

Introduction

What does it mean to truly feel reassurance? It is when two opposing parties do not become suspicious of each other's actions—at the very least, when they can understand the intentions behind those actions. If both sides can accurately grasp each other's actions and intentions, then unnecessary, unintended friction caused by misunderstandings can be avoided by everyone. However, the first prerequisite for understanding each other is to acknowledge each other's existence. Even if ideological or political reasons make it difficult to acknowledge the other party, as long as they exist before our eyes, their presence itself cannot be ignored.

The ocean is a global commons, and even territorial waters allow foreign warships to pass, navigate through as long as they comply with certain international regulations ('innocent passage'). At the southernmost end of the Nansei Islands of Japan, Yonaguni Island and the main island of Taiwan are only about 100 kilometres apart. On a clear day, the mountains of Taiwan can be seen from Yonaguni Island. The East China Sea, including the Senkaku Islands, and the vast Pacific Ocean stretching east of Taiwan may appear boundless at first glance. However, in reality, the operational space for naval vessels and aircraft is surprisingly limited. For instance, a US Navy carrier strike group typically operates within an area of roughly 100 square miles, illustrating how constrained the operational space can be despite the seemingly expansive maritime domain. In this confined sea and air, Japan, Taiwan, China, the United States, Russia, and recently even European warships and aircraft conduct missions day and night for national interests and security—each operating within close proximity of one another.

An instant of misjudgment could lead to an unintended friction or collision at any time. Unfortunately, the players operating in this area currently lack effective means of communication with one another. Mutual suspicion clouds their perception of each other's actions and intentions. This is not solely an issue between Japan and China—it also applies to Japan and Taiwan.

One of the biggest reasons is that none of the regional players officially acknowledge Taiwan as an independent state or government. Since Taiwan is not considered a sovereign nation with a legitimate government, its military—the Taiwan Armed Forces—is also regarded as nonexistent.

However, reality tells a different story. Taiwan's naval warships are operating right before our eyes. The areas where each player conducts operations largely overlap. In 2012, a destroyer of Taiwan Navy approached Japan's Yonaguni Island during a military exercise, causing alarm among Japan-U.S. defence officials¹.

China considers any communication between Japan's Self-Defense Forces and the Taiwanese military as crossing its red line, a dangerous act that implies Japan's recognition of Taiwan's independence. However, from Japan's national defence perspective, the issue is not whether Taiwan is an independent state or not. The real concern is the approach of military vessels near Japan. As long as communication channels exist, unnecessary friction can be avoided. The solution is simple: All players must acknowledge the Taiwan military as a de facto military entity, and establish a framework for communication.

China and Taiwan as seen from Japanese society

To most Japanese people, mainland China and Taiwan appear to be fundamentally different societies. Recent public opinion surveys offer valuable insights into this perception². It seems that many Japanese are not even aware that Taiwan's government refers to itself as the 'Republic of China'. This perception has been shaped over decades through grassroots-level exchanges between Japan and China, and between Japan and Taiwan—distinct from formal diplomatic relations between states.

In recent years, Japanese society's view of mainland China's society has become increasingly unfavourable. Events such as the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong 2014, the handling of the coronavirus pandemic 2020–22, and incidents in the waters around the Senkaku Islands since 2010, have led many Japanese local citizens to perceive contemporary mainland China as fundamentally different from the ancient China they learned about in history, especially the eras prior to the Qing dynasty. In particular, repeated intrusions by China Coast Guard vessels into

¹ "Taiwanese navy "wanders" near Japanese territorial waters, fleet commander punished (台湾海軍、日本領海付近で「迷走」、艦隊長処分)," Taiwan Focus, 3 August 2012 <https://japan.focustaiwan.tw/politics/201208030005>

² For example, "Survey on Japanese Perceptions of China Analysis Report (日本人の中国に対する意識調査分析結果報告書2024)," Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 3 April 2025, <https://www.spf.org/china/news/20250403.html>,

"Results of a survey on Japanese perceptions of Taiwan, 2023 (日本人の台湾に対する意識調査結果2023年)," Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in Japan, 18 December 2023, https://www.roc-taiwan.org/jp_ja/post/95005.html.

waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands, the detention of Japanese businesspeople in China, and the landing of missiles within Japan's EEZ have contributed to growing distrust among many Japanese people toward China's recent actions. For many in Japan, today's Chinese society is seen as unpredictable and difficult to understand.

