan.⁶⁸ Political and popular exchanges expanded. KMT-imposed martial-law-era anti-Japanese education and propaganda in Taiwan ceased, as did prohibitions on Japanese cultural objects. One measurable consequence in Taiwan was that “pro-Japan” sentiment and popular mutual affinity – especially in younger generations – grew.⁶⁹ This created fertile soil for even deeper political, popular and other exchanges after Taiwan’s first peaceful transition to a non-KMT government in 2000. In short, after Taiwan’s democratization Japan’s leaders operationalized Japan’s “one China policy” more and more flexibly. Some Chen administration-era studies bluntly assessed the status quo as constituting “a series of contacts that could hardly be characterized as ‘informal,’” or simply declared Japan–Taiwan relations “unofficial-in-name-only.”⁷⁰

Japan–Taiwan relations in the 21st century: the evolution continues

In the words of the late Ezra Vogel, the 1972–1992 “golden age” of Japan–PRC relations was followed by a three-decade-long “deterioration,” especially after 2008.⁷¹ Specific to 21st-century Japan–Taiwan relations, vagaries in Taiwan’s domestic politics and their consequences for cross-Straits dynamics, coupled with shifting balances of power and deepening threat perceptions in Tokyo and Washington vis-à-vis Beijing, have become increasingly salient variables.

64 See discussion in Liff 2022.

65 Deans 2001, 161.

66 *Ibid.*, 164; Lam and Chong 2004, 260.

67 Clinton’s remarks quoted from Sutter 1998, 1.

68 Wan 2007; Jing Sun 2007.

69 Fukuda 2019, 304.

70 Noble 2005, 12–14; Jing Sun 2007.

71 Vogel 2019, ch. 10–11.

Under President Chen, Taiwan's first DPP administration (2000–2008) was widely perceived to have openly flirted with *de jure* independence. It also actively pursued enhanced cooperation with Tokyo. Though many expected the KMT's return to power in 2008 to negatively affect Japan–Taiwan relations, cross-strait stability under President Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九 (2008–2016) facilitated unprecedented cooperation between Tokyo and Taipei.⁷² Most recently, Beijing's more coercive posture vis-à-vis Taiwan since 2016 – when DPP leader Tsai Ing-wen (2016–present) recaptured the presidency for her party and led it to its first legislative majority – has transformed discourse in Taipei, Tokyo, Washington and other key democratic capitals about the PRC, cross-strait relations and the importance of more proactive support of Taiwan's democracy and effective autonomy.

Vicissitudes in Taiwan, however, are not the only domestic political variable of importance. Indeed, long before Tsai's 2016 election, PRC-based scholars had already expressed concerns about longer-term trends in Japanese politics, including the weakening of “pro-PRC” sentiments among Diet members, growing emphasis in political discourse on Taiwan's importance to Japan's security and Japan's 1972 non-recognition of Beijing's stance on Taiwan, and expanding mutual visits by Japanese and Taiwanese politicians promoting practical cooperation and allegedly “testing the waters” for *de facto* official exchanges.⁷³ Indeed, the 21st century has witnessed a considerable deepening of Japan–Taiwan ties along three tracks: “unofficial relations” through business and cultural exchanges, “semi-official relations” through government representatives (e.g. *de facto* embassies), and “virtual political relations” (e.g. parliamentary exchanges and former Japanese prime ministers visiting Taiwan).⁷⁴

Importantly, in both capitals political support for deeper Japan–Taiwan ties is basically supra-partisan. After the famously “pro-Japan” President Lee Teng-hui of the KMT retired from politics in 2000, President Chen's DPP administration called for a free trade agreement, an Asia-Pacific democracy alliance, enhanced security cooperation and even a Japanese version of the US's landmark 1979 Taiwan Relations Act.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, the GOJ began explicitly supporting Taiwan's “international space,” including elevation of Taiwan to observer status at the World Health Assembly. Under President Ma of the KMT, Taiwan's government continued to advocate for more practical cooperation with Tokyo, including a free trade agreement.⁷⁶ The GOJ responded positively, including congratulations following Ma's election victory – a post-1972 “first.”⁷⁷ Ma's administration subsequently called for a “Taiwan–Japan special partnership”⁷⁸ and signed

