RSC PP 2022/01
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
The Global Governance Programme

POLICY PAPER

The US-Japan security alliance – ready and equipped to deal with China?

Axel Berkofsky

European University Institute
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
The Global Governance Programme

The US-Japan security alliance – ready and equipped to deal with China?

Axel Berkofsky

RSC Policy Paper 2022/01

ISSN 1830-1541

Published in January 2022 by the European University Institute.
Badia Fiesolana, via dei Roccettini 9
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)

Italy

With the support of the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

The European Commission supports the EUI through the European Union budget. This publication reflects the views only of the author(s), and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
The Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, created in 1992 and currently directed by Professor Erik Jones, aims to develop inter-disciplinary and comparative research on the major issues facing the process of European integration, European societies and Europe's place in 21st century global politics.

The Centre is home to a large post-doctoral programme and hosts major research programmes, projects and data sets, in addition to a range of working groups and ad hoc initiatives. The research agenda is organised around a set of core themes and is continuously evolving, reflecting the changing agenda of European integration, the expanding membership of the European Union, developments in Europe's neighbourhood and the wider world.

For more information: http://eui.eu/rscas

The Policy Paper Series of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies complements its Working Papers Series. This series aims to disseminate the views of a person or a group on a particular policy matter, specifically in the field of European integration.

The European University Institute and the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies are not responsible for the proposals and opinions expressed by the author(s).

The aim of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies is to contribute to the public debate by offering views and opinions on matters of general interest.

The EUI and the RSC are not responsible for the opinion expressed by the author(s).

The Global Governance Programme
The Global Governance Programme is one of the flagship programmes of the Robert Schuman Centre. It is made of a community of outstanding professors and scholars, produce high quality research and engage with the world of practice through policy dialogue. Established and early career scholars research write on and discuss issues of global governance within and beyond academia, focusing on four broad and interdisciplinary areas: Global Economics, Europe in the World, Cultural Pluralism and Global Citizenship.

The Programme also aims to contribute to the fostering of present and future generations of policy and decision makers through its executive training programme: the Academy of Global Governance, where theory and 'real world' experience meet and where leading academics, top-level officials, heads of international organisations and senior executives discuss on topical issues relating to global governance.

For more information: http://globalgovernanceprogramme.eui.eu

The European University Institute and the Robert Schuman Centre are not responsible for the opinions expressed by the author(s).

Abstract

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. On 5 July, then Japanese Deputy Prime Minister and the country's Finance Minister Taro Aso announced that Japan would join the US in defending Taiwan against a Chinese invasion, treating an attack on Taiwan as an «existential threat» to Japanese security and territory. 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, fortunately, 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

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 Treaty[2] – 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 does not oblige Japan to defend the US and US territory in the case of an attack on US territory. When the new/revised US-Japan defence guidelines were adopted in 2015[3], Japan was still not obliged to militarily defend US territory or US troops stationed on Japanese territory in the case of any given regional military contingency. Instead, Japan's Self-Defence Forces (SDF) became 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 re-interpreting 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 involving the US but not necessarily posing an imminent and direct threat to Japanese national territory, it is indeed unlikely that Japan would not militarily collaborate with the US or would not execute the right to collective self-defence alongside the US military.

Currently, roughly 55,000 US troops are stationed in US bases on Japanese territory. Roughly 75% of these troops[5] 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 (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 US-Japanese defence guidelines were first adopted in 1978 and then updated in 1997. 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 (none of which featured in the 1997 defence guidelines). Furthermore, the guidelines contain provisions which enable Washington and Tokyo to jointly defend the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea and provisions on the joint defence of sea lanes and Japanese contributions to US military missions 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 prepared and equipped to deal with China such as in the case of a Chinese attack on Taiwanese territory? Yes. Will it have to do this in the months and years ahead? Probably not. For the time being, it remains unlikely that Washington and Beijing will go to war over Taiwan, and hence it is very unlikely that Japan will be asked to – directly or indirectly – contribute to a US-led military operation in East Asia any time soon. That said, however, China's increasingly frequent intrusions into Taiwanese-controlled airspace have undoubtedly increased the possibility of a Chinese-Taiwanese clash over Taiwanese airspace, which in turn would very unlikely involve the US (or Japan for that matter, as is explained further below). Recent months have shown that Washington and Tokyo are nonetheless jointly preparing for the worst-case scenario, i.e. a military conflict with China over Taiwan or an unprovoked Chinese attack on Taiwan and a US response. Washington and Tokyo are equipping their bilateral military alliance with instruments and resources to counter Chinese military aggression over Taiwan or in case Beijing decides to occupy and annex

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).
4 Until 2015, the Cabinet Legislation Bureau stipulated that Japan as a member of the United Nations had 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 Roughly 30,000.

