

Perspective on Channels Between Japan and Taiwan After Participating in Japan-US-China Forum

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Introduction

(1) *China, a threat to Japan, and the Taiwan issue*

At the Japan-US Forum held by the Japan Economic Foundation (JEF) on Jan. 11, 2022, experts from both Japan and the United States emphasized that, given the threat posed by China, diplomatic and military cooperation should be pursued with Taiwan. The theme of the first meeting of the Study Group on a Roadmap of US-Japan-China Relations initiated by JEF (Jan. 19), in line with the proclaimed “unified China strategy”, was how Japan should independently address the threat posed by China, and it was decided that the objective of working group meetings during 2022 would be to propose a national security strategy for Japan. Also at this time, Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, raising the probability of a Chinese invasion across the Taiwan Strait. This scenario, and how to respond, was discussed at working group meetings throughout 2022. The working group stated that “Taiwan is an extremely important issue involving all aspects of human rights and democracy” but “given the importance of maintaining Japan-China relations, Japan needs to take an independent, balanced approach” (Study Group meeting, Feb. 23).

(2) *Importance of creating a channel for dialogue among Japan, the US, and Taiwan*

The Taiwan issue “should be viewed as an issue of Japan’s security guarantee and defense” and “Taiwan is an important human rights issue for Japan” (Study Group meeting, July 6), but Japan is in a position in which, because of Japan’s Constitution, it has no choice but to rely on the US with regard to Taiwan. It was said that “Japan can do nothing except support the United States based on the US-Japan alliance” (Study Group meeting, July 6).

This framework creates another issue: “Private individuals are exchanging opinions, but among governments there is no cooperation among Japan, the United States, and Taiwan. For about the next six months, it may be possible for the three parties to engage in government-to-government, military-to-military, or business-to-business dialogue without arousing China” (Study Group meeting, March 30). Furthermore, the issue going forward was jointly recognized as: “A joint response by Japan, the United States, and Taiwan requires that public and secret discussions are held in advance” and “discussions not lead to the inclusion of persons affiliated with the (Taiwanese) government”, but “the United

States and Taiwan have engaged in the ‘Monterey talks’ and the ‘Track-1.5 dialogue’ with Taiwan, giving the United States a higher level of responsibility. This must lead to the development of a framework among Japan, the United States, and Taiwan that starts with secret discussions, which in turn lead to a policy response without the discussions being publicized” (Study Group meeting, July 6).

In December 2022, the Study Group released a policy proposal that stated that the parties should “show determination for strong solidarity and cooperation among the major parties, i.e., the United States, Japan, and Taiwan”, concluding that “although Japan’s ability to support Taiwan’s defense directly is limited, Japan needs to understand Taiwan’s requests in advance through discussions among Japan, the United States, and Taiwan”, that “dialogue and cooperation between Japan and Taiwan need to be achieved”, and “proactive diplomacy with China requires stronger communication with Taiwan. In confronting China, Taiwan is a valuable partner for Japan in terms of exchanges of information and bilateral cooperation. Japan and Taiwan should search for dialogue and cooperation through both government and private-sector pipelines.”

In other words, the Study Group recognized that although the Taiwan issue is a matter of life or death, given China’s threat to Japan, defense restrictions make cooperation with the US inevitable in terms of the relationship with Taiwan, while at the same time dialogue with Taiwan is important.

On the other hand, analysis of Taiwan’s internal affairs and power structure has not been a major issue of the Study Group, and how to aim to create channels with Taiwan has not been discussed. Through my meetings with various people from Taiwan and Japan involved in Japan-Taiwan relations, I have a sense of insufficiency and uncertainty regarding the creation of a Japan-Taiwan channel. In this article, I would like to consider how Japan should create channels with Taiwan in the absence of a diplomatic relationship, while recognizing the necessity of cooperating with the US.

