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Crucial role: Defense of Taiwan hinges on Japan's support



Ground Self-Defense Force troops reach the shoreline during boat operations as part of the Japanese Observer Exch

Kin Blue training beach in Okinawa Prefecture. | U.S. MARINE CORPS

A Chinese amphibious invasion of Taiwan would most likely be defeated by a U.S.-led coalition, but not without one key element: Japan's support.

Just how crucial Tokyo's role would be was one of the main takeaways from recent [war games](https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan) (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan>) conducted by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank simulating 24 different conflict scenarios involving the democratic island.

"In most scenarios, the United States, Taiwan and Japan defeated a conventional amphibious invasion by China and maintained an autonomous Taiwan," CSIS wrote in a report on the war games.

But victory would come at a high cost. The United States and its allies could lose dozens of ships, hundreds of aircraft and tens of thousands of service members, while Taiwan would see its economy devastated and suffer heavy casualties. China would also likely pay a steep price, and failure to occupy Taiwan could potentially jeopardize Communist Party rule.

Still, things would get much worse if Tokyo decided to remain neutral and deny U.S. forces permission to conduct military activities from Japanese soil — a development that, although increasingly unlikely, could shift the balance in China's favor.

"If Washington knew from the outset that Tokyo would not allow the use of bases in Japan, it is not clear it would even attempt to defend Taiwan, as the lack of those bases would fundamentally change the military equation," Eric Heginbotham, one of the authors of the report, said in an interview.

Even if the U.S. did intervene without Japan, the defeat of Taiwan would be a distinct possibility, as the United States would not be able to employ tactical air power without those bases, he noted, calling Tokyo's role "absolutely critical" in such a conflict.

An 'indispensable' ally

Japan hosts more U.S. service members — about 50,000 — and bases than any other country in the world. The proximity of some of these bases to Taiwan and lack of nearby alternatives means that a major part of any U.S. response would come from there.

While other allies such as Australia and South Korea are important in the broader competition with China and may play some role in the defense of Taiwan, “Japan is the linchpin,” CSIS said in its report. “Without the use of U.S. bases in Japan, U.S. fighter/attack aircraft cannot effectively participate in the war.”

In fact, the bases on Japan’s southwestern islands would be such a crucial staging ground for any American response that the two countries recently agreed

(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/01/12/national/politics-diplomacy/us-japan-two-plus-two-2023/>) to beef up U.S. military capabilities there.



(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/np_file_206388.jpeg)

A U.S. Marine Corps High Mobility Artillery Rocket System conducts a simulated fire mission during training on the Ie Island training facility in Okinawa Prefecture last October. | U.S. MARINE CORPS

It is worth noting that the CSIS report does not conclude that a Taiwan conflict is inevitable. War games do not predict the future, and because they simplify reality, they cannot fully replicate the complexities of a clash between modern powers, including factors such as public opinion, force morale or future military innovations.

While there is little doubt that China hopes to annex Taiwan, questions remain about the timing and methods, including whether the Communist Party is seriously contemplating abandoning its peaceful unification strategy.

That said, speculation has grown that China is accelerating invasion plans. Moreover, the possibility of an accident escalating into confrontation has become an increasingly plausible scenario (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/07/27/asia-pacific/china-us-military-miscalculation/>) as all sides intensify military operations in the area.

Alliance in jeopardy

But how far would Japan be willing and able to go to support its ally? Although Japanese intervention against China is not assured, experts say it is highly unlikely that Tokyo would remain neutral, as this would not only make it very difficult for Taiwan to defend itself but could also jeopardize Japan's alliance with the U.S.

"I think Washington's expectation is that, at the very least, Japan will not impede the use of bases, as it interprets 'prior consultation' under the security treaty as essentially informing Japan of their use," said Christopher Hughes, a professor at Warwick University in Britain.

At the same time, it would make sense for Japan to have a say in the kind of attacks launched from its territory, said James Schoff, senior director of the U.S.-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA. Tokyo would not want the conflict to escalate unnecessarily or involve attacks against civilians, he said.

Defensive or offensive support?

One of the main arguments in favor of direct Japanese involvement is the security threat a successful Chinese occupation of Taiwan — and its integration with the mainland by force — could pose to Japan.

For instance, Beijing's control of Taiwan would enable Chinese submarines to travel directly into Japan's sea lines of communication. It would also place a large set of new Chinese air bases near the southwestern Nansei Islands, said Heginbotham, a security scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for International Studies.