Japanese-controlled territorial waters and islands in the East China Sea. All of this not because the US and Japan have deliberately decided to raise tension with China (for the sake of raising tension) but because Chinese policies and actions have de facto obliged Washington and Tokyo (and others too) to react. While it may be tempting to identify a security dilemma here, i.e. that a measure or policy referred to as «defensive» by one side is interpreted as «offensive» by the other side, in turn motivating the other side to adopt «defensive» policies of its own (which in turn are interpreted as «offensive»), 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/or building military bases on artificial islands are aggressive policies and are 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. Not even China does that as from a Chinese perspective it has every right to intrude in Taiwanese-controlled airspace and build military bases in the South China Sea: Taiwan is a Chinese province and the South China Sea belongs to China as far as China is concerned. Frequent intrusions in Taiwanese-controlled airspace, intrusions in Japanese-controlled territorial waters 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.[6] Beijing, of course, 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 – to put it bluntly – fall in the category of Chinese internal affairs. Instead, they are 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, albeit not explicitly. 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 what was referred to 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 a 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 2001-2009[7] and Iraq in 2004-2006.[8] While Japan's missions in the Indian Ocean refuelling US and British warships engaged in the military campaign in Afghanistan and

6 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. The photos taken by the space technology company Maxar showed the land added to Subi Reef, which is also claimed by Vietnam and the Philippines. 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 further details, see e.g., 'South China Sea: Satellite Images Show China Building Full-Blown Military Bases on Artificial Islands', *NZHerald.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/DAM22R4VYYCKYAZRPRION7ISXU/). 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).

7 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.

8 1,000 Japanese Self-Defence Forces (SDF) were 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.

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.

Putting China Containment on Paper

A US Department of State document published in March 2021 declared that the two allies (US and Japan) are committed to working together on shared challenges, including «countering malign influences and PRC provocations in Asia and around the world».[9] This was shortly before Washington and Tokyo's foreign and defence ministers met for their «Two-Plus-Two» dialogue. The meeting is officially called the Security Consultative Committee and the central item on the agenda at the meeting was how to deal with China. Among other things, 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, above all 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.[10] The new Chinese 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 Islands in the East China Sea.[11] 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.[12] In fact, Beijing has (in the South China Sea) in the past used its coast guard to chase and force foreign fishing vessels out of territorial waters claimed by China. 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 South China Sea, as Beijing has decided unilaterally and in defiance of international law. Indeed, China claims about 90% of the 3.5-million-square-kilometre South China Sea. «China fears the dispute is becoming more internationalized because of the spike in foreign navy operations and that it has lost its clout to discuss sovereignty disputes one-on-one with other Asian states», Yun Sun, senior fellow and co-director of the East Asia program at the Stimson Center in Washington was cited as saying in VOA News in August 2021.[13]

Chinese maritime and territorial expansionism, the construction of military bases on artificial islands close to disputed islands in the South China Sea, the aforementioned Chinese coast guard law, intrusions in Japanese-controlled territorial waters in the East China Sea[14] and increasingly frequent and dangerous intrusions in Taiwanese-controlled airspace had consequences in 2021, the year that **«**Taiwan**»** and **«**peace and security in the Taiwan Strait**»** made it into official Japanese, US and US-Japan statements. In April 2021, US President Joe Biden and then Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga[15] held a bilateral summit. China – and this is not a surprise – featured prominently in the summit joint statement. Biden and Suga jointly announced they would «take on the challenges

9 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).

10 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/).

11 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.

12 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.

13 See 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).

14 In 2013, China announced the creation of an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) over the contested Senkaku islands, in theory obliging Japanese planes flying over Japanese-controlled islands to identify themselves. In theory only of course as Japan (like the US) does not recognize the ADIZ (or any other ADIZs China has established over Chinese-claimed but disputed waters and territories in Asia). For details see, e.g., Lindsay Maizland, Beina Xu, 'The US-Japan Security Alliance', *Backgrounder Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)* 19 August 2019 (https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-japan-security-alliance).