Channel Dispersal

After breaking off diplomatic relations in 1972, the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association and the East Asia Relations Commission (the current Taiwan-Japan Relations Association) were established to maintain a working relationship between Japan and Taiwan, and the LDP continued to have exchanges with the Kuomintang (KMT)

through the Japan-ROC Diet Members' Consultative Council (also known as Nikkakon). Working through Nikkakon has had significant benefits for Taiwan given Japan's Cabinet system; within Japan this made it possible for Taiwan to request cooperation in establishing laws and policies that are favorable for Taiwan, and also for Taiwan to develop relationships with young lawmakers who are potential future Cabinet ministers or prime ministers as long as the LDP remains in power.¹

In 2000, however, Taiwan's ruling party changed from the KMT to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), and because the LDP did not have a pipeline with the DPP and the DPP lacked a pipeline with Japan, both sides sought to create a channel that would incorporate both the ruling and opposition parties. Mid-level and young lawmakers felt a sense of crisis and took action including the launch of a new Japan-Taiwan Parliamentary Commission, setting off a generational change in Japan's primary counterpart for Taiwan from mostly older lawmakers of the Nikkakon to younger lawmakers. In Taiwan, younger DPP lawmakers created their own parliamentary association to promote ties with Japanese lawmakers, accelerating a generational shift in pro-Japan lawmakers.²

After the issue of Taiwan's imports of food from Japan arose following the Great East Japan Earthquake, regular meetings between the LDP and KMT were suspended, accelerating the dissolution of the traditional channel between the KMT and the LDP.³ At the same time, Nikkakon (reorganized as a multiparty group in 1997) maintains ties with Taiwan to this day as a multiparty group of lawmakers and takes pride in the fact that "The role of parliamentary diplomacy is extremely important in the absence of formal diplomatic relations between Japan and Taiwan. This will become even more important going forward" (Nikkakon Chairman Keiji Furuya, August 2022).⁴ As a result, the Japan side's counterparts in Taiwan have become dispersed.

The higher level of Japanese officials visiting Taiwan can be seen as part of this phenomenon. In addition to the first official visit by a Japanese official, by then Parliamentary Vice-Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications Jiro Akama in March 2017, the visits by LDP policy chief Koichi Hagiuda and Secretary-General for the LDP in the House of Councillors Hiroshige Seko in December 2022 are

fresh in our memory.⁵

On the other hand, the diversification of these counterparts on the Japanese side is the result of a plan on the Taiwanese side. Taiwan recognizes that at the very least it needs to create multiple channels.⁶

Furthermore, even without diplomatic relations, Japan and Taiwan have a special relationship rooted in geographic proximity and historical and cultural aspects, but the relationship is very strongly supported by the fact that it was created by individuals acting behind the scenes. This has made it difficult for the governments to manage counterparts and impossible to have a complete understanding of relations between the governments of Japan and Taiwan. This environment makes it difficult for the Japanese government to refine its strategy when considering the relationship with Taiwan. On the Taiwanese side as well, even though it wishes to have channels with Japan and the US, this is difficult when concrete channels have not been created and it is still searching for favorable counterparts, creating the possibility that during this process the parties within Taiwan for diplomatic negotiations will become divided.

Behind the scenes, Taiwanese officials have visited Japan, and in many cases have had contact with senior Japanese officials. Despite the high barriers to senior Japanese officials visiting Taiwan, there have been exchanges of opinions in areas including joint disaster response. It is said that during the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) administration, Taiwanese lawmakers could visit Japanese Cabinet ministers in their offices.⁷ When then Legislative Yuan Speaker Wang Jin-pyng visited Japan in August 2008 in the face of strong opposition from China, he met with then LDP Secretary General Taro Aso and attended the general assembly of the Asian-Pacific Parliamentarians' Union (APPU) in Nara. His participation in these public events raises the possibility that visits by Taiwanese officials to Japan could lead to contact with Japanese officials and a breakthrough in the situation. Last year, Taiwan's second-highest government official, Vice President Lai Ching-te, visited Japan to pay his respects to former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The Japanese government issued a visa to him, but when asked about the visit at a press conference, Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi would not even say his name, emphasizing that it was a "private visit" and showing that the Japanese government felt it necessary to keep its

1 Interview with former Taiwanese lawmaker; Taipei, Oct. 12, 2021.

2 "New Trends in Japan and Taiwan", *Asahi Shimbun*, Oct. 3, 2002, morning edition.