72 Matsuda 2020; Leng and Liao 2016.

73 Yan and Kong 2004, 28; Zhao 2004, 51; Sheng 2006, 62.

74 Kawashima et al. 2020.

75 Bridges and Chan 2008, 583.

76 National Policy Foundation 2008.

77 Matsuda 2020, 241.

78 ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2009.

various bilateral agreements, including a landmark memorandum on strengthening bilateral exchange and cooperation,⁷⁹ bilateral investment and open skies agreements, and a historic 2013 agreement on fisheries to deescalate tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (which Japan administers but over which Taiwan also claims sovereignty in the name of the ROC). Unprecedented memoranda of understanding demonstrated the practical deepening of Japan–Taiwan “virtual” political and diplomatic relations, even under KMT leadership.⁸⁰

The past decade of Japan–Taiwan relations: a new era of deeper cooperation?

Over the past decade-plus, Japanese and Taiwanese leaders of various political stripes have continued to promote deeper Japan–Taiwan cooperation – often in subtle but symbolically and practically significant ways. After the LDP and its junior coalition partner regained control of the Kantei from the left-of-centre DPJ in 2012, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s government (2012–2020) expanded cooperation with his KMT (Ma) and DPP (Tsai) counterparts. These trends in Japan–Taiwan relations have not gone unnoticed in China, or PRC academic circles.⁸¹ Some Chinese observers argue that the true intent of this uptick in “quasi-diplomacy” is “to create the illusion of Taiwan as an independent political entity,” or to “break the 1972 system” by expanding bilateral exchange, economic links, security cooperation and Taiwan’s international space.⁸² Needless to say, such trends are not viewed positively in Beijing.

One authoritative manifestation of the GOJ’s quiet but *official* shift in how it conceives of Taiwan’s importance to Japan is changing language in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) *Diplomatic Blue Books* – which shape official government rhetoric, including cabinet-level speeches. As detailed in [Table 1](#), an important shift is observable since 2013 – Abe’s first full year in office: the GOJ began granting Taiwan incrementally enhanced status and agency as a distinct political entity, rather than just a geographical “region,” and political and diplomatic significance as a “crucial partner and an important friend,” rather than just an economy. This trend has continued intermittently in more recent blue books, which newly emphasize that Japan and Taiwan share democratic and other “fundamental” or “universal” values, drawing a subtle but unambiguous contrast with Beijing. Not coincidentally, these changes occurred against the backdrop of Japanese, US and Taiwanese leaders’ calls for enhanced cooperation among democratic countries and support for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” Close readings of the blue books further reveal that the GOJ is now referring to shared values with Taiwan using language it previously reserved primarily for Washington and other US democratic treaty allies and partners.

79 ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2010.

80 Matsuda 2020, 241.

81 Li 2010, 45; Zhang 2019.

82 Luo and Jiang 2017.

Table 1. Changes in the GOJ's Authoritative Single-sentence Definition of Japan's Significance to Taiwan

MOFA <i>Blue Book</i>	"For Japan, Taiwan is a/an ..."
2012	"...important region with which Japan has close economic relations"
2013–2014	"...important <i>partner</i> with which Japan has close economic relations"
2015–2019	"... <i>crucial partner and an important friend</i> , with which [Japan] <i>shares basic values in the form of freedom, democracy, basic human rights and the rule of law, as well as close economic relations and people-to-people exchanges</i> "
2020	"... <i>extremely crucial partner and an important friend</i> , with which [Japan] shares <i>universal values in the form of freedom, democracy, basic human rights and the rule of law, as well as close economic relations and people-to-people exchanges</i> "

Sources:

Changes first appear in MOFA 2012; 2013; 2015; 2020a.

Notes:

Italics indicate new wording.