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

from China and ensure that the future of the Indo-Pacific is free and open».[16] 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».[17] Again, this is not a surprise against the background of increasingly frequent intrusions by Chinese fighter jets in Taiwanese air defence identification zones.[18] 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 that part of the joint statement was «anodyne» and was in line with Japan's «strategic ambiguity» towards Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait.[19] 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. This is also because there was (much) more «China» in the statement: «We also recognize the importance of deterrence to maintain peace and stability in the region. We oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East China Sea. We reiterated our objections to China's unlawful maritime claims and activities in the South China Sea and reaffirmed our strong shared interest in a free and open South China Sea governed by international law, in which freedom of navigation and overflight are guaranteed, consistent with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea». Washington also talked about China without naming it: «We will continue to work together bilaterally, as well as within the G7 and the WTO, to address the use of non-market and other unfair trade practices, including violations of intellectual property rights, forced technology transfer, excess capacity issues, and the use of trade distorting industrial subsidies».

Finally, Washington reiterated its policy stating that the Senkaku Islands/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea[20] are covered by Article 5 of the US-Japan Security Treaty in the way it did in March 2021. 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».[21]

Japan's defence white paper entitled «Defense of Japan» published in July 2021 is also fairly or indeed very explicit about Tokyo's interest in and commitment to making – together with its alliance partner Washington – a contribution to keep 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

16 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).

17 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/)

18 See, e.g., 'Taiwan: Record Number of China Jets Enter Air Zone', *BBC News,* April 13, 2021 (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56728072).

19 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/).

20 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 «terra nullius» and hence were not part of Chinese territory. Because the Senkaku Islands were not part of the territories Japan was obliged 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. China is contesting this and insists that Japan should have rendered the islands to China after World War II. 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.

21 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/).

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 favor, 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.[22] 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). Furthermore, since lifting the ban Japan has sold defence equipment to the Philippines,[23] and in 2020 it signed a bilateral weapons export agreement with Vietnam.[24] 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.[25] 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 cooperation. 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.[26] 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. Put differently, in view of the aforementioned Japanese-Taiwanese military exchanges and the very close US-Japan and US-Taiwan security and defence ties, it is very unlikely that Washington, Tokyo and Taipei are not already talking about how to react and what to do jointly in the case of a military clash in the Taiwan Strait and/or over Taiwan.

Worst-Case Scenarios

Shortly after the aforementioned US-Japan summit in April, Japanese Prime Minister Suga paddled back, 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 April[27], Rand scholar Jeffrey Hornung argued 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*.[28] In the same *Foreign Policy* article, Jeffrey Hornung outlined 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 in terms of support. What Hornung

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

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

24 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/).

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/).

26 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/).

27 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).

28 Suga cited in 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).

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, Tokyo[29] and Washington agreed through a so-called «exchange of notes» that they would have so-called «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).[30] Certainly, not being informed in advance on the nature of a US operation using US bases on Japanese territory could be interpreted as «convenient» in Tokyo. 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. A Japanese journalist 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.[31] This was probably to protect Japan from Chinese accusations that Japan was making an officially sanctioned and direct contribution to a US military operation in East Asia. Certainly, this was not the way it was supposed to work officially: as was stipulated in the US-Japan Security Treaty, «prior consultation» must take place before the deployment of US troops based on Japanese territory.

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 explains, could define that the conflict has «important influence» on Japanese security. In that case, Japanese contributions would continue to remain limited to non-combat «rear-area support», such as logistical support in Japan, including supply, maintenance, transport and medical support and services. Furthermore, Hornung writes that the US would request intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance from Japan, albeit outside the airspace and waters of other countries and outside combat areas. If on the other hand Tokyo decided that the conflict in question was a threat to Japan's «survival» – in the case of a direct attack on Japanese territory, including attacks on US military troops stationed in US military bases on Japanese territory – the Japanese military could/would be obliged to contribute with military combat operations, i.e. would fight alongside the US military (possibly under US command). However, it is not clear – because consecutive Japanese governments have never clarified – whether an attack on US military forces stationed on Japanese territory would constitute a direct attack on Japan. Certainly, in reality in such a case it would be very difficult for a Japanese government to decide that it would not respond – together with the US military – with military force to an attack on US forces stationed on Japanese territory. It almost goes without saying that Washington would expect such a contribution from its security alliance partner, not least because US military forces stationed in Japan are also there to protect Japan and Japanese territory.[32] All this is on the basis of and authorized by the aforementioned national security laws adopted in 2015.