3 Interview with former Taiwanese lawmaker; Taipei, Oct. 12, 2021.

4 "Visiting Taiwan Lawmakers Confirm Stronger Cooperation, Multiparty Nikkakon", *Asahi Shimbun*, Aug. 9, 2022, morning edition.

5 Furthermore, with the US's passage of the Taiwan Travel Act in March 2018 to allow high-level officials of the US to visit Taiwan and vice versa, there has been a series of high-level visits, showing a more forceful pro-Taiwan position in anticipation of a confrontation with China.

6 Interview with former Taiwanese lawmaker; Taipei, Oct. 12, 2021.

7 Ibid.

pro forma relationship with Taiwan “behind the scenes”.

Visits to Taiwan by Lawmakers from Other Countries

Visits from Japanese lawmakers to Taiwan have continued since the breaking off of diplomatic relations, primarily through the aforementioned Nikkakon. In July 2022, a group of Diet members from the LDP and the Japan Innovation Party (JIP) visited Taiwan and met with President Tsai Ing-wen.

Many US lawmakers have visited Taiwan since the beginning of the Joe Biden administration. A multiparty group of senators visited in June 2021, followed by a group of Republican Party members of the House of Representatives and a five-person multiparty group of representatives in November, and a group of US lawmakers visited in April 2022 as well, and all met with President Tsai.

In place of diplomatic relations, Congress has come to play the central role in US relations with Taiwan. Taiwan also has bilateral support in both houses of Congress. The fact that Taiwan is a democracy that has economic and military strategic value is understood, but there is a tense relationship between Congress and the president regarding the Taiwan issue.⁸

The US Congress proposed the Taiwan Policy Act, which included a significant strengthening of military support for Taiwan, in August 2022. The Biden administration requested amendments, creating a standoff with Congress. The working group repeatedly discussed the visit of a group of lawmakers led by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and China’s military drills in the Taiwan Strait in August 2022. After Pelosi’s visit, there was a conspicuous succession of visits by US lawmakers to Taiwan.

Lawmakers from countries other than the US visit Taiwan as well. Higher profile visits by European lawmakers stand out. The president of the Senate of the Czech Republic made an official visit to Taiwan in August 2020, and during October-December 2021 a group of French lawmakers and the former prime minister of Australia visited Taiwan and met with Tsai, a group of European lawmakers made a first official visit, and a group of lawmakers from the three Baltic States visited as well. These moves are seen by the Taiwanese side as signaling that “the international community has begun to turn its eyes toward democratic Taiwan, which is different from China.”⁹

As we can see from the above, lawmakers from overseas are actively visiting Taiwan, suggesting that US and European interest in

Taiwan is increasing. Taiwan is receiving attention from lawmakers of Western countries as a contrast to China, but in the absence of diplomatic relations with Taiwan, this contact needs to be seen as separate from government-to-government channels.

Japan-US Cooperation & Japan-Taiwan Dialogue in Making Taiwan Policy

The Japanese Diet held a trilateral strategic dialogue with interested lawmakers from Japan, the US, and Taiwan in July 2021, and this and other activities are demonstrating the potential for more active interaction among lawmakers, but the key is how the Japanese and US governments address these moves while maintaining a distance.

The Study Group (Feb. 23) pointed out that “Japan had no choice but to take a two-pronged approach including expressing opinions unofficially, with former Prime Minister Abe speaking outside. If the incumbent prime minister said something that went too far, Japan could not take it back, and other countries would wonder what he was actually thinking.” This put the Japanese government in the difficult position of figuring out how to manage building separate relationships with China and Taiwan. The Study Group (Feb. 23) also pointed out the possibility of Japan and the US sending each other political messages on their own, and “It is preferable for Japan and the United States to discuss a joint plan on what specific actions to take.” The Study Group (May 17) also pointed out that there is a “slight difference in Japan’s and the United States’ perception of the threat from China” and because “America views a rising China in a Cold War context, Japan should have a its own comprehensive policy for dealing with China.”