In contrast, Taiwanese society has experienced significant political reforms, including the direct election of the president since 1996, leading to peaceful transitions of government and the establishment of a free and democratic society. Taiwan has also made notable progress in recognizing LGBTQ rights and same-sex marriage, among other aspects of social progress. Therefore, it is understandable that the Japanese people perceive Taiwan as the closest democratic society to Japan. Furthermore, the mutual support between Japan and Taiwan at the grassroots level, which has been strengthened through responses to disasters and global pandemics, has deepened the perception in Japan that Taiwan is Japan's closest neighbouring community, both geographically and emotionally. In comparison with Chinese society, Taiwanese society can be considered relatively more predictable for Japanese people.

Japan's 'One China' policy

China has consistently sought international support for its 'One China Principle'. While Japan does not officially endorse the principle as defined by China, it fully understands and respects the position of the Government of the People's Republic of China that "Taiwan is an inalienable part of the People's Republic of China." There is a subtle gap between Japan's official stance and the general perception within Japanese society. It is important to emphasize that Japan's understanding and respect for China's position are premised on the peaceful resolution of cross-strait relations. Should this premise be undermined, Japan would no longer be able to understand or respect China's claims.

During a visit I made to China in December 2024, I discussed this matter with flag officers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). They argued that if the Taiwanese leaders were to engage in negotiations as a result of large-scale military exercises, such as missile firings around Taiwan, or other forms of coercion, this could be seen as 'peaceful resolution'. However, from the perspective of our international community, such exercises and other coercive measures should be perceived as intimidation. If one side acts in a way that is perceived as aggressive by the other side, it could potentially lead to military conflict, which could not be considered as 'peaceful resolution'.

A ‘Taiwan Contingency’ is a ‘Japan Contingency’

It seems prudent to consider the implications of a Taiwan Contingency as it pertains to Japan. Regardless of the potential for intervention by the United States in cross-strait relations, the ramifications for Japanese society in a cross-strait contingency could be significant. The phrase “A Taiwan Contingency is a Japan Contingency” has gained prominence since the significance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait was underscored in a joint statement issued after the Japan-US summit meeting in April 2021. A public opinion survey conducted in Japan immediately after the summit revealed that a significant majority of respondents expressed support for Japan’s involvement in maintaining stability in the Taiwan Strait³. Then, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine began and there were growing concerns that China might be inspired to use force against Taiwan, there was also an increase in discussions in Japanese society about how Japan should protect its own security.

The Japan–US Security Treaty and a Taiwan Contingency

The Japan–US Security Treaty allows the US to use US military bases in Japan to protect the security of the Far East⁴, and Taiwan is included in the Far East⁵. It is reasonable to assume that, in the event of a Taiwan Contingency, the US may choose to utilize US military bases in Japan.

In addition, the ongoing revision of the Japan-US Guidelines⁶, along with the development of Japanese domestic law, has contributed to deepening the level of cooperation between the US military and the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) for the security of the region. If there are any signs of US intervention in Taiwan, there is a high possibility that China will attack US forces in Japan. Any attacks by China on US military bases in Japan would be an invasion of Japan itself. Japan needs to do its utmost to defend itself, whether it likes it or not.

³ “74% agree with involvement in maintaining stability in the Taiwan Strait, according to Nikkei opinion poll (台湾海峡の安定に関与「賛成」74% 日経世論調査),” Nikkei Shinbun, 26 April 2021, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOUA231410T20C21A4000000/>.

⁴ “Japan-U.S. Security Treaty,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html>.