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

30 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.1*, pp. 963-965, 19 January 1960 (https://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/docs/19600119.T2E.html).

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

32 For a further and excellent analysis, 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).

What then lies ahead for US-Japan consultations in terms of alliance management? Sheila Smith from the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) predicts that US-Japanese consultations in the case of a Taiwan contingency will continue in the months ahead and believes that Washington will request Tokyo to explain its approaches and policies in three areas: 1. which US bases and facilities on Japanese territory would be allowed to be used by US military forces in the case of a Taiwan crisis scenario; 2. what the priorities and principles of joint US-Japanese military cooperation would be; and 3. what Japan's Self Defence Forces (SDF) would be able and prepared to deliver in a joint US-Japanese military response to a military crisis over Taiwan.[33] This arguably sounds as if a military conflict between the US and China is imminent and about to break out. Despite all the current Chinese sabre-rattling, this is most probably not the case and there is a near-consensus among China scholars that part of the Chinese sabre-rattling is directed at a domestic Chinese audience as part of a strategy to send a message of strength to the Chinese people in general and those in China who could accuse the political leadership of being «too soft» or «weak» in defending China against (alleged) «interference» in China's «internal affairs».[34] This is not to say that Chinese official aggressive rhetoric in reaction to Tokyo and Washington mentioning «Taiwan» and the «Taiwan Strait» appearing in statements is not to be taken seriously or dismissed as irrelevant. However, Chinese reactions and political rhetoric need to be put in context – a context that needs to take into account the dynamics and expectations in Chinese domestic politics. Moreover, aggressive Chinese messages and propaganda delivered, e.g., via Twitter or government mouthpiece newspapers like the Global Times alternate with messages and declarations announcing Chinese initiatives and ideas on how to foster international and global cooperation on an array of issues like climate change, poverty eradication etc. – Something like very amateurishly practiced Chinese «good cop, bad cop» messaging.

Former high-ranking Japanese diplomat Hitoshi Tanaka[35] sounds hopeful (or over-optimistic for those who are sceptical about Tokyo's mediation/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 neighbor 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».[36] 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. How can one expect Japan to facilitate dialogue between Washington and Beijing when Tokyo is increasingly frequently preoccupied with protesting and defending itself against Chinese intrusions in Japanese-controlled territorial waters in the East China Sea? Moreover, Japan's historical ties with China are – to put it bluntly – still and above all defined by World War II and Japanese-Chinese disagreements over who started the war and over what in 1937,[37] arguably not the best position to start from to mediate dialogue between Washington and Beijing. Certainly, there is much more to bilateral Japanese-Chinese relations than the territorial dispute in the East China Sea and disagreements over who attacked whom first in the late 1930s, but Beijing is acting on the territorial conflict and is deliberately risking a military conflict with Tokyo in the East China Sea. China building military bases on disputed islands in the South China Sea, violating an international agreement adopted with the UK over Hong Kong in 1984 and increasing military pressure on Taiwan probably does not help either to motivate Tokyo's policymakers to dedicate resources and political capital to

33 Sheila Smith, 'Japan Leans Forward on China-Taiwan Tensions', *East Asia Forum*, 5 September 2021 (https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/09/05/japan-leans-forward-on-china-taiwan-tensions/).

34 For example, parts of China's armed forces and China's so-called «New Left»/China's «Neo-Maoists.» China's Neo-Maoists in particular 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.

35 Among others, Japan's North Korea chief negotiator.

36 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).

37 In defiance of universally acknowledged facts, Japan's revisionist and ultra-conservative elite claims that Japan did not start the conflict with China in 1937.

mediating between Washington and Beijing. Furthermore, if Tokyo were able to facilitate dialogue between Washington and Beijing (which it is not), 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», i.e. of involuntarily becoming part of a US-led war against China.[38]

A Key Role for Japan?

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. As mentioned above, a US-Chinese military conflict over Taiwan would probably be interpreted in Tokyo as a crisis that by default had a direct impact on Japanese national security.[39] 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 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 – at least for the time being – 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».

