



ASIA MAIOR

Special Issue 2 / 2022

US-China Competition, COVID-19 and Democratic Backsliding in Asia

Edited by
Giulio Pugliese
Andrea Fischetti
Michelguglielmo Torri

viella

A large, intricate, golden-brown mandala graphic on the right side of the cover. It features complex, repeating geometric and floral patterns, resembling traditional Indian or Middle Eastern art. The mandala is partially cut off by the right edge of the page.

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THE US-JAPAN SECURITY ALLIANCE – READY AND EQUIPPED
TO DEAL WITH CHINA?

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In 2021 Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait have made it back into US-Japan joint statements. Tokyo and Washington have talked (more or less) openly and on the record about what to do jointly in the worst-case scenario: a US-Chinese conflict over Taiwan. The quality and scope of Japanese contributions to US-led military operations in a Taiwan/Taiwan Strait crisis scenario depend on the circumstances and the crisis scenario. The devil would be very much in the details. However, China is very unlikely to attack or invade Taiwan (any time soon) even though Tokyo and Washington – together with other like-minded countries in the region – are preparing for various worst-case scenarios. What China calls Western containment to «suppress» China and secure US (military) hegemony in the region is in reality Tokyo and Washington jointly preparing for various worst-case scenarios in reaction to Chinese very assertive regional security policies in general and policies related to territorial claims in particular.

KEYWORDS – US-Japan Alliance; China containment; Taiwan; Taiwan Strait.

1. Introduction

The US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security was adopted in 1960.¹ In the treaty – usually referred to as the US-Japan Security Treaty² – Japan agreed to provide US forces with basing rights on its soil in exchange for the provision of security against external threats (see its Article VI). The treaty's Article V stipulates that the US will defend Japan militarily in the case of an attack on Japanese territory. The treaty, however, does not oblige Japan to defend the US and US territory in the case of an attack on US territory. When a revised version of the US-Japan defence guidelines was adopted in 2015³, Japan was still not obliged to militarily defend US territory or US troops stationed on Japanese territory in the

1. See Japan-US Security Treaty/Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of America (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html>).

2. Initially (in 1952) called the Mutual Security Pact (1952) until it was renamed in 1960.

3. See 'The Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) Japan*, 27 April 2015 (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000078188.pdf>).

case of any given regional military contingency. However, in 2015 Japan's Self-Defence Forces (SDF) were authorized to fight alongside and defend US military forces if a regional military contingency/conflict poses a direct threat to Japan's national security. This was authorized in a set of national security laws adopted in the same year and by the Japanese Cabinet Legislation Bureau (CLB) which on the government's behalf re-interpreted the right to collective self-defence stipulated in Chapter VII Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations.⁴ Certainly, in the case of a regional military contingency that involves the US but not necessarily poses an imminent and direct threat to Japanese national territory, it is indeed very likely that Japan would always and even before constitutional re-interpretation have militarily collaborated with the US. Japan's constitutional re-interpretation in 2015 was controversial⁵ but equipped Japan's military with a legal base to execute the right to collective self-defence. That was welcomed by those and inside and outside Japan who for a long time had been wanting the country to become 'normal', i.e. a country that authorizes its armed forces to military defend themselves and other countries' soldiers in the case of a military contingency. The critics at the time feared that Tokyo's national security laws could be interpreted and applied so as to allow Japanese armed forces not only to execute the right to collective self-defence in the case of US-Japanese military cooperation for the purpose of defending Japanese national territory, but instead and also used to authorize the Japanese military to fight alongside the US military even if the conflict in question did not pose a direct threat to Japanese territory. Moreover, the definition and interpretation of what constitutes «individual self-defence», i.e. defence of Japanese territory in the case of an attack on Japanese territory, is «adjustable» as Tokyo has demonstrated when it contributed to the US-led military operations in Afghanistan (2001-2009) and Iraq (2004-2006). At the time, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi declared that Japanese (non-combat) contributions to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq constituted acts of individual self-defence (as opposed to acts of collective self-defence) and therefore did not violate Article 9 of the Japanese constitution. Koizumi explained that assisting the US – in Afghanistan with rear-area logistical support supplying naval vessels with fuel in the Indian Ocean and in Iraq with reconstruction work in southern Iraq – were both acts of individual self-defence as such contributions contributed to – at least as far Koizumi at the time was concerned – fighting international terrorism. This in turn, Koizumi explained at the time, made a contribu-

4. Until 2015, the Cabinet Legislation Bureau stipulated that Japan as a member of the United Nations has the right in principle to execute collective self-defence. However, Japan's war-renouncing constitution (Article 9 of the Japanese constitution) prohibits Japan's Self-Defence Forces from actually executing that right.

5. Leading the political opposition and parts of Japan's civil society to accuse the LDP of violating Japan's war-renouncing constitution.

tion to keeping international terrorists from entering Japan.⁶ Admittedly, this was not a very credible attempt to sell Japanese contributions to the war against terror to the Japanese but was certainly good and credible for those in LDP policymaking circles who like Koizumi wanted Japan to make more substantial and in-person contributions to international security at the time.

