



THE BOILING MOAT

URGENT STEPS TO DEFEND TAIWAN

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CHAPTER 10

Japan as the “Swing Vote”

GRANT NEWSHAM

A Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency, and therefore an emergency for the Japan-U.S. alliance.

—FORMER PRIME MINISTER SHINZO ABE

Introduction

A key aspect of Xi Jinping’s assessment will be Japan’s posture and capabilities. Japan is a golden key to unlocking deterrence of Xi. And should the worst happen and deterrence fails, Japan’s actions—both now and in the future—will likely determine whether Taiwan, along with the United States and the free world, wins or loses.

Unsatisfactory State of the Status Quo

The arrangement that has characterized Japan-US defense strategy for decades is the so-called shield and spear arrangement: Japan is the “shield” guarding bases, while the “spear” is the Americans going out and doing the fighting. Although US bases in Japan are essential for Western Pacific operations in general, and a Taiwan contingency in particular, Japan will need to do more than just provide US forces with bases and some limited logistics and defensive support.

A Chinese attack on Taiwan could be accompanied by “supporting” operations elsewhere in the region, if not globally. These might

include North Korea starting hostilities on the Korean Peninsula, direct attacks on Japan, Chinese naval operations in the Malacca Strait, Russian moves against Japanese territory or provocations in Europe, and possibly Iranian moves in the Middle East.

The United States is limited in the number of simultaneous operations it can prosecute. Thus, capable allies who can defend themselves and also provide offensive support are required.

Japan needs to do more. This includes taking very specific actions to improve its military capabilities for Japan's own sake as well as to perform as a much more useful ally to the United States and other partners and, if necessary, to be able to do its share of the fighting.

More than anything, Japan has to demonstrate the *will* to fight. Without will, Tokyo cannot enhance deterrence, no matter how much high-priced hardware it has in the arsenal.

Tokyo can no longer maintain only a modest defense capability and remain coy about its intentions in a Taiwan contingency, in hopes of not offending the People's Republic of China. It cannot continue a policy of overreliance on the United States military. Instead, Japan must positively contribute to collective security. A more capable Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) is essential and is a political statement by itself. Moreover, Japan's political class will need to marshal the citizenry and harness Japan's economic power toward bolstering national defense.

No doubt many policymakers—and even much of the public—in Japan will find a newfound Japanese forthrightness uncomfortable at first. But the more able and willing Japan is to fight, the less likely it will have to do so. And Japan should keep in mind that the more it demonstrates its own commitment, the more willing the United States, Tokyo's only formal ally, will be to fight on Japan's behalf.

Indeed, the chief of Japan's Joint Staff, General Yoshihide Yoshida, revealed a keen understanding of this dynamic—and of what Japan needs to do—in a recent interview with *Nikkei Asia*:

So far, we have been able to count on U.S. deterrence should there be a crisis. But if we rely too much on the U.S., there will be voices there [in the United States] questioning whether its

alliance with us is worth the cost. We will bolster the alliance’s capabilities by increasing the things Japan can do on its own.¹

The Japanese public has a good understanding of national defense and the need for Japan to defend itself and to be a useful ally—when the matter is explained to them. When then prime minister Shinzo Abe pushed for revised interpretations of “collective self-defense,” it is true that there were some public protests and that the public seemed skeptical of the need (and particularly the means) to significantly raise defense spending. Yet Abe and others continued to push for these changes even out of office, and by the time Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was in power just a few short years later, Kishida was able to push through all those agenda items with hardly any public opposition.

Sixty Years of the US-Japan Defense Relationship

Mike Mansfield, the US ambassador to Japan from 1977 to 1988, regularly said the US-Japan relationship was the “most important bilateral relationship, bar none.”²

That is still true today. A solidly linked United States and Japan—not just militarily but politically and economically and psychologically—underpin freedom and security in the Asia-Pacific region.

China’s rapid military buildup and increasing assertiveness over the last quarter century have given Mansfield’s words new life. Beijing’s objectives for regional domination include taking the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands and undermining Japan’s indisputably sovereign control over the Ryukyu chain. Mao’s dictum that “power grows out of the barrel of a gun” is on display.

Many JSDF officers appreciated the China risk many years ago, using the phrase “Taiwan’s defense is Japan’s defense.” If Taiwan were to fall, China would control the sea-lanes in the South China Sea through which most of Japan’s trade and energy flows. People’s Liberation Army (PLA) ships, submarines, and aircraft operating from Taiwan could easily isolate, harass, or surround Japan.