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 of improving and expanding US-Japan interoperability, and at one point during his speech he indicated that this bilateral US-Japan interoperability could be extended to trilateral US-Japanese-Taiwanese interoperability. There is no doubt that defence planners in both Tokyo and Washington have (off the record) talked about and still talk about how and to what extent to expand bilateral to trilateral interoperability. To what extent such potential trilateral interoperability that Nakayama alluded to in his speech reflects Japan's official view on expanding bilateral to trilateral defence cooperation remains to be seen. Then it was Japanese Deputy Prime Minister (and Finance Minister) Taro Aso's turn to bring Taiwan into the equation and drive Chinese official alarmism and government propaganda into overdrive. «If a major problem

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

39 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).

took place in Taiwan, it would not be too much to say that it could relate to a survival-threatening situation (for Japan)», Aso said in July.[40] In that case, i.e. in the case that a conflict between the US and China over Taiwan directly threatened Japanese national territory, Japan's national security laws adopted in 2015 would authorize Japanese armed forces to execute the right to collective self-defence as formulated in Article 51, Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations.[41] Japan's national security laws adopted in 2015 authorize Japan's SDF forces to execute the right to collective self-defence – jointly with US military forces – if the conflict in question posed a direct threat to Japanese territory (e.g. constitutes a direct attack on Japanese territory). Before Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pushed the re-interpretation of Japan's constitution war-renouncing Article 9 through both chambers of the Japanese parliament[42] in 2015, Tokyo denied itself the right to execute the right to collective self-defence. The interpretation of the Japanese constitution until then was that Japan did in principle have the right to collective self-defence but due to its pacifist Article 9 was not allowed to execute that right. At the time the adoption of Tokyo's national security laws led to controversy and protests among Japanese (non-LDP) policymakers and parts of civil society, which claimed that the re-interpretation of Article 9 enabling Japanese military to execute the right to collective self-defence (fighting alongside US military troops) violated the Japanese constitution. Furthermore, it was at the time (and still is today) feared that Tokyo' 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 (in the case of a direct attack on Japan) but instead and also 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 itself 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 fighting international terrorism. This in turn, Koizumi explained at the time, made a contribution to keeping international terrorists from entering Japan.[43] 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.

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. Meanwhile, China also continues to pose a challenge to Japan through its constant incursions into the maritime and air space surrounding the Senkaku Islands, also claimed by China and referred to as the Diaoyu Islands, in the East China Sea.»[44]

40 See 'Japan Deputy PM Comment on Defending if Invaded Angers China', *Reuters*, 6 July 2021.

41 Charter of the United Nations, Chapter VII – Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression (https://legal.un.org/repertory/art51.shtml).

42 The lower and upper houses, in which the ruling Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP) in 2015 commanded very solid majorities, enabling the government to de facto govern without opposition.

43 For details, see Aurelia George Mulgan, 'Japan's Defence Dilemma', *Security Challenges,* Vol 1, No,1, 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. However, the ruling LDP under Koizumi commanded very solid majorities in both chambers of the Japanese parliament at the time and had few difficulties in having the parliament approve both missions.

44 See Berkshire J. Miller, 'Anchoring the US-Japan Alliance in the Suga-Biden Era', *Global Asia,* Vol. 16, No. 2, June 2021 (https://www.

While China is – to put it bluntly – doing all of this, Miller does not suggests what the US and Japan should do when he writes that Washington and Tokyo have to «focus on a range of longstanding security irritants». In fact, 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 Chinese fighter jets intrude in Taiwanese air defence identification zones. This in turn raises the question of how far China will have to go, 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 Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea? In other words and put bluntly, what is the limit in terms of Chinese aggressive and/or expansionist policies and actions for Washington and Tokyo to take action?

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 behavior by China with force and avoiding any unnecessary provocation against China».[45] 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 it still is a long way from becoming a NATO-like security apparatus it could help stabilize the region by creating a credible counterweight to check China's territorial ambitions». The Quad, at least as far as China sees it, however, is the kind of «unnecessary provocation» Tsutsui Kiyoteru and Charles Grabtree advise Washington and Tokyo to avoid. In fact, while Beijing publicly downplays the significance of the Quad (typically portraying it as an ill-fated US-led grouping of countries[46] to «suppress» China[47]), for Beijing the Quad is the result of a US-led China containment policy,[48] which Washington and its Quad partner allies again confirmed for Beijing in August. Without revealing details, the US Department of State announced that during the virtual meeting of Quad country leaders «peace and security in the Taiwan Strait» were discussed.[49]

globalasia.org/v16no2/feature/anchoring-the-us-japan-alliance-in-the-suga-biden-era_j-berkshire-miller).