Roughly 55,000 US troops are stationed in US bases on Japanese territory. Roughly 75% of these troops⁷ are stationed in Okinawa, and US military bases occupy close to 20 per cent of Okinawa's land mass. The US maintains 89 military facilities on Japanese territory and the Japanese government is paying nearly \$2 billion a year for the stationing of US forces in Japan (the so-called 'host nation support'). In April 2015 Tokyo and Washington adopted new bilateral defence guidelines, i.e. guidelines which define the nature of and procedures for bilateral US-Japan security and defence cooperation. The 2015 defence guidelines stipulate joint development of military technology, bilateral cooperation on cyber-security, the use of space for defence purposes and ballistic missile cooperation. Furthermore, the guidelines contain provisions which enable Washington and Tokyo to jointly defend the Japanese-controlled Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea and provisions on the joint defence of sea lanes and Japanese contributions to US military operations beyond East Asia. The guidelines also foresee increased US-Japanese joint military training activities and shared use of military facilities to further enhance interoperability between US and Japanese military forces.

Is the US-Japan security alliance equipped with the instruments to counter China in the case of a Chinese kinetic attack on Taiwan? Yes. Will it have to do this in the months and years ahead? Probably not. Indeed, for the time being, it remains unlikely that Washington and Beijing will go to war over Taiwan. That said, however, China's increasingly frequent intrusions into the south-western sector of Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ) have undoubtedly increased the likelihood of Chinese-Taiwanese clash over Taiwan's ADIZ. This in turn could lead to US involvement in a Chinese-Taiwanese conflict if Washington – alone or with Japan – decided to militarily defend Taiwan. Against the background of increasingly assertive and aggressive Chinese behaviour over Taiwan's ADIZ and in Japanese-controlled territorial waters in the East China Sea, Washington and Tokyo have in 2021 repeatedly reiterated that Taiwan/Taiwan Strait and East China Sea crisis scenarios are part of bilateral US-Japan defence planning.

6. For details, see Aurelia George Mulgan, 'Japan's Defence Dilemma', *Security Challenges*, Vol 1, No.1 2005, pp. 59-72. This constitutional interpretation was very controversial in Japan, like the Japanese missions in the Indian Ocean in support of the US-led war in Afghanistan and Iraq themselves.

7. Roughly 30,000.

Almost needless to say that Beijing warns that Washington and Tokyo equipping their bilateral security with the resources and instruments to deal with a Taiwan Strait crisis further aggravates an already existing security dilemma in East Asia.⁸ A part of East Asia's security dilemma involving the US and China can be summarized as follows: measures and policies declared as «defensive» by the US and Japan are interpreted as «offensive» by China, in turn motivating Beijing to adopt «defensive» policies of its own (which in turn are then interpreted as «offensive» by Washington and Tokyo) However, that is – putting it bluntly – not what is taking place in East Asia. Instead, it is accurate to conclude that the aforementioned Chinese policies are not the result of such a security dilemma. This is because China is actively challenging and changing the existing territorial status quo in Asia, which is clearly not a defensive policy. Instead, intruding in the territorial waters and airspace of other countries and building military bases on artificial islands in disputed areas are aggressive policies and are indeed being perceived as such in Washington and Tokyo. Consequently, this is not an action-counteraction chain of events that could be interpreted as a security dilemma. Frequent intrusions into Taiwan's ADIZ, intrusions in Japanese-controlled territorial waters in the East China Sea,⁹ and the construction of military bases on Chinese-built artificial islands/geographical features close to and around disputed islands in the South China Sea have consequences for East Asian security.¹⁰

8. For further details see e.g. Ryo Sahashi, 'Japan's Strategy Amid US-China Confrontation', *China International Strategy Review* 2 November 2020, pp. 232-245

9. Around the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands.

10. China has built military bases on artificially built islands close to disputed islands in the South China Sea. Satellite footage shows that Beijing has over recent years accelerated the construction of military facilities in the South China Sea. This footage shows what is most probably infrastructure for radars and antennae mounts as part of a military base on Mischief Reef. The Mischief is a ring-shaped coral reef located roughly 250 km from the Philippines and has de facto been occupied by China since 1995. It is the kind of reef that China cannot legitimately claim as part of its territory as the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled in 2016. Other satellite pictures taken earlier in March 2021 show that China has reclaimed land to extend Subi Reef in and around the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Furthermore, since 2014, China has transformed numerous reefs and sandbars – typically far from its own shoreline – into man-made artificial islands fortified with missiles, runways and various weapons systems. In the Spratly archipelago, claimed by Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam, Beijing has built roughly 13 square kilometres of artificial islands on top of reefs and rock (on which it has deployed missiles). For details, see e.g., 'South China Sea: Satellite Images Show China Building Full-Blown Military Bases on Artificial Islands', *NZ Herald.co.nz*, 21 February 2021 (<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/south-china-sea-satellite-images-show-china-building-full-blown-military-bases-on-artificial-islands/DAM22R4VYCYKYZRPRION7ISXU/>). Also Kristin Huang, 'South China Sea: China has Extended another Spratly Islands Reef, Photos Show', *South China Morning Post*, 24 March 2021 (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3126656/south-china-sea-beijing-has-extended-another-spratly-islands>).