There is also a need for Japan and Taiwan to build a relationship quickly that does not rely excessively on the US. As pointed out by the Study Group (Feb. 23): “It is good that the United States is a platform for sharing important information, and this will meet the need for the time being. This was also the case among Japan, the United States, and South Korea prior to the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) agreement between Japan and South Korea. Taiwan wants to increase its partners extremely urgently and believes that Japan is sure to feel the same way. In Japan, people including former State Minister of Defense Yasuhide Nakayama and Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso have said things that caused misunderstanding. The Japan-Taiwan relationship has not

8 Ryo Sahashi, Associate Professor, University of Tokyo, “Pelosi’s Visit to Taiwan Will Only Damage Regional Stability”, *Asahi Shimbun*, Aug. 4, 2022, morning edition.

9 President of the Legislative Yuan You Si-kun, “Taiwan’s Diplomacy Today and Going Forward”, *Asahi Shimbun*, Nov. 27, 2020, morning edition.

been good and needs to start with the establishment of a relationship of trust.”

In this way, the Study Group has carefully touched on the importance of talks between Japan and Taiwan and among Japan, the US, and Taiwan, but it is difficult to establish means of effective communications with governments in the absence of official diplomatic relations, and there is little precedent for this.

In addition, if Japan and the US are to cooperate with Taiwan, they would need to gain a better understanding of Taiwan’s internal political dynamics and seek useful counterparts. As noted above, Taiwan has been using means like cooperating with its world-leading semiconductor industry to attract visits by lawmakers from overseas, but on the other hand there are also issues with Taiwanese lawmakers’ diplomatic activities. For example, the lack of effectiveness of the legislature’s committee responsible for diplomacy with Japan, which is the result of the country’s reform of its single-seat constituency system, is an issue. In Japan as well, few people understand Taiwan’s internal structure, including the legislature.¹⁰ Without diplomatic relations, the key for both governments going forward will be how to build stable channels.

Points of Caution in Communication with Taiwan

The Study Group (Feb. 23) also expressed the opinion that while Japan should emphasize the values of human rights and democracy, it also later (May 17) noted a divergence in values with other countries and the danger of terminology like “authoritarianism vs. democracy”. Along with noting (April 19) that “security guarantees with India and ASEAN should be incorporated a bit more” and that “as Japan develops its diplomatic relations with Asia, calls from inside and outside the country for more assistance and support will become stronger”, the group recognized the need for “a comprehensive approach not based solely on security”, as well as things like “cooperative programs in supply chains and economic cooperation with ASEAN, along with the concern parts of the Middle East, ASEAN, and other regions may be driven away”, but from the perspective of “commitments to Western countries being important, but strengthening involvement in other regions” many experts say there is danger in an “authoritarian vs. democracy” approach, while at the same time raising the issue (May 17) of the “importance of the long-term significance of demonstrating the attractiveness of democratic government”. If economic security is included in a

national security strategy, it will become necessary to consider cooperating with countries with different systems (Study Group meeting, Oct. 28).

Regarding Taiwan, however, its difference from China in terms of being a democracy is a major part of its identity, and it is using this in its diplomatic policy. For example, as noted previously, President of the Legislative Yuan You Si-kun has shown confidence that with a pickup in visits to Taiwan by overseas lawmakers, “the international community has begun to turn its eyes toward democratic Taiwan, which is different from China.” In terms of cooperation with the US and Taiwan, Japan would emphasize more than is necessary slogans about the value of democracy. Regarding Japan’s interest, it may be particularly important to cooperate with Taiwan while determining how to maintain a distance on the issue of values.

Conclusion

The administration of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has made a major change of direction in Japan’s postwar security policy and decided to aim for a significant strengthening of the country’s defense capabilities. Under Japan’s new national security strategy, China’s direction is a “challenge” and peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is an indispensable element for the peace, stability, and prosperity of international society. China can be seen as the biggest threat to Japan’s security. Therefore, Japan needs to consider using many channels that it alone has when dealing with the Taiwan issue, while the government pays close attention to watching US moves, how Western countries present their values, and Taiwan’s internal power structure. Exchanges among Japanese and Taiwanese lawmakers cannot be one-time events, they need to be built with a timeframe of more than 10 and up to 20 years.¹¹ From a micro perspective, the issue is how to recover the channels that have already diversified and weakened, to build a regular pipeline between the two governments. **JS**

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¹⁰ Interview with former Taiwanese lawmaker; Taipei; Oct. 12, 2021

¹¹ Ibid.