

Japan-Taiwan Relations: Recent Changes & Future Development



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Introduction

Japan's history with Taiwan is storied to say the least. After the Qing Dynasty ceded control of Taiwan to the Empire of Japan in 1895, a sudden and forceful influx of Japanese social exports forever altered Taiwan's identity. Taiwanese cuisine, culture, and education were rapidly changed in ways that can still be seen today. What's more, this was not the only societal upheaval in modern history to challenge the island nation.

While the Japanese occupation of Taiwan ended in 1945, only four years later China experienced a massive civil war which left the defeated Republic of China (ROC) with one final refuge after losing control of the mainland to the Communist revolutionaries. This revolution became the catalyst for an increasingly hostile (albeit mutually profitable) relationship between mainland China and Taiwan, while both nations, if we may use such terminology, would become unrecognizable from the principles on which these new governments were originally founded.

As mainland China tried and failed to implement the vision of Mao Zedong, the country wavered and struggled economically for decades. Meanwhile, the militaristic rule of the founding ROC in Taiwan meant oppression and lack of opportunity for most. Both China and Taiwan benefitted from a Westernization of sorts in the years following. Taiwan adopted Democratic governmental reforms in the 1980s, while China embraced the principles of capitalism, subsequently exploding onto the world stage as an economic powerhouse that has proved too big to ignore.

But one *zeitgeist* never faded in the minds of this emerging power, and only grew stronger with time: there is only one China, and Taiwan is part of it. As the power and influence of mainland China has grown, nearly every nation of the world has come to adopt the (in) famous One-China policy to capitulate to the demands of the mainland. At present, only 18 nations maintain official diplomatic relations with Taiwan, while Taiwan's key trade partners, paradoxically, recognize the sovereignty of mainland China.

It is impossible to delve into this topic without engaging with the baffling contradictions which ensconce Taiwan's international relations in a safety net of ambiguity. While important trade partners like Japan and the United States officially recognize the One-China policy, the

outworking of that pact has ever been a delicate matter, marked by ambivalence on all sides. With faux embassies and unwritten international contracts, Taiwan represents a tantalizing case study for anyone interested in the functions of modern diplomacy.

This topic merits its own study, if not its own library. Rather than breaching that difficult topic of US-Taiwan relations, I will take the diplomatic approach and instead talk about another country's transnational dilemmas with Taiwan. The purpose of this article is to examine the future of international relations – official or otherwise – between Japan and Taiwan.

Geopolitics in East Asia has much more to do with *de facto* rules than with “official” policies, which are often too grandiose to be realized, but also too precious to be discarded as overly idealistic. Japan officially has no standing army, and no diplomatic relations with Taiwan. In both cases, these are technicalities at best; open secrets of modern politics. Emblematic of the tenuous balance by which relative peace has been achieved in East Asia today, the contradiction between policy and practice has become a semi-comfortable status quo. Veiled threats and equally ambiguous promises of reciprocation are exchanged regularly among trade partners. Forgive the distinctly millennial tone to this summation, but “frenemies” perhaps best describes the pseudo-relations in which Japan and China will navigate a treacherous course toward mutual advancement.

What's at Stake

To be clear, Taiwan has the most skin in this game. Japan is not without security concerns of its own, but it is Taiwan which has legitimate reasons to be alarmed at the future of its statehood and (unofficial?) sovereignty. While Taiwan's economy exploded several decades ago, it has also levelled off more recently as China's has swelled. As Beijing's influence has grown, the pressure on Taiwan has increased commensurately. The indisputably more powerful mainland China has sniped off more and more of Taiwan's former diplomatic allies, leaving Taiwan in a stranglehold diplomatically. What's more, the manufacturing base of China offers impossible-to-ignore trade potential to developed nations. China is not unaware of its superior position on the world stage, through which Beijing has persuaded nations and private organizations to capitulate to its demands in regard

to the One-China policy.