Beijing in turn is brushing all of this off as «interference» or «meddling» in Chinese internal affairs, but unlike Beijing, Tokyo and Washington and (many) other like-minded countries in the region agree that security in the Taiwan Strait and safeguarding Japanese territorial integrity in the East China Sea do not fall in the category of Chinese «internal affairs.» In reality, i.e. reality is defined outside of Chinese policymaking and propaganda circles, they are security issues relevant to regional stability and security. Certainly, US-Japanese military cooperation in the case of a Taiwan crisis scenario, i.e. US-Japanese military cooperation defending Taiwan in the case of a Chinese attack, has undoubtedly always been on the US-Japan policy planning agenda. When in 1997 the US and Japan revised their bilateral defence guidelines, the guidelines spoke about US-Japanese military cooperation in «areas surrounding Japan» While it was clear and obvious that both Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait are part of the geographical concept of «areas surrounding Japan», Tokyo and Washington at the time maintained that «areas surrounding Japan» was not a geographical concept but instead defined as a «situational concept». While it was indeed obvious and perceived and interpreted as such by scholars and policymakers at the time (especially and obviously among Chinese policymakers and scholars) that «areas surrounding Japan» was without much doubt an euphemism for Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait, Washington and Tokyo maintained that such areas can be anywhere and beyond and outside Asia – areas where the US and Japan decide to cooperate militarily when the «situation» calls for such cooperation, e.g. Japan's contributions to the US-led wars in Afghanistan in 2001-2009¹¹ and Iraq in 2004-2006.¹² While Japan's missions in the Indian Ocean refuelling US and British warships engaged in the military campaign in Afghanistan and Tokyo's Iraqi reconstruction mission were authorized by laws adopted under Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, the missions at the time were interpreted as confirmation that the aforementioned US-Japan cooperation in «areas surrounding Japan» is indeed not a geographical but instead the aforementioned «situational» concept.

11. Japanese navy vessels were engaged in a refuelling mission in the Indian Ocean, providing US and British navy vessels with fuel. The US and British vessels brought military troops to and back from Afghanistan.

12. 1,000 Japanese Self-Defence Forces (SDF) were at the time deployed to Samawah in southern Iraq engaged in a reconstruction mission. Due to Japan's war-renouncing constitution, Japanese troops were deployed to Iraq on the condition that they would face next to no risk of getting involved in military fighting in Iraq.

2. *Putting China Containment on Paper*

A US Department of State document published in March 2021 declared that the US and Japan are committed to working together on shared challenges, including «countering malign influences and PRC provocations in Asia and around the world».¹³ This was shortly before Washington and Tokyo's foreign and defence ministers met for their «Two-Plus-Two» dialogue. Washington and Tokyo voiced their joint concerns about a newly adopted Chinese law that authorizes its coast guard to fire at foreign ships in contested Asian territorial waters, including in the South China Sea. In January 2021 Beijing adopted a law that explicitly authorizes the country's coast guard to fire at foreign vessels.¹⁴ The new Chinese coast guard law has led to concerns in Japan as the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) in 2020 and 2021 sailed hundreds of times into Japanese-controlled territorial waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.¹⁵ While this is not to say that Beijing is deploying coast guard vessels in the East China Sea to pick a fight with the Japanese navy and/or coast guard, it nonetheless signals that in principle it allows its coast guard to «defend» Chinese-claimed territorial waters and territories far from the Chinese coastline.¹⁶ In fact, Beijing has (in the South China Sea) in the past used its coast guard to force foreign fishing vessels out of waters in the South China Sea that China claims are part of Chinese territory. Certainly, these waters are not contested and are – at least as far as China is concerned – «unalienable» parts of Chinese territory – like more than 90% of the 3.5-million-square-kilometre South China Sea.¹⁷

13. Kobara, Junnosuke, 'US and Japan Take on China Provocations with Unbreakable Alliance', *Nikkei Asia*, 15 March 2021 (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/US-and-Japan-take-on-China-provocations-with-unbreakable-alliance>).

14. See e.g. 'Force Majeure, 'China's Coast Guard Law in Context', *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Washington D.C., 30 March 2021 (<https://amti.csis.org/force-majeure-chinas-coast-guard-law-in-context/>). Furthermore, see Yew Lun Tian, 'China Authorises Coast Guard to Fire on Foreign Vessels if Needed', *Reuters*, 22 January 2021 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-coastguard-law-idUSKBN29R1ER>). Also see Gurjit Singh, 'Return of the Samurai Spirit – Japan Defense White Paper 2021', Chanakya Forum, 18 July 2021 (<https://chanakyaforum.com/return-of-the-samurai-spirit-japan-defense-white-paper-2021/>).

15. Among other things, the law allows Chinese coast guard personnel to demolish other countries' structures built on Chinese-claimed reefs and inspect foreign vessels in waters claimed by China.

16. Certainly, China claims the Senkaku Islands as part of its national territory, meaning that how China defines its coastlines is fundamentally different to how other countries define them.

17. See also Ralph Jennings, 'Increase in South China Naval Activity Expected to Provoke Beijing', *VOA News*, 27 August 2021 (<https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/voa-news-china/increase-south-china-sea-naval-activity-expected-provoke-beijing>).

The aforementioned Chinese maritime and territorial expansionism had consequences in 2021 - the year that «Taiwan» and «peace and security in the Taiwan Strait» made it again¹⁸ into official Japanese, US and US-Japan statements. In April 2021, US President Joe Biden and then Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga¹⁹ held a bilateral summit. Biden and Suga jointly announced they would «take on the challenges from China and ensure that the future of the Indo-Pacific is free and open.»²⁰ Security in the Taiwan Strait was also mentioned in the statement: «We underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues».²¹ While press reports after the summit pointed out that the last time Taiwan was mentioned in a US-Japan joint statement was in 1969 (during a meeting between then US President Richard Nixon and Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato), Adam Liff from the Brookings Institution pointed out that «Taiwan» was not even mentioned in that statement. Instead, it mentioned the «Taiwan Strait», leading Liff to conclude that part of the joint statement was «anodyne» and was in line with Japan's «strategic ambiguity» towards Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait.²² Certainly this did not – at least judging by the reaction of the Chinese state-controlled press – make a difference to China: whether Taiwan or instead «only» the Taiwan Strait was mentioned in the official US-Japan statement is irrelevant: both are «interference» in China's internal affairs as far as Beijing is concerned. In other words, the effectiveness and *raison d'être* of Japan's alleged «strategic ambiguity» must be put in doubt as it not perceived as such in Beijing. For Beijing, at least so it seems, it is sufficient to hear «Taiwan» as in «Taiwan Strait» to conclude for itself that an allegedly ambiguous concept is instead a very unambiguous one.