Admiral Yoji Koda, for example, then commander of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force Fleet (and author of the next chapter in



The China Coast Guard has promised to keep its vessels in Japanese territorial waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands for 365 days in 2024—an unprecedented increase in frequency from previous years—in support of Xi’s declaration that the PRC “will never let even 1 millimeter of our territory [be] taken.” *Kyodo News Stills via Getty Images*

this book), was sounding the alarm about Chinese island-building in the South China Sea—and the threat it posed to Japan—long before it became accepted wisdom in Tokyo or Washington, DC.³

Starting around 2010, the Chinese threat became hard for even the optimists to completely ignore—especially after China began turning up the heat around the Senkaku Islands. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) started to use constant China Coast Guard and Chinese fishing boat incursions, along with PLA Air Force incursions, that tended to wear down if not overwhelm Japan Coast Guard ships and other JSDF resources in the area. It is an attempt to take over almost by osmosis, similar to Beijing’s largely successful South China Sea strategy. Many Japanese fishermen no longer visit traditional fishing grounds in the area for fear of Chinese harassment.

In addition to China’s mighty coast guard and maritime militia force, PLA Navy ships—sometimes operating with Russian Navy ships—intrude in Japanese waters and even circumnavigate Japan in shows of force.

Just one data point: the PLA Navy has more than 370 submarines and surface ships (and is expected to have nearly 400 by the end of 2025), compared with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force’s

approximately 154 total ships that have to cover all of Japan—and also keep an eye on North Korea and Russia.⁴

Not surprisingly, Japan Coast Guard and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) officers have occasionally admitted a sense of feeling “overwhelmed.” The Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) is similarly overstretched by the high tempo of People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) incursions into the region.

And the Chinese military buildup is multifaceted—to include naval, airborne, and amphibious units; space, cyber, electronic, and nuclear weapons; and thousands of long-range missiles, to go with a long-standing political warfare campaign directed against Japan. Without Japanese support, the United States has slim hopes for successfully defending—and thus deterring—an attack on Taiwan. But without the Americans, Japan has no chance at all of defending itself.

Japan harbors long-standing doubts about US commitment, both conventional and nuclear. Observers note Japanese worries shifting between “Japan bashing” (asking Japan to do too much defense-wise) to “Japan passing” (the Americans and the Chinese cutting a deal that leaves Japan out in the cold to fend for itself). Nowadays, Japan doesn’t worry about being “drawn into American wars.” Rather the concern is about the reliability of the United States in defending Japan.

*The Japanese and US Militaries:
Except for the Two Navies, Basically Strangers*

The US-Japan defense alliance has existed for over sixty years. One would think that the two militaries would be intimately familiar with each other and able to “take care of business.” To be sure, there are pockets of good news: first, missile defense and second, the US Navy and the JMSDF. The United States and Japan have done a good job of combining missile defense capabilities and improving them.

The two navies also have a solid operational relationship. In the event of a fight over Taiwan, coordination between the JMSDF and the US Navy’s Seventh Fleet, based in Yokosuka, could serve as a pillar of strength.

Despite these notable exceptions, the JSDF and US forces are nowhere near as capable of combined operations as they should be after this many years of proximity.

Indeed, this was borne out in 2011 after the massive earthquake and tsunami hit northern Japan. Except for the US Navy and the JMSDF—which promptly fell in with one another and went to work—other components of Japanese and American forces scrambled to establish the most rudimentary cooperation and seemed to know almost nothing about each other’s capabilities. Joint-combined operations—that is, operations involving troops from more than one military service from each nation’s forces—were even more of a challenge. And this was on Japanese territory, with no one shooting at them.

An ad hoc “joint US-Japan task force” was established for the first time in 2011 to deal with the earthquake and tsunami. In the thirteen years since Operation Tomodachi, progress has been halting.

In 2015, Prime Minister Abe successfully engineered a reinterpretation of “collective self-defense” and the US-Japan Defense Guidelines to allow US and Japanese forces to train and operate together robustly. He also established an Alliance Coordination Mechanism (ACM) that has potential but is vague and unwieldy and would be of little real use in an actual conflict or contingency. The Japanese and US militaries now conduct more bilateral exercises and are trying to “join” their command and control more than in the past. But progress has been slow with few concrete outcomes in combined planning, including for a Taiwan contingency.