No one is unclear about the eventual end toward which China is looking. China's position remains openly hostile toward any move indicative of Taiwanese independence, which most consider a *de facto* reality already. That same spirit of colonialism which impels other powerful nations to extend their influence globally seems to also drive China's telling encroachment. What's more, with an increasingly centralized, autocratic, and restrictive rule of government coming to shape in the China which President Xi Jinping will preside over for the rest of his life (after successfully changing the former laws on term limits), the ambitions of the nation's top brass are poised to be unimpeded by internal dissent in the event of international conflict.

Taiwan's Nuanced Relationships

Taiwan's protection against invasion has been a matter of subtlety for generations. America's Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 states that **"the United States will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability."** Without promising aid in the event of conflict, this treaty rather notes that it may be provided. This same agreement contains provisions about the uses of the American Institute of Taiwan, outlining the same essential functions of an embassy without the namesake. But the idea came from Japan.

In 1972, Japan instituted the Interchange Association, from the offices of the former Japanese Embassy in Taiwan prior to Japan's adoption of the One-China policy. This organization was staffed by former Japanese diplomats who were lent to the Interchange Organization, temporarily relinquishing their official status as diplomats until the end of their terms working at the Interchange Association. The government of Japan avoided "recognizing" Taiwan in travel arrangements as well; Taiwanese travelers to Japan would be issued a separate travel document to be processed at Japanese immigration offices, leaving the passport untouched. This approach toward the continuation of unofficial relations with Taiwan was dubbed the "Japanese formula", which blueprint the US mirrored in many ways in establishing the unofficial relations its shares with Taiwan

today. None of this has served to inhibit trade, business, and cultural exchanges between the nations in question.

This is not to say that Japan's relationship with Taiwan is or was without difficulty. While Japan, China, and Taiwan continue to dispute ownership of the Senkaku Islands, for example, Japan maintains amicable relations with Taiwan which are likely to continue well into the future. Because these issues have a potential to culminate in conflict, maintaining the current state of affairs has been dubbed a priority; so Japan and Taiwan have taken measures to solve such disputes through diplomatic means.

Opaque Policies as Political Barometers

The implementation of the One-China policy has ever been a delicate undertaking, but that fact has also resulted in certain advantages for Taiwan's unofficial partners. Through non-embassies staffed by non-diplomats, Japan has largely circumnavigated the former difficulties in establishing and protecting foreign investment, trade, and other interests in Taiwan. With the precedent of unofficial business and political relations in Taiwan having been set decades prior, the wording of the policies which brought about these conditions is largely meaningless. Terms such as "strategic ambiguity" have been used to describe the Taiwan-related treaties the US adopted after learning from Japan; and the beauty of ambiguity is flexibility.

Because the question of what does and does not constitute adherence to the One-China policy has largely become a matter of subjective interpretation, dealings with Taiwan have evolved into a diplomatic gesture on some level. President-elect Donald Trump broke precedent by having a phone conversation with President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan in late 2016, who congratulated him on winning the presidency of the US. This seemingly innocuous gesture was taken as something far greater by politicians and analysts on all sides; the ire the act incurred might well be evidence of the efficacy of "strategic ambiguity".

Other controversial gestures include the 2017 visit to Taiwan by Japanese Senior Vice Minister of Internal Affairs and Communication Jiro Akama, which had been shortly preceded by the January 2017 renaming of Japan's *de facto* embassy in Taiwan, now redubbed the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association. While Akama's trip was about promoting Japanese food exports, and the renaming of the former Interchange Association was a gesture of goodwill, none of this has gone unnoticed by Beijing. This has long been the case in international dealings with Taiwan, which is why President Trump can also be accused of "playing the Taiwan card" in associating with Taiwanese authorities – but that motivation can just as easily be denied, and with a plausible deniability of its own thanks to the ambiguity surrounding the One-China policy.