18. After decades of not and never being mentioned in joint official US-Japan statements.

19. On September 3, Suga announced he would not run for election as LDP party leader later in September.

20. See Ken Moriyasu, 'Biden and Suga Refer to 'Peace and Stability of Taiwan Strait' in Statement', *Nikkei Asia*, 17 April 2021 (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Biden-and-Suga-refer-to-peace-and-stability-of-Taiwan-Strait-in-statement>).

21. See 'US-Japan Joint Leader's Statement: US-Japan Global Partnership for a New Era', *The White House*, 16 April 2021 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/16/u-s-japan-joint-leaders-statement-u-s-japan-global-partnership-for-a-new-era/>)

22. Adam P. Liff, 'Has Japan's Policy Toward the Taiwan Strait Changed?', *Brookings*, 23 August 2021 (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/08/23/has-japans-policy-toward-the-taiwan-strait-changed/>).

Finally, Washington in March 2021 reiterated its policy stating that the Senkaku Islands/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea²³ are covered by Article 5 of the US-Japan Security. In that month, the US State Department published a US-Japan alliance fact sheet entitled «Reaffirming the Unbreakable US-Japan Alliance». «The United States' commitment to the defense of Japan is absolute», the fact sheet reads. «The United States affirms the Senkaku Islands fall within the scope of Article V of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, and we remain opposed to any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East China Sea or undermine Japan's administration of these islands».²⁴

Japan's defence white paper entitled «Defense of Japan» published in July 2021 is also explicit about Tokyo's interest in and commitment to making – together with its alliance partner Washington – a contribution to keeping China from attacking and invading Taiwan. The paper mentions the Taiwan Strait several times and among other things points out that «China has further intensified military activities around Taiwan including Chinese aircrafts entering the southwestern airspace of Taiwan. Stabilizing the situation surrounding Taiwan is important for Japan's security and the stability of the international community». Furthermore, the paper is explicit about the need to continue equipping Taiwan with weapons and weapon technology to defend itself against China: «The overall military balance between China and Taiwan is tilting to China's favour, and the gap appears to be growing year by year. Attention should be paid to trends such as the strengthening of Chinese and Taiwanese forces, the sale of weapons to Taiwan by the United States, and Taiwan's own development of its main military equipment», the paper reads.²⁵ In 2014, Japan lifted its ban on exporting weapons and weapon technology and since then Japanese weapons contractors have been cooperating with US and also European counterparts (the UK, France and Germany). Fur-

23. The Senkaku Islands have been part of Japanese territory since the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895. China, however, claims that the islands (which are referred to as the Diaoyu Islands in China) have since the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) been part of Chinese territory. When Tokyo annexed the islands in 1895, it maintained that they were instead «terra nullius» and hence not part of Chinese territory. Because the Senkaku Islands were not part of the territories Japan was obliged to render to China with the adoption of the *San Francisco Peace Treaty* in 1951, Tokyo maintains that the islands continue to be part of Japanese territory today. The islands were under US administration until 1972 until they were – together with Okinawa - formally returned to Japanese sovereignty in May 1972. Consequently, Tokyo maintains that there is no territorial conflict with Beijing over the Senkaku Islands.

24. See 'Reaffirming the Unbreakable US-Japan Alliance, US Department of State', *Fact Sheet, Office of the Spokesperson*, 15 March 2021 (<https://www.state.gov/reaffirming-the-unbreakable-u-s-japan-alliance/>).

25. 'Defense of Japan 2021', *Ministry of Defense (MOD)*, July 2021 (https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021_Digest_EN.pdf).

thermore, since lifting the ban Japan has sold defence equipment to the Philippines,²⁶ and in 2020 it signed a bilateral weapons export agreement with Vietnam.²⁷ Furthermore, in April 2021 it was reported that Tokyo will be selling up to eight of its new Nogami-class stealth frigates to the Indonesian Navy.²⁸ While the Japanese defence white paper does not say anything about Tokyo and Japanese weapons contractors cooperating with Taipei and Taiwanese weapons contractors, Tokyo and Taipei have very recently started jointly thinking out loud about military exchanges and co-operation. During a meeting between Japanese Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP) lawmakers and lawmakers from Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in August 2021, bilateral military exchanges were discussed, including cooperation between their coast guard forces.²⁹ Consequently, it is probably not unrealistic to assume that Tokyo and Taiwan – either bilaterally or together with Washington – are engaged in off-the-record consultations on how to militarily cooperate in a Taiwan Strait crisis scenario. Already in 2019 it emerged e.g. that Japanese experts are believed to have assisted Taiwan with the development of the country's indigenous submarine programme.³⁰ Furthermore, it cannot be excluded that – should China continue to increase military pressure onto Taiwan – Japan joins the US in exporting weapons and weapons technology to Taiwan. To be sure, Japan lifting the ban to export weapons and weapons technology in 2014 did not authorize Japanese weapons contractors to export weapons to countries part of or involved in a military conflict. However, growing Chinese military pressure onto Taiwan and the aforementioned unlawful Chinese territorial expansionism in the East and South China Seas might in the future encourage Japanese policymakers to join US counterparts in arming Taiwan.