Supra-partisan and unprecedentedly high-level and frequent exchanges over the past decade-plus further evince closer Japan–Taiwan relations and further undermine the myth that after 1972 the relationship has been strictly “economic and cultural.” For example: in 2012, the then prime minister, Yoshihiko Noda of the DPJ, and former Taiwanese vice-president Lien Chan 連戰 met at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit. The following year, former vice-president Vincent Siew 蕭萬長 met with Japan’s sitting prime minister, Shinzo Abe of the LDP, at that year’s APEC Summit. Between 2010 and 2016, seven former prime ministers – including four from the LDP and all three former DPJ prime ministers – visited Taiwan in some capacity. Additional precedents were reported when Japan’s then sitting chief cabinet secretary (and future prime minister), Yoshihide Suga, hosted East Asia Relations Commission Chairman Li Jiajin at the Kantei (2013), and when Prime Minister Abe held (unannounced) meetings in Tokyo with Taiwan’s former president Lee Teng-hui and the then DPP chairperson (and future president), Tsai Ing-wen (2015).⁸³ Upon Lee’s death in 2020, former prime minister Yoshiro Mori led a supra-partisan delegation to Taipei to convey their and Prime Minister Abe’s condolences. The visit reportedly included meetings with Tsai.⁸⁴

The post-2016 Tsai era has also witnessed the further institutionalization of Japan and Taiwan’s (officially “non-governmental”) relationship. For example, in 2016 Japan’s foreign minister sent the first ever official congratulatory message to a Taiwanese president-elect, which also praised Taiwan’s democracy and highlighted shared values.⁸⁵ As a sign of how much the relationship has evolved in the

83 Matsuda 2020, 244–246.

84 “Zutuan diaoyan Li Denghui” (Condolence delegation for Lee Teng-hui), *CNA*, 19 August 2020, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aip/202008190382.aspx>; Shimizu 2020, 277.

85 MOFA 2016.

21st century, this language contrasted starkly with MOFA’s 2000 statement, which merely acknowledged that Chen, Tsai’s only DPP predecessor, “was elected.” It even included scare quotes around “president” – consistent with PRC convention.⁸⁶

Just two days after Tsai’s election victory, the then chief cabinet secretary, Yoshihide Suga, expressed support for Taiwan joining the (then) US-and-Japan-led Trans-Pacific Partnership.⁸⁷ Later that year, Japan and Taiwan launched annual “maritime cooperation dialogues” involving representatives from both sides’ de facto embassies and government agencies, reportedly including MOFA and Taiwan’s National Security Council.⁸⁸ In 2017, Japan dispatched the highest level government representative to visit Taiwan officially since 1972.⁸⁹ And in what one expert calls “the most significant breakthrough in their relationship since 1972,” the governments agreed to change the name of Japan’s de facto embassy in Taiwan from the 1970s-era, conspicuously vague “Interchange Association” to the “Japan–Taiwan Exchange Association.”⁹⁰ Significantly, the new name includes the characters for “Japan” (日本) and “Taiwan” (台灣).⁹¹ Recent years have also witnessed an expansion and new forms of unofficial, bilateral and trilateral security dialogues among legislators and experts. For example, in 2021, the LDP set up its first ever “Taiwan Project Team,” formally submitted to Japan’s prime minister proposals to improve Japan–Taiwan relations and held its first ever direct (virtual) dialogues with counterparts in the ruling DPP to discuss security and economic concerns.

Supplementing these efforts to expand and further institutionalize political exchanges and policy cooperation are extensive business ties and popular and civil society linkages. In the last year before COVID-19-induced disruption, Japan was Taiwan’s third-largest trading partner, while Taiwan was Japan’s fourth largest.⁹² Furthermore, Japan was exceptionally popular among people in Taiwan, and vice versa.⁹³ And bilateral tourism had soared to record highs.⁹⁴

Another important trend to highlight is Tokyo’s expanding cooperation with third parties – most importantly, the US and its other major democratic allies – to support Taiwan’s effective autonomy amid perceived efforts by Beijing to coerce and isolate Taipei. In 2019, Japan became the first new member of the theretofore bilateral US–Taiwan Global Cooperation and Training Framework – a platform Washington launched in 2015 in response to Beijing’s

86 MOFA 2000.

87 Prime Minister’s Office of Japan 2016.

88 ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016; Shimizu 2020, 267.