⁵ “Q&A on the Japan-U.S. Security Arrangements, Scope of the Far East (日米安保体制Q&A 極東の範囲),” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/usa/hosho/qa/03_2.html

⁶ For example, “The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation April 27, 2015,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000078188.pdf>.

Challenges: The gap between reality and perception

According to a recent survey of Taiwanese public opinion, many Taiwanese believe that Japan would come to Taiwan's aid if it faces a Chinese invasion⁷. However, under current Japanese domestic regulations, even if the SDFs were to support the US forces in Japan, it would be difficult for them to participate in the defence of Taiwan itself or to evacuate Japanese nationals living in Taiwan. Even if the SDFs were legally authorized to provide direct support to Taiwan, they would probably be too busy defending Japan. However, Japan cannot simply ignore Taiwan or the Taiwanese military. If any contingencies were to occur in Taiwan, the geographic proximity of neighbours means that their operational areas would inevitably overlap, making cooperation between Japan and Taiwan unavoidable.

Currently, there is no communication scheme in place between the SDF and the Taiwanese military. The reality is that the SDF does not understand the situation of the Taiwanese military, and the Taiwanese military does not understand the situation of the Self-Defense Forces. It is highly likely that both sides overestimate the other. The emotional response to expectations being unmet can be more severe than anticipated.

Move Forward 1: Communication is crucial

Japan and China already have a hotline between the SDF and the PLA, called the "Maritime and Aerial Communication Mechanism between the Japan-China defense authorities," which is intended to prepare for unforeseen situations⁸. However, regrettably, it is not functioning. Although it was established for emergencies, in reality, it has hardly been used at all. A hotline that is not regularly utilized cannot be expected to function effectively in a crisis. After the end of the Cold War, the United States and Japan maintained similar hotlines with the Soviet Union and Russia, fostering mutual trust through frequent communication. Hotlines between the PLA and not only the SDF but also the U.S. and South Korean military exist, yet they remain merely formal frameworks with little practical utility. Now is the time for these hotlines to become truly 'hot' channels

⁷ "If the Chinese Communist Party uses force against Taiwan, Taiwanese people's confidence in Japan providing various necessary assistance, August 16, 2022 (如果中共武力犯台·台灣人對日本提供各種必要援助的信心 (2022年8月16日))", Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation, <https://tinyurl.com/ymucyp45>

⁸ "Establishment of the Hotline Between Japan-China Defense Authorities," Ministry of Defense of Japan, 31 March 2023,2) <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2023/03/dd1ddd1e633fe6b16f982cf5fd6762ec152934e7.html>.

for seamless communication.

The maritime space and airspace around Taiwan is an area where multiple military and law enforcement forces operate in overlapping zones. Instead of bilateral hotlines between individual parties, a more comprehensive, multi-layered ‘web-like’ hotline system would be preferable. At sea, not only the Self-Defense Forces and the People’s Liberation Army but also law enforcement agencies such as the Japan Coast Guard and China Coast Guard are likely to be present simultaneously. Therefore, it is desirable to establish a framework in which all relevant entities—such as the Self-Defense Forces and the China Coast Guard, or the People’s Liberation Army and the Japan Coast Guard—can communicate with each other effectively.

Move Forward 2: Taiwan’s Armed Forces as a non- negligible entity

All stakeholders, including China, hope for a peaceful resolution or management of the Taiwan issue. To ensure at least a minimum guarantee for peace to be preserved, the primary goal must be to avoid unintended friction or misunderstandings that could lead to clashes. China asserts that cross-strait relations are a domestic matter, and that the international community has no role to play. No one can obstruct a peaceful unification between China and Taiwan if both sides agree. However, unfortunately for China, the current cross-strait relations do not provide much hope for an agreement to be reached anytime soon. While those advocating full independence do not represent a majority in Taiwan, the majority of Taiwanese also do not wish for unification with mainland China.

Given this reality, this region is home to some of the world's most formidable military forces, including nuclear powers. Unlike the European front, East Asia’s military operations predominantly take place in maritime zones, which are Global Commons. As a result, military activities in this region are highly overlapping.