26. In June 2020, Mitsubishi Electric sold maritime radars to the Philippines.

27. See John Wright, 'Japan's Arms Exports: A Prudent Possibility Amid Enduring Challenges', *The Diplomat*, 26 January 2021 (<https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/japans-arms-exports-a-prudent-possibility-amid-enduring-challenges/>).

28. ²⁵ Built by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Mitsui Engineering and Shipbuilding at Shipyards in Tamano and Nagasaki. For details see Sebastian Strangio, 'Japan could Deliver 8 Cutting-Edge Frigates to Indonesia', *The Diplomat*, 8 April 2021 (<https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/japan-could-deliver-8-cutting-edge-frigates-to-indonesia/>).

29. See 'Taiwan, Japan Ruling Parties Discuss China, Military Cooperation', *Reuters*, 27 August 2021 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-japan-ruling-parties-discuss-china-military-cooperation-2021-08-27/>).

30. See Howard Wang, 'Japan Considers a New Security Relationship Via Networking with Taiwan', *China Brief* 29 May 2019 (<https://jamestown.org/program/japan-considers-a-new-security-relationship-via-networking-with-taiwan/>).

3. *Worst-case Scenarios*

Shortly after the aforementioned US-Japan summit in April, then Japanese Prime Minister Suga struck a more cautious tone, saying that mentioning the Taiwan Strait in the April 2021 joint US-Japan statement «does not presuppose Japanese military involvement» in a Taiwan crisis scenario. While the South China Morning Post at the time concluded that Tokyo seemingly got «cold feet» and therefore decided to downplay what was jointly issued with Washington on Taiwan in April³¹, Rand scholar Jeffrey Hornung argues that what Suga said in the Japanese parliament does not contradict what Tokyo and Washington jointly said and issued on Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait. «Not being a formal ally of Taiwan, it would be odd for Japan to declare an unconditional military commitment in any situation. Suga's statement could best be interpreted as taking a page out of the United States' own playbook on strategic ambiguity. As long as Japan stays vague on its level of commitment, China is forced to consider both US and Japanese possible involvement in any plans it has to invade Taiwan», he writes in *Foreign Policy*.³² Maybe. However it can also be assumed that Chinese foreign policymakers have already a long time ago concluded that Japan would in any event – either directly or indirectly – be involved in any possible US-Chinese military clash over Taiwan. Put differently: Beijing knows that Tokyo would be part of a military clash with Washington and is prepared (and preparing) for such a scenario even if it meant a military confrontation not with one but indeed two heavily armed opponents. This in turn could/would mean that Beijing does not consider the aforementioned Japanese ambiguity an obstacle standing in the way of attacking Taiwan. In the same *Foreign Policy* article, Jeffrey Hornung outlines what Washington could/would in the case of a Taiwan Strait crisis scenario request from Japan and what Japan would be able and prepared to provide the US with

31. See also Julian Ryall, 'Japan Troops Won't get Involved if China Invades Taiwan, PM Yoshihide Suga Says', *South China Morning Post*, 21 April 2021 (<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3130423/japan-troops-wont-get-involved-if-china-invades-taiwan-pm>).

32. Jeffrey Hornung 'What the United States Wants from Japan in Taiwan', *Foreign Policy*, 10 May 2021, (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/10/what-the-united-states-wants-from-japan-in-taiwan/>). See also Julian Ryall, 'Japan Troops Won't get Involved if China Invades Taiwan, PM Yoshihide Suga Says', *South China Morning Post*, 21 April 2021 (<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3130423/japan-troops-wont-get-involved-if-china-invades-taiwan-pm>). Japan's defence minister Nobuo Kishi has in September 2021 been less ambiguous about a possible Japanese involvement in a Taiwan Strait crisis scenario when he said that «as Taiwan is an important ally of Japan and the two are only separated by a short distance, Tokyo cannot stand aside when events in Taiwan occur.» Cited in Matthew Strong, 'Japan's Defense Minister Says Tokyo Cannot Stand Aside from Developments in Taiwan', *Taiwan News*, 7 September 2021 (<https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4282365>).

in terms of support. What Hornung calls «minimum» Japanese support for the US in the case of a conflict with China is Japan allowing Washington to use US bases in Japan for combat operations (deploying troops, navy vessels and aircraft from the bases). In 1960, Tokyo³³ and Washington agreed through a so-called «exchange of notes» that they would have what was referred to as «prior consultations», during which Washington would (have to) explain to Tokyo which purpose US bases on Japanese territory would be used for (however, in that agreement it was not mentioned or clarified whether Tokyo would have the option to not allow the US to use US bases on Japanese territory for combat operations in Asia).³⁴ Certainly, not being informed in advance on the nature of a US operation using US bases on Japanese territory could also be interpreted as «convenient» in Tokyo, shielding Japan from the accusation of directly contributing to US-led military wars. When in 1996 Washington deployed a Japan-based aircraft carrier in the Taiwan Strait to react to Chinese attempts to intimidate Taipei when it was holding its (first) democratic presidential election, then Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto countered Chinese accusations that Japan was contributing to and participating in what China at the time referred to as an «act of aggression against China» by being ambiguous: he did not specify whether or not he and his government were informed by the US about the purpose of the aircraft carrier's deployment (or destination) before it was deployed to the Taiwan Strait. At the time this also worked very well for the US. The Japanese journalist Yoichi Funabashi wrote in his book «Alliance Adrift» (1999) that Washington's policymakers chose not to opt for prior consultations with Japan in order to avoid receiving official permission from Japan to deploy a US aircraft carrier from a US base on Japanese territory in the Taiwan Strait.³⁵

The aforementioned first scenario of Japanese indirect and/or rear-area support is realistic, Hornung points out, in the case of a US-Sino military conflict that does not include a Chinese military attack on Japan. Further Japanese (more direct) contributions that go beyond allowing Washington to use its bases in Japan, Hornung explains, depend on how Tokyo «defines» the situation. If Japan continues not to be directly attacked in the case of a US-Chinese conflict, Tokyo, Hornung argues, could define that the conflict has «important influence» on Japanese security. In that case, Japanese contributions would continue to remain limited to non-combat

33. At the time governed by the very controversial and convicted A-class criminal of war Kishi Nobusuke, grandfather of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo.