89 Shimizu 2020, 271–272.

90 Fukuda 2020, 27.

91 Liberty Times 2016.

92 National Development Council 2019, 220–224; statistics for 2019 compiled by the Japan External Trade Organization, available here: https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext_images/en/reports/statistics/data/gaikyo2019e.xls.

93 JTEA 2019; Central Research Services 2019.

94 “Taiwan welcomes record 2-million Japanese tourists in 2019,” *Taiwan News*, 7 January 2020, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3852065>; MOFA 2020, 47.

efforts to block Taipei's participation in many international organizations. The GOJ's expressions of support for Taiwan's efforts to diversify its international connections, including expanded trade ties through CPTPP, which Beijing opposes, are now commonplace. And in global health, Japanese leaders continue to join US and other foreign counterparts in supporting Taiwan's effort to regain World Health Organization (WHO) observer status – which Beijing has blocked since Tsai's election in 2016, despite the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹⁵ In response to alleged efforts by Beijing to frustrate Taiwan's attempts to purchase vaccines during a May 2021 COVID-19 wave, President Tsai reportedly called former prime minister Abe for help. A trilateral meeting (including the US chargé d'affaires) at Taiwan's de facto ambassador's residence in Japan led Tokyo and Washington to rush aid to Taiwan.⁹⁶ The GOJ and Washington each directly donated to Taiwan's 23 million people 4 million vaccine doses.

Against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting balance of power and sharp uptick in PLA activities around Taiwan, the past year-plus has also witnessed deepening concerns in Tokyo about cross-Strait peace and stability, and recognition of the implications of a possible conflict for Japan's interests.⁹⁷ Since a historic US–Japan summit statement in April 2021 “underscored the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait” and “encouraged the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues,” both Tokyo and Washington have issued similar expressions of concern with other democratic partners⁹⁸ – an unprecedented multilateralization and internationalization. And while remaining ambiguous about Japan's possible response in a cross-Strait contingency, Japan's leaders have noted the importance of the US–Japan alliance bolstering cross-Strait deterrence and publicly linked Taiwan's security to both regional and Japan's own security.⁹⁹ Recent media reports suggest the US and Japan may be deepening contingency planning to enhance deterrence, and to prepare for the worst if deterrence fails.¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless, it is important to stress that direct Japan–Taiwan bilateral cooperation remains limited to non-military domains. Active-duty Japan and Taiwan military–military ties basically do not exist. Japan has never made a concrete commitment to Taiwan's defence or sold it arms, and though national security reforms over the past decade have expanded the scope of possible Japanese roles and US–Japan alliance cooperation, they were not originally motivated by a feared Taiwan contingency. If Tokyo decided to mobilize Japan's

95 Kastner et al., this issue.

96 “Wakuchin (10) Taiwan e supido kyōyo” (Vaccines (10) speedy delivery to Taiwan), *Yomiuri shimbun*, 11 June 2021.

97 Liff 2022.

98 For example, MOFA 2021; G7 2021.

99 “Suga Shushō, Taiwan mondai wa Nichi Bei de renkei” (Prime Minister Suga, Taiwan issue through Japan–US linkages), *Jiji Press*, 4 April 2021; MOD 2021, 52.

100 Liff 2022.

Self-Defense Forces in a “Taiwan contingency” it would most likely be in defence of Japan itself and/or in support of the US military.¹⁰¹

Japan’s Evolving “One China Policy” and Japan–Taiwan Relations 50 Years after 1972: Towards an Uncertain Future

The historical record of the past half-century demonstrates that, beyond obvious “red lines” (e.g. establishing diplomatic relations with Taiwan), the practical constraints for Japan–Taiwan engagement of the Japan formula and Tokyo’s vague 1972 position on “one China” are remarkably flexible and politically contingent. In none of the four “major political documents” defining Japan–PRC relations does Tokyo recognize Beijing’s “one-China principle” as it concerns its essential claim of PRC sovereignty over Taiwan. Far from being strictly beholden to some putative Japan–PRC consensus on Taiwan’s status frozen in 1972, Japan’s leaders’ choices about how to *operationalize* its vague official position and effective policies towards Taiwan have evolved significantly in response to shifting political winds, strategic vicissitudes, perceived threats and political will in Tokyo and Taipei.