In this discussion, I've jumped between US-Taiwan affairs and Japan-Taiwan affairs rather freely as I feel that Japan-Taiwan relations cannot be properly understood without consideration of America's influence in East Asia and especially Japan. Japan has come to mirror Westernized philosophies in politics and society in ways which differentiate it from the rest of East Asia. While Western modernity has

Photo: MiNe (CC BY 2.0)



Sign stone of Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association, Taipei Office

Photo: Presidential Office of Taiwan (CC BY 2.0)



Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen meets with US Senator Marco Rubio in Miami, Florida, in June 2016.

affected most of the world to greater and lesser degrees, Japan was literally given its Constitution by an American military general. The US still has vast military resources allocated to Japan, and the relationship is growing stronger. As such, US interests in East Asia will often overlap with Japanese interests, including many shared friends and enemies. However, there is a particular historical place Japan occupies which necessitates greater unction in promoting peaceful, fruitful relations in East Asia.

National Images Old & New

I will not belabor here the innumerable sources of animosity toward Japan among other East Asian countries. It is a historical memory longer than my American psyche can fathom to delve back into the annals of ages past and attempt to grasp the impacts of the many invasions of the Korean Peninsula at the hands of ambitious Japanese warlords, or Japan's history with China, or the atrocities of Nanjing in 1937. Suffice it to say that imperialist Japan had earned the ill-will of its enemies. And, as anyone familiar with the geopolitical landscape in East Asia knows, many of those events in ages past cannot be forgotten today. The issue of the "comfort women" enslaved by the Japanese military in Korea is another blight on Japanese history which has left deep wounds that may not be healed for ages to come; monies and apologies have been issued and memorial statues erected, while Japan would simply like to forget.

Taiwan is no stranger to Japanese imperialism, of course. After Japan took control of the island in 1895, the ensuing gentrification process saw Taiwanese children speaking Japanese in school, while the populace at large was encouraged to live, speak, and believe the Japanese way. Unlike many of the more slipshod expansionist movements, Japan's first colony was meant to serve as an example of Japan's positive influence; Japan invested in improving and developing the infrastructures of Taiwan during their occupancy. This ended in 1945 when Japan surrendered to the Allied Forces, and surrendered control of Taiwan.

Photo: From Japanese book *Kinsei Meishi Shashin Vol. 2* (1934-1935)



Portrait of Kabayama Sukenori, inaugurated as the first Japanese governor-general of Taiwan, on May 10, 1895

Reactive & Adaptable – How Taiwan Is Built for Survival

Colonialism may never leave the best of cultural memories, but Japan's occupation of Taiwan had an entirely different flavor than did its military conquests in Korea and some parts of China. In many ways, Japan contributed to Taiwan's development, albeit a mandated development from invaders. This is one reason that while Taiwan might represent the sorest of sore spots for China's foreign relations, it can still enjoy a happy (unofficial) relationship with Japan.

Another boon for Taiwan is the adaptability it has cultivated. Old cultures tend to change slowly, as Japan is often cited to do. New cultures can build and innovate without much concern for precedent and tradition when there is little of it to hinder progress. Taiwan has become a master of adaptation in this way. After Japan surrendered control of Taiwan to China, the Chinese Civil War soon brought about another societal shift in Taiwan, where the ousted Chinese government leaders dug in and attempted to create a separate China to oppose the Communist China which had seized power. Although modern Taiwan was conceived and ruled autocratically by its founder, a series of democratic reforms in the 1980s set the ball in motion for Taiwan to become the more democratic nation it is today.

A highly adaptable and resilient Taiwan is eager to make connections internationally, while Japan must find inroads toward a more established and less tenuous peace with neighboring countries. As a developed nation, Japan is also eager to trade and promote commerce, and Taiwan's close proximity and hospitable political relations with Japan make it the ideal (unofficial) partner with which to do business. With a shrinking domestic workforce, Japan will undoubtedly look to Taiwan among other nations to help pick up the slack as it scrambles to find replacements for the older generation of employees across every industry.

Japan has an image to attend to as a pacifist nation, while internal struggles like population decline are leaving change-resistant Japan

backed up against a wall. Japan's relationship with Taiwan is particularly advantageous for both of these reasons. Although Japan ceased from practicing colonialism many years ago, historical memory in East Asia is long. To maintain both the practice and image of pacifism, Japan has a need protect the reputation it has worked to cultivate – a task which is not taken lightly if the remuneration paid to South Korea in recent times is any indication. This is why Japan's former “model colony” can still, ironically, enhance Japan's reputation today.