34. For details, see 'Exchanged Notes, Regarding the Implementation of Article VI of Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States of America', *Japan's Foreign Relations-Basic Documents Vol. I*, pp. 963-965, 19 January 1960 (<https://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/docs/19600119.T2E.html>).

35. For details, see Yoichi Funabashi, 'Alliance Adrift', *Council on Foreign Relations Book*, Council on Foreign Relations Press 1999, pp.351-366.

«rear-area support», such as logistical support in Japan, including supply, maintenance, transport and medical support and services. However, it is not clear – because consecutive Japanese governments have never officially clarified that – whether an attack on US military forces stationed on Japanese territory would indeed constitute a direct attack on Japan. Certainly, under realistic crisis scenario circumstances the above would most probably amount to little more than semantic hair-splitting, as it would be very difficult (if not possible) for a Japanese government to decide not to respond – together with the US military – with military force to an attack on US forces stationed on Japanese territory.³⁶

4. *And Taiwan again*

In June 2021 Japanese State Minister of Defence Yasuhide Nakayama gave a speech at the Hudson Institute in the US during which he was very explicit about Japanese concerns about Sino-Russian military cooperation in Asia. Nakayama said that such cooperation is posing a potential threat to Japan and also Taiwan. Therefore, Nakayama explained, Japan and its allies are charged with the task of protecting Taiwan as a «democratic country» Nakayama talked about improving and expanding US-Japan interoperability, and suggested that bilateral US-Japan interoperability could be extended to trilateral US-Japanese-Taiwanese interoperability.

Sidhart Kaushal from RUSI in London goes beyond possible Japanese rear-area support and suggests Japan should take a much more active role in a Taiwan Strait crisis scenario, calling Tokyo a «key actor» defending Taiwan: «In the longer term, should the country eventually shake off its self-imposed restrictions on the use of force, Japan could become a key actor in any effort to secure Taiwan. This, coupled with military and technological development allowing Taiwan itself to play a greater role in its own defence, would make it possible for the US to play the part of an enabling power in a Taiwan scenario, intervening with forces sufficient to tip the scales in favour of local partners, rather than achieving preponderance in a contested theatre itself», he writes. For this scenario to be realistic, i.e. Japan becoming a «key actor», the Japanese constitution would not even have to be revised.³⁷ Kaushal goes on to argue that Taiwan is «vital to the security of Japan by the very nature of its position» (as a large part of Japanese energy imports are

36. See Jeffrey Hornung, 'Japan's Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency', *Rand Corporation Research Report* 2020 (https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA314-1.html).

37. See Sidhart Kaushal, 'Japan's Evolving Policy on Taiwan and the US-Japan Alliance: Towards a Nixon Doctrine for Northeast Asia?', *RUSI Commentary*, 30 July 2021 (<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/japans-evolving-policy-taiwan-and-us-japan-alliance-towards-nixon-doctrine-northeast-asia>).

shipped through the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, as he points out) and maintains that the Japanese navy (Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, JMSDF) would be better positioned to defend Taiwan than US forces. «Unlike rotationally deployed US forces that must be redeployed from the continental US – straining readiness cycles – the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) is regionally postured», he writes. The Japanese navy, Kaushal writes, has 34 destroyers and 11 frigates, and is therefore Northeast Asia's largest force of permanently stationed major surface combatants (vessels of destroyer size or greater): «Japan's large and capable fleet of Soryu-class diesel-electric submarines could arguably be better suited to denying shallow littoral waters in and around the Taiwan Strait to PLA Navy vessels than US nuclear-powered submarines, which are optimized to operate in deeper waters».

5. *How far can China go?*

The scholar Berkshire Miller writes that «Tokyo and Washington will have to focus on a range of longstanding security irritants in the region and challenges to the rules-based order. In the South China Sea, Beijing continues to practice salami-slicing tactics aimed at ensuring its de-facto control of much of the key waterway through extensive land reclamation, the deployment of military equipment and the diplomatic splitting of states in ASEAN.³⁸ While China is – to put it bluntly – doing all of this, Miller, however, does not suggest what the US and Japan should do when he writes that Washington and Tokyo have to «focus on a range of longstanding security irritants». From a policy point of view, the question is indeed or should be what the US and Japan will do about all of that: will they – individually or jointly – continue to monitor the above-mentioned aggressive and coercive Chinese regional policies or will they instead jointly formulate and adopt policies on the ground deterring and keeping China from unlawfully building bases on disputed islands in the South China Sea and deter Chinese coast guard vessels from intruding in Japanese-controlled territorial waters? For now it is the former: Washington and Tokyo voice their concerns about China's aggressive and expansionist regional policies without doing anything about them. Put differently, the US and Japan are not – at least not yet – able and/or willing to oblige China to not continue building military bases on disputed islands in the South China Sea and do not intervene when

38. See Berkshire J. Miller, 'Anchoring the US-Japan Alliance in the Suga-Biden Era', *Global Asia*, Vol. 16, No. 2, June 2021 (https://www.globalasia.org/v16no2/feature/anchoring-the-us-japan-alliance-in-the-suga-biden-era_j-berkshire-miller). On Taiwan-Japan relations in 2021 see also: Giulio Pugliese & Corey Wallace, 'Japan 2021: The Liberal Democratic Party Emerges Stronger Despite Domestic Tumult', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXII / 2021, pp.63-94.