This empirical reality evinces the informal institutional nature of the “one China” framework and the striking ambiguity and myth of consensus at its heart.¹⁰² The politically contingent flexibility is further reflected in the concrete deepening of Japan–Taiwan (and US–Japan–Taiwan) ties in recent years: not only expanding cultural and economic exchange, but more forward-leaning official rhetoric, supra-partisan political and de facto diplomatic engagement, and practical cooperation – in key instances in partnership with other major democratic partners. Collectively, these trends demonstrate the practical disconnect between Japan’s ambiguous (and static) official 1972 position on “one China” and the unambiguous (and dynamic) political and policy reality that defines – and redefines – practical Japan–Taiwan relations today.

In past scholarship, some scholars have commented on the “1972 system’s” perceived inflexibility. For example, in 2001 Amae observed that it caused Tokyo to “abstain from any actions that Beijing opposes, even though they may not violate the communique.” Yet presciently, he also suspected that deepening tensions with Beijing and across the Taiwan Strait, coupled with Taiwan’s democratization, would challenge that status quo.¹⁰³ Though flexibility was already apparent in the 1990s, the indeterminant bounds of Japan’s “one China policy” were less conspicuous in earlier periods, especially when Japan’s leaders prioritized cooperation with Beijing and changing power balances and security frictions were less relevant. Today, highly dynamic geopolitical and domestic political vicissitudes (i.e. political will in the relevant capitals) manifest

101 Ibid.

102 Liff and Lin, this issue.

103 Amae 2001.

clearly as key variables, driving expanded cooperation. Such is the nature of fundamentally *political* informal institutions.

Since Taiwan's democratization, the steady expansion and institutionalization of Japan–Taiwan relations across KMT, DPP, DPJ and LDP-led administrations and despite the waxing (Lee, Chen), waning (Ma) and waxing again (Tsai) of cross-Strait frictions, further demonstrates that although bilateral ties are hardly immune to PRC pressure or shifting domestic political and geopolitical winds, the basic trend appears firmly rooted, supra-partisan and beholden to neither. Japan, the US and key other major democratic powers are increasingly treating Taipei as an important international actor and valued cooperative partner in its own right, not merely as an issue derivative of the countries' relations with Beijing.

The fact that effective bounds on what's possible were not locked in five decades ago, and are instead basically where the key players ultimately decide they are, has another important implication: this political contingency means that what the future holds for Japan–Taiwan relations is also unclear. Indeed, 50 years after 1972, worsening frictions with the PRC and across the Strait, coupled with the post-1970s nadir of US–China relations, raise questions about the sustainability of today's effective status quo. Recent geopolitical and geo-economic vicissitudes render the tensions inherent in the vagueness at the heart of Tokyo's traditional approach – a *de facto* “two Chinas” policy and separation of economics and politics – increasingly conspicuous. With public sentiment in democratic Taiwan rendering a peaceful resolution of the cross-Strait dispute on terms acceptable to both the Taiwanese people and CCP leaders difficult to imagine, and Xi Jinping's rhetoric and increased pressure on Taiwan suggesting intolerance for the uneasy status quo, how far Japan (separately from and in concert with its US ally and other major democracies) is willing to go in supporting its “extremely crucial partner and important friend” is an open question.

At least so far, the constraints appear most apparent in the security domain, where the GOJ's reluctance to respond positively to intermittent calls for more robust Japan–Taiwan security cooperation, or to be seen as too publicly explicit or forward-leaning regarding how it would respond to a PRC attack on Taiwan, are easily overlooked but should be acknowledged.¹⁰⁴ No matter how things play out, as the metaphorical distance across the Taiwan Strait expands so, too, do the potential risks for Tokyo of openly challenging an increasingly powerful Beijing on the potentially incendiary issue of Taiwan's status.