Japan could also lose unhindered access to crucial sea lanes to the Indian Ocean, Middle East and Europe.



(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/np_file_206381.jpeg)

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin (center) welcomes Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada to the Pentagon in Washington on Jan. 12. | AFP-JIJI

Experts note that the level of Japanese support would likely depend on several factors, including the cause, nature and intensity of Chinese aggression.

Other key elements would include Japanese domestic politics and public opinion, with such an important issue likely to result in heated debates in parliament and require public understanding.

Hughes said Tokyo could respond with no or limited military involvement should China opt against an armed attack and instead employ means such as economic embargoes and limited cyberoperations to pressure Taiwan.

However, this scenario could easily escalate into a kinetic conflict. Even so, Japan's military would not necessarily have to play an offensive role.

Depending on China's strategy, Tokyo could allow Washington to use existing bases for offensive moves while limiting the SDF to defensive operations, logistical support, surveillance cooperation and rear-area asset protection, especially for supplies and transport of refugees, Schoff said.

Nevertheless, Tokyo might struggle to maintain this position as China, which has thousands of ballistic and cruise missiles, could decide to attack U.S. bases in Japan, given the threat posed by American air power to Chinese aircraft and warships operating near Taiwan.



(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/np_file_206379.jpeg)

A Chinese military bomber takes off in this image posted to the official Weibo account of the Chinese military's Eastern Theater Command on Dec. 25. | KYODO

Such a move, however, would drastically alter the situation, as a direct attack on Japan would lend a legal rationale for deploying the SDF against Chinese forces and perhaps even striking targets on Chinese territory as acts of individual or collective self-defense.

“There are many who would be reluctant to launch strike operations against Chinese territory because of the high risk of escalation,” said Masashi Murano, a Japan expert at the Hudson Institute think tank.

But this would be inevitable even in a relatively low-intensity scenario such as a blockade around Taiwan, he said, as breaking it would also require destroying air-defense systems along the Chinese coast.

However, such a level of involvement could come at a high price for Japan, as losses on the military side would be heavy, including dozens of major ships and between 100 and 300 aircraft, the war games found. More than 90% of personnel losses, however, would be suffered on the ground as a result of Chinese missile attacks.

While intentional attacks on the general population would be highly unlikely, civilian casualties would be inevitable if China struck the bases, Heginbotham said. Also, military planners in Japan might want to disperse their forces to a wider range of military and civilian airfields to increase their survivability, a move that would also raise the risks for civilians.

Preparing for a potential conflict

There are indications that Japan, which has referred to China as its “greatest strategic challenge,” is preparing for a Taiwan conflict.

Influential Japanese policymakers in and out of government have spoken publicly about the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Others such as former Prime Minister Taro Aso, who currently serves as vice president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, have signaled that Tokyo would consider a Chinese invasion of Taiwan an existential threat (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/07/06/national/taro-aso-taiwan-defense/>) to Japan’s security.

But perhaps the clearest indication of this view are the revisions made to the country’s three security documents (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/12/16/national/japan-dramatic-defense-shift/>) last month.

Not only does the government plan to allocate about ¥43 trillion (\$315 billion) for defense spending over five years from fiscal 2023, it also aims to acquire long-range weapons as well as better cyber and space-defense capabilities while expanding Japan’s role within the U.S. alliance.



(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/np_file_206378.jpeg)

Taiwan's armed forces hold routine drills to show combat readiness ahead of the Lunar New Year holidays, at a military base in Kaohsiung on Jan. 11. | REUTERS

A top priority mentioned in the documents is the reinforcement of SDF capabilities on and around the Nansei Islands (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/12/20/national/japan-defense-nansei-islands-taiwan/>), which would be uniquely exposed in a conflict with China.

Although Japan has well equipped forces, their warfighting capabilities have been questioned, which is why Tokyo's new defense posture and emphasis on combat resilience and sustainability could greatly enhance their ability to assist in a Taiwan contingency, observers say.

At the same time, the planned acquisition of long-range missiles and the adoption of a counterstrike doctrine means Tokyo will soon have a "spear" to go along with its "shield."

In case of a Taiwan contingency, this would not only help Japan better defend itself and free up U.S. forces for offensive operations but also enable the country to supplement U.S. deterrence against China, Hughes said.