The Japan Self-Defense Forces

The Japan Self-Defense Forces are rated in some estimates as the fifth most powerful military power in the world. The JSDF has about 250,000 personnel: 150,000 for the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) and about 50,000 each for the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF). They have modern, effective hardware overall and personnel are professional. Yet the whole may be less impressive than the sum of its parts.

The JSDF was essentially built as an adjunct to the US military. It provides specific capabilities that can contribute to US operations, but it is not a balanced force that can prosecute multi-domain, combined arms warfare. Chief of Japan Joint Staff Yoshida was asked in August 2023 whether the JSDF currently possesses the capability to defend Japan. He replied: “We cannot maintain Japan’s security with our current capabilities.”⁵

Over the last decade the JGSDF has begun shifting away from heavy, immobile units geared to fight off a Russian invasion of Hokkaido to more mobile forces able to operate in the maritime environment of southern Japan—where the Chinese threat is the highest. This required cooperating with the JMSDF, particularly as the JGSDF established its first amphibious force, the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade.

Japan’s JMSDF is highly professional and has excellent niche capabilities at submarine and antisubmarine warfare, surface warfare, maritime surveillance, and mine warfare. Since 2011, in addition to starting to develop joint operational capabilities with the JGSDF and the JASDF, the JMSDF is mastering the art of amphibious operations.

Nonetheless, despite some impressive capabilities, a foreign senior military officer with experience working with the JMSDF noted that it isn’t equipped or trained in “multi-domain fleet actions,” like those that could be required for effective combat against China. He added: “It is not a well-rounded force and is lacking in a fleet air arm, except for anti-submarine capabilities.”⁶ It also struggles to maintain sufficient personnel levels—much less to expand them as is needed. Recently, the JSDF even considered transferring five hundred JGSDF personnel into the Japanese navy to provide crews for two potential new destroyers.

The JASDF is another professional yet understaffed force. It too often tends to operate in isolation from the other services. The JSDF certainly needs more money, and the Kishida government (and previous ones starting with Prime Minister Abe in 2012) recognized this. In fact, plans are afoot to double defense spending over the next five years or so. And in 2025, Japan will establish a Permanent Joint Headquarters

that will command the operations of the three JSDF services for the first time.

Importantly, Japan's previous self-imposed restriction on conducting "offensive" operations appears to have faded away. Tokyo now acknowledges the need for longer-range lethal capabilities, potentially even targeting enemy territory, in the context of a larger strategic defense campaign.

Within its military modernization plans, Tokyo must prioritize JSDF personnel as much as hardware. The JSDF has missed recruitment targets by about 20 percent for years and thus is an older and understaffed force. The problem is not just Japan's well-known shrinking population. Terms of service in the JSDF feature low salaries, dilapidated housing, and substandard medical care for family members. Yet there is public support for the JSDF, as attested by the popularity of base open-house days and other exercises that are open to public viewing.

The JSDF is a professional force that has the potential to be a first-rate military in short order—with the right force development policies and investments.

Urgent Recommendations

In late 2022, the Japanese government updated its three baseline national security documents: the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program. They cover the waterfront and are clear about the threats facing Japan, naming China in particular. The following recommendations address the most urgent deficiencies in Japan's defensive capabilities set.

They are designed to deliver quick operational benefits that would improve the JSDF's capabilities and its ability to be a full partner "on the firing line." But they are also designed to have political benefits, like demonstrating resolve to China—and to other countries, in the region and around the world—as well as shaping the Japanese public's thinking.

These recommendations aim to follow former prime minister Kakuei Tanaka's advice, delivered to US interlocutors in 1970 when Washington was considering asking Tokyo if the US Navy could station

an aircraft carrier at Yokosuka naval base. He advised the Americans to “tell us what you need and don’t back down.”