45 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).

46 The Twitter accounts of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials and Chinese diplomats stationed abroad talk about and mention the Quad in this manner. Digital Chinese government propaganda paired with disinformation posted on a social media platform ordinary Chinese citizens have no access to.

47 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).

48 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).

49 See 'US, Japan, other Quad Members Discuss Taiwan's Peace and Security', *Kyodo News*, 13 August 2021 (https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/08/b317ccd991eb-us-japan-other-quad-members-discuss-taiwans-peace-and-security.html).

What does China Want?

Chinese policymakers and diplomats claim – continuously and through numerous channels[50] – 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.[51] 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»,[52] bad old Cold War-style containment as far as Beijing and its so-called «wolf-warrior» diplomats operating and howling on Twitter are concerned. Some in Washington are making the right noises confirming to Beijing that containment is – to put it bluntly – the name of the game. When outgoing Indo-Pacific commander Admiral Philip Davidson testified in front of the US Congress in March 2021, he warned that the modernization of the Chinese PLA is making rapid progress, enabling it to attack Taiwan within six years.[53]

But is China willing and 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.[54] 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. While they acknowledge that there are policymakers, scholars and military leaders in China who push for reunification with military force sooner rather than later, they cite Chinese President Xi Jinping as announcing in Beijing's most recent five-year plan (issued in 2021) that China «will continue to pursue peaceful development of cross-strait relations». They also explain why Beijing is very unlikely to opt to seek to achieve 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). «In recent years, Beijing has unveiled a broad range of tools to deter Taiwan's independence and gradually weaken the will of the people of Taiwan to resist integration with the mainland. China has targeted Taiwan economically, 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.»

50 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. The Twitter feeds of ministry spokespersons Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying in particular must be mentioned in this context. Hua and Zhao are two of China's continually growing army of so-called 'wolf-warriors' charged with the mission to aggressively and seamlessly defend China and its policies against all kinds of foreign «interference» in what China defines as its «internal affairs.»

51 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).

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

53 See 'Hearing United States Senate Committee on Armed Services', 9 March 2021 (https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/21-03-09-united-states-indo-pacific-command).

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

Conclusions

As mentioned above, after the US-Japan summit in April 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. Then again, 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», i.e. 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. As mentioned above, back in 1996 when Beijing's People's Liberation Army (PLA) was ordered to conduct military manoeuvres in the Taiwan Strait days before the Taiwanese presidential election[55] and Washington, in response to Chinese (ill-fated) attempts to obstruct democratic elections, deployed an aircraft carrier stationed in Japan,[56] Beijing was quick to identify and warn of a direct Japanese contribution to a US military operation directed at China. Tokyo under Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto at the time sought to defuse such accusations by claiming – albeit not convincingly – that the Japanese government had not been informed in advance of the deployment of the USS Kitty Hawk in the Taiwan Strait and therefore Tokyo did not make an active contribution to the deployment of a US aircraft carrier in the Taiwan Strait.[57]

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 Taiwanese-controlled airspace 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: the islands Beijing is building military bases on in the South China Sea have been part of Chinese territory since the Ming Dynasty[58], 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.

55 Taiwan's first democratic election was accompanied by Mainland Chinese warnings towards Taiwan not to declare independence or risk a military attack and/or an invasion.

56 The aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk stationed at the US military base in Yokosuka.

57 From Japan's Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP), the party that governed in Japan uninterrupted in 1955-1993, in 1994-2009 and again from 2012 until the present day.

58 1368-1644, followed by the Qing Dynasty, China's last imperial dynasty.

In sum, what will determine what Washington and Tokyo in the months and years ahead will be obliged to do in terms of preparation – individually or jointly – for a military conflict with China will largely (if not exclusively) depend on China's policy choices. Put or asked differently, how far is China prepared to go in terms of belligerent and/or expansionist policies? How would the US and Japan react if, e.g., Beijing decided not only to continue building military bases on artificial islands in the South China Sea but turned to blocking naval access to the South China Sea? One could be tempted to make too much of all the references to Taiwan in recent US-Japan joint statements and policy papers issued by the Pentagon and Japan's Ministry of Defence. Bonnie Glaser and her colleagues suggest resisting the temptation to conclude that China is preparing to invade Taiwan in the very near future.

Author contacts

Axel Berkofsky

University of Pavia

Email:Axel.Berkofsky@unipv.it