Japan's well-known and much-feared population decline is beyond any simply solution, but one immediate and unavoidable result must be that Japan adapts its immigration practices to a new age in which continued homogeneity will simply not be an option. To this end, characteristically slow reforms have been taking place, including incentivizing the immigration process for highly skilled workers, and permitting greater numbers of low-skill workers to enter Japan to perform the jobs Japanese people tend to shun. One might correctly think that China rather than Taiwan could better provide the necessary manpower Japan requires, but where Japan has been slow to change, China has not; with a busy economy and capitalist fervor on full power, China is increasingly attracting foreign talent from abroad while providing greater incentives for local talent to stay local.

Meanwhile, Taiwan's best and brightest have been subject to a “brain drain” from China, where skilled tech workers, for example, can earn much higher salaries than are typically available in Taiwan. Laborers from China will probably still be eager to seek working wages in Japan, but this says nothing of the professional class. Since the skilled workers Japan needs are becoming less likely to leave neighboring China, Taiwan will be indispensable for meeting the staffing shortages Japan will face.

Why Taiwan?

In a globalized world, one might well ask why, in the face of population decline, Japan would be restricted to neighboring Asian countries in meeting personnel staffing needs. To put it simply, neighbors from afar are less likely to adapt and assimilate to Japan's comparatively rigid culture. For starters, there are the linguistic similarities between Mandarin, Korean, and Japanese which facilitate a sort of built-in understanding among expatriates from these nations (Japan and China share the *kanji* system which baffles many Westerners, while Korean grammar is nearly identical to Japanese). In addition, East Asian expatriates in Japan can and do “pass” for Japanese, which provides manifold benefits in a culture which has ever been wary of foreigners.

As I mentioned earlier, Taiwan, unlike China, is a democratic nation which has embraced many liberal reforms. This has aligned Taiwan with many American values, to which Japan has also been inextricably tied. Japan is officially a protectorate of the US, while Taiwan enjoys unofficial protection as the US and other interested nations seek to maintain the status quo in Asia. The eventuality which must be prepared for is the question of how long this status quo can be maintained. In preparing for its own future, Japan must invest in Taiwan.

Photo: Staff Sgt. D. Myles Cullen (USAF)



Chinese military honor guards march during a welcome ceremony for Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Marine Gen. Peter Pace at the Ministry of Defense on March 22, 2007, in Beijing, China.

China – Too Big to Ignore

Having laid out some of the reasons why it would behoove Japan to continue and enrich its current relations with Taiwan, this says nothing of the obvious elephant-in-the-room: China's constant disapproval of the status quo and recent intensifying of its position that Taiwan is a territory of mainland China, to come under its control sooner or later. As almost all nations of the world have come to accept the One-China principle in some manifestation, China's influence in Taiwan's affairs and the affairs of its trading partners can be clearly seen.

Leaked People's Liberation Army (PLA) training documents have hinted at scenarios in which China could invade Taiwan, and the strategic gains to be made by doing so – including how Taiwan would serve Chinese powers in the case of a conflict with Japan. In recent times, rhetoric of a possible invasion has been ramped up amid increased tension between the US and China, and concurrent and intentional reinvigorating of the unofficial US-Taiwan relationship. The potential for open conflict should be treated with utmost gravity – something China has capitalized on in swaying the opinions of Taiwan's allies via threats and intimidation.

Economically and militarily, it is clear that China is too big to ignore. As one of the few diplomatic partners of North Korea, China also maintains the terrifying prospect of a nuclear-powered ally nation which shares at least some of the grievances with Japan as China has for ages. As with all things North Korean, the future of that relationship is also questionable, but provides another reason to think that the status quo in the Pacific is not sustainable.

In contrast to the doom-and-gloom picture you might be envisioning by now, I do not mean to say that war in the traditional sense is inevitable. “War” might be waged via public opinion, and the revolutions which I think must happen in the future can be peaceful transitions of power or power structures. As a diplomat-to-be, it is my utmost hope that when the scales tip, as they one day must, peace and prosperity in East Asia would be maintained regardless of whatever that new “status quo” might look like.

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