Steps by Japan on Its Own

1. Speak loudly from the highest levels of political leadership about the threat and Japan’s defense deficiencies. Once the Japanese people understand the risks, they will support the policies with less complaint. Continue, or even increase, the JSDF’s good work publicizing and exposing Chinese (and Russian) military and other malign activities around Japan. Beijing will help make the case for Tokyo. In 2022, for example, Beijing’s reaction to US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit helped push Tokyo’s three new defense documents across the finish line.
2. Publicly emphasize that Taiwan is Japan’s problem. Instead of suggesting that the United States must defend Taiwan in support of the US-Japan alliance, Japanese pundits should be asking how Japan can contribute more to Taiwan’s defense.
3. Prepare the JSDF and the Japanese people, physically and psychologically, for a war over Taiwan. Japan cannot remain on the sidelines providing logistics support and guarding bases.
4. Provide the appropriate authorities to Japan’s new joint operational headquarters, set to open in 2025, so that it can effectively improve JSDF readiness. There is concern that once it is set up it won’t do much. The new joint headquarters needs budget approval among other authorities over the individual JSDF services. It needs teeth to enforce jointness in organization, capabilities, and equipment. Make the JASDF participate, even if it doesn’t want to.
5. Broaden a “fighting mind-set” within the JSDF by allowing more risk and providing more range space and resources for realistic and effective training. The JSDF should not have to go to Australia to conduct serious training. Establish amphibious training areas in Japan. JSDF training needs to be more realistic and without the excessive safety restrictions that keep the services from professionalizing. Let the JSDF take risks.

6. Ensure adequate munitions stockpiles, combat logistics, casualty handling, and reservists who can replace combat casualties. Japan simply is not ready to fight a war. As for civil defense, Japan has a strong foundation given its long-standing and well-established local networks for responding to natural disasters. That needs to be built upon to prepare for a wider range of contingencies.
7. Harden bases and facilities (especially, but not only, in Japan's southern islands) and prepare to operate while getting hit by the enemy. Be able to make repairs quickly. This needs to be practiced through frequent, realistic drills.
8. Send JSDF medical personnel to Eastern Europe, such as Poland or even Ukraine, to assist and to learn about combat casualty handling and treatment.
9. Build the JSDF reserve into a useful and effective force. While doing so, determine which active-duty activities and missions would need immediate support in a contingency and make that the priority for reservist deployments.
10. Prioritize the JMSDF Mine Warfare Force—for both defensive and offensive mine warfare operations. Coordinate with South Korea to keep corridors open in a future contingency.
11. Expand overseas security assistance, especially with the Philippines. Expand Pacific Islands support too, especially in Palau, the Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu—the three countries in the region that still recognize Taiwan. There are operational benefits that can come from supporting these countries. It also shows that countries can derive benefits from supporting Taiwan. Prioritize energy, transportation, and communications. Coordinate efforts with the United States, South Korea, Australia, Taiwan, India, and others.
12. Launch a focused counterintelligence push against Chinese subversion and fifth-column efforts in Japan. This includes China-sponsored support for antimilitary, anti-base groups in Okinawa and elsewhere. Investigate the purchases of property in Japan and especially near sensitive locations and in sensitive industries.

13. Relax training restrictions for partner nations. US military units often leave Japan to train to defend Japan. These restrictions can and should be removed quickly. Also, continue hosting other friendly foreign militaries in Japan for meaningful exercises.
14. Address JSDF recruiting shortfalls through increased pay, benefits, and public messaging. Political and cultural leaders should talk up the benefits of serving in the Japanese military and remind people that it is a respectable profession. Encourage movies that increase morale (the *Top Gun* effect).
15. Reorganize the JGSDF along functional lines. Create bases for helicopter forces, infantry, and other specialties for efficiencies. Get rid of the dozens of penny packet bases with small units that do little more than have cherry blossom festivals with the local populations. The Japanese government may argue that this is how they keep the JSDF in touch with the local populace. If that is the case, these units have underperformed, judging by the severe restrictions still imposed on JSDF training.
16. Adopt NATO standards in the JSDF. Australia can provide an example of a non-NATO force that has seen the benefit of adopting NATO standards.

Steps by Japan in Cooperation with the United States

1. Establish a US-Japan joint operational headquarters in Japan. Simultaneously stand up a US-Japanese Joint Task Force Nansei Shoto (referring to Japan’s “southwestern islands,” including the Ryukyus) and headquarter it in Okinawa. These commands should conduct detailed, combined Taiwan contingency planning. Consider also putting a combined presence on the Senkaku Islands.
2. Open up more Japanese civilian airfields (of which there are over a hundred, most of them underutilized) for use by JSDF and US forces and other partner militaries.
3. Restart the US use of air and naval firing ranges on and near the Senkakus—and include the JSDF. These were used extensively