Chinese fighter jets intrude in Taiwan's ADIZ. This in turn raises the question of what China will have to do in order to provoke a joint US-Japanese reaction – a reaction going beyond words – to Chinese aggressive policies with an indirect or direct impact on US and Japanese security interests. Will it have to invade Taiwan and/or occupy the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea?

In May 2021 the scholars Tsutsui Kiyoteru and Charles Grabtree wrote that «the US-Japan alliance is obviously central in the coalition of democratic nations concerned about China's ambitions. The primary goal of these countries ought to be walking the thin line between demonstrating their resolve to counter any aggressive behaviour by China with force and avoiding any unnecessary provocation against China».³⁹ Again and like Berkshire Miller above, Kiyoteru and Grabtree do not suggest and/or explain what exactly Washington and Tokyo should do to counter the aforementioned aggressive Chinese behaviour. Their attempt to add further substance in terms of policy prescriptions does not necessarily add much substance either on how to deter Chinese aggressive policies in general and territorial expansionism in particular when they write that «toward that end, the most promising framework is the Quad that includes India and Australia in addition to Japan and the US». While Beijing publicly downplays the significance of the Quad (typically portraying it as an ill-fated US-led grouping of countries to «suppress» China⁴⁰), for Beijing the Quad is part of a US-led China containment policy.⁴¹ In August 2021, the Quad provided Beijing with further 'evidence' towards that end. Without revealing details, the US Department of State announced at the time that during the virtual meeting of Quad country leaders «peace and security in the Taiwan Strait» were discussed.⁴²

39. See Kiyoteru, Tsutsui, Grabtree, Charles, 'China Looms Large, Despite a Strong US-Japan Alliance', *Commentary Stanford Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University*, 14 May 2021 (<https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/china-looms-large-despite-strong-us-japan-alliance>).

40. First proposed by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Among other things, the four Quad countries conduct military exercises in the region and invite other like-minded countries with a naval presence in the region (like the UK and France) to join these exercises. For further details, see, e.g., Patrick Gerard Buchan, Benjamin Rimland, 'Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue', *CSIS Brief, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 16 March 2020 (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-diamond-past-present-and-future-quadrilateral-security-dialogue>).

41. See also 'The Quad is Finding its Purpose, at Last', *The Economist*, 12 June 2021 (<https://www.economist.com/asia/2021/06/12/the-quad-is-finding-its-purpose-at-last>).

42. See 'US, Japan, other Quad Members Discuss Taiwan's Peace and Security', *Kyodo News*, 13 August 2021 (<https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/08/b317c-cd991eb-us-japan-other-quad-members-discuss-taiwans-peace-and-security.html>).

6. *What does China want anyway?*

Chinese policymakers and diplomats claim – continuously and through numerous channels⁴³ – to be victims of Washington and Tokyo teaming up to contain and «suppress» China. Beijing claims that Washington is using its allies and alliances in the West and Asia (including Japan and Australia) to turn its bilateral conflicts and disagreements with China into conflicts and disagreements between China and the West in general.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Beijing and the government’s state-controlled nationalist tabloid newspapers like the *Global Times* publish a constant stream of articles and editorials which depict the US – together with its allies – as determined to «suppress Chinese economic development»,⁴⁵ bad old Cold War-style containment, Beijing’s policymakers and their so-called ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomats complain about via Twitter in a (very) frequent basis.

But is China preparing to attack and invade Taiwan at all, or anytime soon? Richard Bush, Bonnie Glaser and Ryan Haas do not think so and caution that what they call «doomsday predictions» of Beijing attacking Taiwan as soon as it is able to do not reflect what China is planning to do in the years ahead. China, they argue, has little to gain from attacking and seeking to unify Mainland China with Taiwan by force.⁴⁶ Instead, the three scholars point out, China’s priority today and in the foreseeable future is to deter Taiwanese independence as opposed to achieving reunification through military force. Attempts to invade Taiwan would, as they write, «very likely invite a military conflict with the United States. Such a conflict would be difficult to limit from escalating or spreading beyond the Taiwan Strait. Under such circumstances, Beijing could not be assured of absolute victory, and anything short of quick and absolute unification would risk undermining Chinese Communist Party legitimacy at home». Instead, they conclude that Beijing is putting Taiwan under pressure with different (non-military) means (and will continue to do so). «China has targeted Taiwan economical-

43. Increasingly often via Twitter, which is used a lot by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to spread Chinese government propaganda, conspiracy theories and enormous amounts of disinformation (while Twitter is not accessible to ordinary Chinese citizens). The US and US policies towards China are the favourite targets of the ministry’s disinformation campaigns. Referring to the US-Japan alliance as directed against China and an instrument to contain China, facilitate Japanese rearmament and secure US military hegemony in Asia is part of this.

44. See, e.g. ‘China should Work to Tear Down US-Built «Western Wall»’, *Global Times*, 3 August 2021 (<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1230495.shtml>).

45. ‘US Attempt to Use «Small Digital Circle Containment» Set to Fail’, *Global Times*, 13 July 2021 (<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1228580.shtml>).