An armed conflict between China and Taiwan would be subject to *jus in bello*. Furthermore, such a conflict would undoubtedly have a direct impact on neighbouring countries such as Japan and the Philippines.

Unintended military frictions would be disastrous for both citizens of China and Taiwan, making it essential to immediately resolve misunderstandings and ease tensions. Without regular communication during peacetime, it is difficult to establish reliable dialogue in a short period after friction arises. If armed conflict breaks out, it will already be too late.

Therefore, during peacetime, it is crucial to acknowledge the existence of the other side, specifically, the Taiwanese military as a de facto counterpart ‘military entity’ for communication from now on.

The SDF and the Taiwan Armed Forces operate in overlapping maritime and air spaces, because the waters between Yonaguni Island (in the southwestern Ryukyus) and Taiwan serve as a boundary. Even if both armed forces are not in an adversarial relationship, no nation would feel comfortable having an armed force operating near its territory without any means of communication. Nevertheless, there is no established framework for communication between the SDF and the Taiwan Armed Forces. This is because China strongly criticizes any efforts for them to engage in communication.

Reassurance

Taiwan is recognized as a body, player, entity in international frameworks such as the World Trade Organization and the Olympic Games in economic and cultural contexts. Why, then, should military affairs be treated differently? If anything, military conflicts and friction are the very things that should be avoided, making communication all the more necessary. In truth, China is one of the countries that understands this issue most deeply. The People's Liberation Army has a long-standing communication framework with rebel forces near the Myanmar border, while also preserving friendly relations with Myanmar's military regime in Nay Pyi Daw. This is all in the interest of China's border security, and no one questions it⁹.

The same logic should apply to communication with the Taiwanese military. For the military operating in this region—the People's Liberation Army, the Self-Defense Forces, the Taiwan military, and U.S. forces— establishing communication is the first step toward avoiding unintended friction. Given that Japan faces these risks on a daily basis, it is in the most appropriate position to propose such an initiative.

Whether the Taiwanese military is a national armed force or a non-governmental force, it should be accepted as a communication partner, a ‘military entity’ sharing borders with Japan. Between Taiwan and Japan, mechanisms for communication already exist

⁹ HIRONO Miwa (廣野美和), “China's Engagement in Myanmar: Practices and Perceptions of the Non-Interference Principle (中国によるミャンマーへの関与 不干涉原則の現実と認識),” *Asian Studies (アジア研究)*, 2023 Volume 69 Issue 3 pp.55-70, https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/asianstudies/69/3/69_as23.si11/pdf.

regarding issues such as fisheries and air rescue operations¹⁰. Taiwan already operates as a de facto entity in various domains, such as sports and economic affairs. The time has come for Taiwan to be recognized as a ‘military entity’ as well. Unnecessary friction can be avoided through communication.

Conclusion

If a conflict were to break out between China and Taiwan, it can no longer be regarded as merely a bilateral or a domestic matter. Regardless of its form, any dispute between the two will bring devastating consequences and tragedies to the international community. Japan—and likely the Philippines as well—would inevitably and directly suffer damage from any conflict between Taiwan and China. If all parties wish to avoid and prevent armed confrontation, it is essential to establish a communication mechanism among their respective military entities.

History has shown that many wars begin due to unintended and careless frictions. Japan, which shares maritime borders with both China and Taiwan, must advocate for the importance of communication. This would be the first step toward mutual trust and a stable sense of reassurance.

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¹⁰ “Japan-Taiwan Private Sector Fisheries Agreement (日台民間漁業取決め),” The Japan–Taiwan Exchange Association, 10 April 2013, <https://www.koryu.or.jp/news/?itemid=637&dispmid=5287>, “Agreement on Cooperation in Search and Rescue of Aircraft at Sea (海上航空救難取決め),” The Japan–Taiwan Exchange Association, https://www.koryu.or.jp/Portals/0/tokyo/MOU/20131105%EF%BC%88%E6%8D%9C%E7%B4%A2%E6%95%91%E9%9B%A3%E5%8D%94%E5%8A%9B%EF%BC%89_0001.pdf