- by US forces through the 1970s, and the United States still has the right to use them under its defense treaty with Japan.
4. Allow the Taiwan military to conduct training on Japanese territory, as it already does on US territory. This would foster interoperability and demonstrate political will.
 5. Expand missile defense cooperation beyond the United States to include South Korea and Taiwan.
 6. Raise information security protocols to Five Eyes standards and then increase intelligence sharing with US and other partners.⁷ Given that it would probably take a long time to set up a government-wide security-clearance system, start with strict controls to allow small groups of Japanese civilian and military personnel to receive US classified data related to Taiwan contingency planning.
 7. Implement Admiral Koda's ship-repair scheme where US Navy ships formally utilize Japanese shipyards and repair facilities in peacetime and wartime. The Japanese are highly skilled at this kind of work and US shipyards are thousands of miles away.
 8. Prepare to offer full medical support, including through civilian hospitals, to US and allied forces in wartime. Casualties might be in the tens of thousands.
 9. Procure more counterstrike and long-range missile capabilities. Integrate relevant intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and targeting systems with US forces. China's military would fear the linking together of Japanese and American missile capabilities.
 10. Continue to improve relations, especially in defense, between Japan and South Korea with the help of trilateral diplomacy led by the United States.
 11. Ensure that long-standing US commitments to "extended deterrence"—the protection of Japan under the US nuclear weapons umbrella—remain solid and well understood by the Japanese people and by America's enemies. Tokyo and Washington should arrange for the United States to bring nuclear weapons into Japan aboard US Navy ships and, if the Japanese government requests it, store such weapons in Japan.

12. Open all US bases in Japan to become joint bases with Japanese troops based on them and providing security.
13. Implement a US advisor program to mentor, coach, and train key counterparts in the JSDF. US liaison officers are already established in each JGSDF army, for example. Expand these offices with soldiers, Marines, military Foreign Area Officers, US Army Special Forces, and others with specialties in ground, fires, logistics, and aviation.
14. Dispatch US war planners to directly assist JSDF planners in understanding the requirements—both hardware and operational capabilities—needed to fight a war and to be most useful to US forces. This will have the added benefit of ensuring that Japan’s increased defense spending is spent wisely.

Unilateral Steps by Japan to Help Taiwan

1. Break Taiwan out of its diplomatic isolation. Visits to Taiwan by senior Japanese politicians representing the incumbent Liberal Democratic Party have been useful, but more needs to be done. Japanese government officials should visit and welcome reciprocal visits by Taiwan officials.
2. Pass a Japanese version of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), similar to the 1979 US law by that name that affirms Washington’s support for Taiwan’s defense. This would help shape thinking in Japan and serve as an authoritative statement of Japanese concern about Taiwan’s fate.
3. Establish commercial transportation links between Taiwan and Yonaguni and other southern islands.
4. Hold Taiwan-Japan security talks at government-to-government levels. Include the Americans if that is desired. Taiwan has been asking the Japanese for this for years. Start these talks and it will demonstrate “will.”
5. Send active-duty officers to Taiwan as full-fledged attachés and also as training advisors. Taiwan officers go to Japan in return. Media reports claim that Japan will be sending a “defense

official” to Taiwan to serve in addition to the retired military “attachés.” This is a good move, but it is only one person—and is probably a civilian. That is not enough.

Conclusion

Potential is the operative word. More needs done both by Japan itself and in conjunction with the Americans and Japan’s other friends. Fortunately, even as many political elites dithered, Japanese patriots—civilian and uniformed—quietly went about building and developing a military over the years that could potentially defend the nation when the time came and be an essential ally to the United States in its quest to deter or, if necessary, win a war against China.

If leaders find the will to do the things described in this chapter, we will find a more capable Japan—one that is able and willing to fight and solidly linked with US forces. That would have a stabilizing effect at a time when China seems to be revving up its war machine. Military capability improvements have attendant political and psychological effects that further enhance deterrence.

If Japan gets things right and addresses the threats it faces head on, it will indeed serve as the “swing vote” that prevents conflict over Taiwan.

NOTES

1. Yoshihide Yoshida, “Japan ‘Cannot Maintain’ Security at Current Capabilities: SDF Chief,” interviewed by Naoya Yoshino, *Nikkei Asia*, August 29, 2023.
2. John V. Roos, former US ambassador to Japan, Statement Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 111th Cong. (2009).
3. Admiral Yoji Koda, conversations with author.
4. Idrees Ali and Michael Martina, “What Is Most Significant in the Pentagon’s China Military Report?,” ed. Leslie Adler, Reuters, October 20, 2023.
5. Yoshida, “Japan ‘Cannot Maintain’ Security.”
6. Author’s private correspondence with a military officer familiar with Japan’s military.
7. Five Eyes is an intelligence-sharing alliance that includes Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.