Beijing's defence spending has surged to more than five times that of Japan's, with developing the ability to conquer Taiwan and deter, delay or defeat US efforts to aid Taipei guiding China's rapid military modernization. CCP leaders judge “full reunification” the “greatest and final obstacle” for achieving “national rejuvenation.” Accordingly, opposing and containing “Taiwan independence” is

104 Liff 2022.

Beijing’s core national defence aim.¹⁰⁵ This changing strategic context challenges the ambiguity in Tokyo’s traditional approach across multiple fronts, especially as Taipei and Washington look to Japan and other democratic partners for additional support. As a recent study in the PRC’s Ministry of State Security-affiliated journal cautioned about trends in Japan–Taiwan cooperation: Beijing “should be on high alert.”¹⁰⁶

As has been the case since the 1950s, Tokyo continues to value stable ties with Beijing – its top trading partner since 2008 and increasingly powerful next-door neighbour. Nevertheless, despite, or perhaps because of, the shifting power balance across the Strait and between China and the US, deepening concerns about Beijing’s authoritarian politics, power and policies towards democratic Taiwan seem – at least so far – to be pushing Tokyo, Taipei and other major US democratic allies closer together. Shared values, democratic institutions, economic interests, popular affinity and, increasingly, concerns vis-à-vis Beijing about economic security and its regional behaviour also facilitate closer Japan–Taiwan ties.¹⁰⁷ Japan’s 2021 Ministry of Defense white paper publicly highlights the shifting power balance and links cross-Strait stability to the security of both Japan and the international community.¹⁰⁸ In short, it appears that some Japanese leaders increasingly believe what many observed after the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis: that “the peace and security that Japan wants in the Taiwan Strait can no longer be sustained by favoring China and neglecting Taiwan.”¹⁰⁹

Thus, beyond the space constraints of this paper is a crucial question for the future: how these concerns might translate into more concrete security cooperation between Tokyo and Taipei, of which there is little, or more robust “Taiwan contingency” planning with Japan’s US ally to bolster deterrence. Both have long faced significant domestic and international political obstacles.¹¹⁰ Yet today public discussion and calls from prominent Japanese politicians are increasingly mainstream. Whether these calls will lead to more robust cooperation and support is an important space to watch.¹¹¹

Conclusion

Despite Beijing’s repeated claims today that its “one-China principle” is a “universal consensus in international society,” both Tokyo’s vague 1972 stance, which

105 Academy of Military Science 2001, 471–472.

106 Zhang 2019.

107 Shimizu 2020, 276.

108 MOD 2021, 52.

109 Amae 2001, 274.

110 Wilkins 2012; Liff 2022. One frequently cited example is intermittent calls for a “Japan–Taiwan Relations Act.” So far, however, Japan’s Diet has never considered legislation remotely comparable to the US’s 1979 legislation. See Liff 2021.

111 For example, “Gaikō bukai Taiwan seisaku kentō purojeketo chimu dai ichiji teigen” (Foreign Affairs Committee Taiwan policy review project team’s first proposals), *Jimintō*, 3 June 2021, <https://www.jimin.jp/news/policy/201712.html>; Liff 2022.

does not recognize the PRC's essential claim of sovereignty over Taiwan, and the reality of Japan's evolving *policies* towards and deepening practical cooperation with Taipei belie a far more complicated reality. Beyond their real-world significance, the dynamic nature of contemporary Japan–Taiwan relations also buttresses a more general finding shared across the contributions to this special section: the importance of careful analytical differentiation between the PRC's self-defined “one-China principle” – an essential component of which is Beijing's assertion that Taiwan is part of the PRC – and other countries' variable “one China” *policies*. Recognizing this distinction is crucial for understanding the “one China” framework's continued relevance – and the ambiguity and flexibility at its heart – 50 years after Nixon and Tanaka went to China. How political leaders in major democratic powers like Japan choose to operationalize it has long carried, and will continue to carry, profound implications for Taiwan's effective autonomy, cross-strait dynamics and US–Japan–China relations.