46. See Richard Bush, Bonnie Glaser, Ryan Haas, ‘Opinion: Don’t Help China by Hying Risk of War over Taiwan’, *NPR*, 8 April 2021 (<https://www.npr.org/2021/04/08/984524521/opinion-dont-help-china-by-hying-risk-of-war-over-taiwan>).

ly, sought to induce a brain drain of Taiwan's top engineers to the mainland, isolated Taiwan on the world stage, fomented social divisions inside Taiwan, launched cyberattacks and undertaken displays of military force». All of this together with and in addition to the current Chinese sabre-rattling as part of a strategy of seeking to send a defiant message of strength to the outside world in general and the US in particular. A message to the outside world which is probably also meant as re-assuring message to those in China who – like e.g. the country's so-called «Neo-Maoists» – accuse the political leadership of being «too soft» or «weak» in defending China against (alleged) «interference» in China's «internal affairs». ⁴⁷

Former high-ranking Japanese diplomat Hitoshi Tanaka ⁴⁸ sounds optimistic (or over-optimistic for those who are sceptical about Tokyo's mediation and/or charm offensive skills) that Tokyo can facilitate dialogue between Washington and Beijing when he wrote in June 2021 that «Japan, as both a US ally and a neighbour with deep historical and cultural connections to China, can play an important role in helping facilitate deeper communication between the United States and China to ensure that tensions in the region do not escalate». ⁴⁹ On paper this sounds conciliatory. Reality, however, as we have seen above, is very different: Japan today is clearly not in a position to «facilitate» «deeper» or – for that matter – any communication with China. China and its regional policies are largely to blame for this. Furthermore, if Tokyo were able to facilitate dialogue between Washington and Beijing (which it is not, at least not currently), the recent past has made it unambiguously clear that Beijing is not adjusting or changing its policies in accordance with «advice» from other countries. Instead, «advice» is instantly referred to as «interference» by Chinese policymakers. However, it should not go unmentioned that the kind of mediation proposed by the aforementioned Tanaka is also motivated by a Japanese fear of «entrapment», namely of involuntarily becoming part of a US-led war against China. ⁵⁰

47. China's «Neo-Maoists» (also referred to «New Left») have concluded that armed conflict with the US is as good as inevitable. For a detailed analysis on who the «Neo-Maoists» are and what they want, see Jude Blanchette, *China's New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

48. Among others, Japan's former North Korea chief negotiator.

49. Hitoshi Tanaka, 'Deepening US-Japan Strategic Cooperation on China and the Indo-Pacific', *JCIE East Asia Insights*, June 2021 (<https://www.jcie.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/EAI-Jun-2021.pdf>).

50. For details, see, e.g., Yasuhiro Izumikawa, 'Explaining Japanese Anti-Militarism', *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Fall 2010), pp. 123-160.

7. *Conclusions*

As mentioned above, after the US-Japan summit in April 2021 Tokyo was quick to emphasize that Japan would only make a direct military contribution to a US-Chinese conflict over Taiwan if the security of Japanese territory were directly affected. As elaborated above, it is hard to imagine how any US-Chinese clash in East Asia and/or the Taiwan Strait could not have a direct impact on the security of Japanese territory. This in turn would/could mean that in the case of a military conflict with China Washington would in any event request a direct Japanese military contribution in support of US military operations (even if Japanese territory were not under attack). In the unlikely event of a US-Chinese military conflict over Taiwan, Japan would – at least indirectly if the situation/crisis is interpreted as not directly threatening Japanese territory – make a contribution to US military operations and fighting in the region. It would do this through «rear-area support», namely by providing the US military stationed on Japanese territory with logistical and medical support. However, the concept of «rear area support» is ambiguous: there is no consensus in the literature and in policymaking circles on whether such «rear area support» already constitutes a «real» contribution to a military crisis scenario.

In the past, Japanese scholars and policymakers have at times been concerned that US antagonistic policies towards China would have negative repercussions for Japanese-Chinese political, trade and investment relations. In other words, they feared becoming ‘entrapped’ in a conflict between Washington and Beijing. Such concerns are still around in Tokyo today but are arguably (far) less vocal than they were in the past. Because of the (very) assertive and indeed aggressive and expansionist Chinese regional policies, there is very little talk in Tokyo (as in Washington, Brussels and many EU member states too) of policies aimed at engaging with China. This is not because Japan and other like-minded and democratic countries are not willing to engage with China but because China has made it very clear that it does not see the need to get engaged. «Engagement» – at least in current circumstances and under the current political leadership – is a synonym for unwanted «interference» in China’s «internal affairs».

Beijing’s policymakers cannot be blamed for concluding that the US-Japan security alliance and the Quad are aimed at militarily containing China. They quite clearly are. What they can be accused of is pretending that China’s regional foreign and security policies in general and those related to territorial claims in the South China Sea in particular do not provoke a reaction. Put bluntly, sooner or later Beijing had to expect a reaction to its decision to dismiss international law as irrelevant and build civilian installations and military bases on disputed islands in the South China Sea, authorize its coast guard to fire at foreign vessels in disputed territorial waters, constantly violate Taiwan’s ADIZ and order Chinese fishing and coast guard

vessels to sail into Japanese-controlled territorial waters in the East China Sea. Certainly, Beijing sees all of this very differently by claiming «historical rights»: the islands Beijing is building military bases on in the South China Sea have been part of Chinese territory since the Ming Dynasty⁵¹, the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea were annexed by Japan in 1895 and Japan failed to return them to China after World War II and finally Taiwan is a Chinese province and hence an «internal» Chinese affair.

51. 1368-1644, followed by the Qing Dynasty, China's last imperial dynasty.