Though Japan and Japan–Taiwan ties are often overlooked in the heavily US–China and security-centric English-language scholarship on cross-strait relations and “one China,” Tokyo has long been a critical player. In September 1972, Tokyo successfully parried PRC pressure and normalized diplomatic relations without recognizing Beijing's claim that Taiwan is part of the PRC. Through its Japan formula Tokyo further established a powerful precedent that enabled practically significant, if officially unofficial and non-governmental, ties with, and *de facto* representation in, Taiwan thenceforth. It bears repeating that Tokyo accomplished this more than six years before Washington, and during the 1970s US and PRC negotiators identified Japan's “formula” as a model. The ambiguity of “one China” further consolidated after Tokyo received Beijing's acquiescence not to discuss Taiwan in negotiations over the 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Post-Cold War, the 1998 and 2008 joint statements merely contained unilateral reiterations of Japan's vague 1972 position.

Tokyo's diplomatic achievements a half-century ago demonstrated two important realities. First, key PRC “conditions” regarding its ostensibly non-negotiable “one-China principle” could be effectively circumvented by omission, even by a country as important to Beijing and Taipei as Japan – their next-door neighbour, a key US treaty ally and then the world's second-largest national economy. Second, Beijing would grudgingly allow even Japan, a former colonial occupier and wartime enemy, to maintain robust ties with Taiwan – provided they remained nominally “non-governmental.” Over the 50 years since, the politically convenient myth of “consensus” at the heart of the 1972 *modus vivendi* has allowed Japan to enjoy extensive cooperation with Beijing and Taipei, while officially recognizing only the former as a sovereign state.

Upon the 1972 Japan–PRC normalization communiqué's 50th anniversary, political and strategic vicissitudes across the Strait and region present new and diverse challenges for what appears to be an increasingly precarious status quo. What the future holds is uncertain, but the historical record makes one thing very clear: Japan will have a pivotal role to play. Indeed, though largely

unheralded, Japan’s negotiated outcomes in the year immediately following Nixon’s 1971 announcement of his planned visit, and its meaningful engagement with Taiwan in the decades since, have carried immense significance. They have proven essential to the robust external linkages and US–Japan alliance-centred deterrence that have supported the international space necessary for Taiwan’s persistence as an autonomous international political actor (albeit with significant constraints); robust, comprehensive and practically significant (if nominally non-governmental) links to and cooperation with its two most important nation-state partners (and others); and its eventual emergence as an economic powerhouse and the first and only democracy in the primarily Chinese-speaking world.

Though what future path Japan–Taiwan relations will take is uncertain, in confronting these complicated challenges, Japan is not alone. Policy debates in Washington and other major democratic partners, including Australia, the United Kingdom, and the European Union and its member states, evince similar dilemmas vis-à-vis democratic Taiwan, “one China” and stable ties and economic exchange with an increasingly powerful, assertive and authoritarian Beijing. At least so far, and as additional indicators of the vagueness and flexibility built into the “one China” framework, developments during the 50th year since normalization suggest many in Japan and beyond are eager to continue deepening support for and practical cooperation with Taiwan – even as their official positions on “one China” remain frozen in time.

Acknowledgements

For helpful feedback on earlier drafts the author thanks fellow paper presenters at academic workshops on the “One China Framework and World Politics” (Sam Nunn School of International Affairs, Georgia Institute of Technology), especially organizer Dalton Lin, and “Japan and the World” (21st Century Japan Politics & Society Initiative, Hamilton Lugar School, Indiana University). The paper also benefited from research assistance provided by Indiana University students Evan Wright, Jeffery Wang and Yiming Hu.

Conflicts of interest

None.

Biographical notes

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摘要: 本研究旨在分析「一个中国」框架自 1972 年日中建交以来对日台关系产生的实质意义与影响。透过区隔北京主张的「一个中国原则」与日本官方对此模糊的立场与继之出台的政策, 本文检视了过去半世纪以来, 日台关系渐进但实质的演变。21 世纪以降, 日台关系历经日台的政治转型、中国实力的增强、以及愈发恶化的两岸关系仍变得日益紧密, 展现了此一关系的韧性。

关键词: 日本; 台湾; 中国; 美国; 一个中国; 两岸关系

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