

Tensions Between Japan and China over Taiwan: The Meaning of a “Survival-Threatening Situation”

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Background

Japan and China entered a new phase of tension in their bilateral relations after Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi stated in the Japanese Parliament on **November 7** that a potential military attack by China against Taiwan could be considered a “**situation threatening Japan’s survival.**” Although the prime minister emphasized that her remarks were based on Japan’s existing security legislation, the statement drew considerable attention by explicitly linking a conflict over Taiwan to Japan’s own national survival.

Until now, Japanese prime ministers had refrained from offering concrete definitions or scenarios regarding how Japan might respond to a Taiwan-related crisis. This episode highlights the high sensitivity surrounding the Taiwan issue and reflects an increasingly tense regional security environment in East Asia, where historical legacies, international law, and great-power competition intersect.

China’s Reaction and the Taiwan Issue

China reacted strongly, reiterating that Taiwan constitutes a core interest of its foreign policy and an issue on which it will not tolerate any form of external interference, even resorting to severe measures against countries that, from its perspective, fail to respect the “**One China**” principle. For Beijing, Prime Minister Takaichi’s remarks on Taiwan crossed a red line.

The Chinese government regards Taiwan as an unresolved issue stemming from the Chinese civil war between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang), a conflict that was interrupted in 1949 when the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan after being defeated by Communist forces. China maintains that the civil war has not formally ended and that reunification is an internal matter, which could even be achieved through the use of force.

Following Prime Minister Takaichi’s remarks, China lodged strong diplomatic protests and implemented a series of measures, including recommendations to its citizens to avoid traveling to Japan, restrictions on seafood imports, the cancellation of cultural events in China, military activities in international waters near Japan, and the suspension of people-to-people exchanges. Taken together, these actions reflect a deliberately calibrated approach by Beijing to reaffirm its position on the Taiwan issue through diplomatic, economic, and military instruments, while avoiding direct military confrontation. Nevertheless, the recent incident in which a Chinese fighter aircraft locked its radar onto a Japanese fighter jet has heightened concerns about the risk of miscalculation that could trigger a direct military clash between the two countries.

China's reaction is also shaped by lingering historical wounds, such as Japan's acquisition of Taiwan following the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the occupation of Manchuria in 1931, and the war between 1937 and 1945, including the episode known as the Nanjing Massacre. These events remain central to China's historical memory and continue to influence how Beijing perceives Japan's behavior.

Japan's Response and Efforts to Stabilize the Situation

Following China's reaction, Japan moved quickly to emphasize the importance of restraint and constructive dialogue with Beijing. The Japanese government stated that its basic policy toward China and Taiwan has not changed and reaffirmed the commitments established in the **1972 Japan–China Joint Communiqué**, in which Japan recognizes the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China and expresses respect for Beijing's position on Taiwan.

At the same time, Tokyo has avoided making further comments on operational details regarding a potential Taiwan contingency, maintaining its traditional practice of assessing each situation individually in accordance with its security legislation. Japanese authorities stressed that the prime minister's remarks reflect the existing legal framework and do not signal a policy shift or an intention to confront China.

Prime Minister Takaichi herself explained in Parliament that her comments followed an official script based on the government's legal position, while acknowledging that her personal view of regional security is shaped by what she considers an increasingly severe environment. Since then, Japan has emphasized the importance of dialogue, crisis management, and the prevention of miscalculation, expressing its willingness to stabilize relations and reduce rhetorical tension with China. However, Beijing is unlikely to ease the pressure until Prime Minister Takaichi retracts her statements suggesting that a Chinese military action against Taiwan would constitute a situation threatening Japan's survival.

What a “Survival-Threatening Situation” Means and Its Implications for Japan

Under Japanese law, a “survival-threatening situation” arises when an armed attack against a country closely linked to Japan creates a clear danger to Japan's own survival and fundamentally threatens the lives, freedom, and security of its population, even if Japanese territory is not directly attacked.

In practice, a large-scale conflict over Taiwan could meet this definition for several reasons. Geographically, Taiwan lies very close to Japan's southwestern islands, with the Japanese island of Yonaguni located approximately 110 kilometers from Taiwan, meaning that any conflict would unfold in maritime and airspace areas adjacent to Japanese territory.

From a military standpoint, such a scenario would increase the risk of missile launches and air and naval operations near Japan, with possible spillover effects on its territory or on U.S. forces stationed in the country. Moreover, U.S. armed forces could intervene militarily to defend Taiwan in the event of an attack or blockade by China, which would inevitably lead to Japan's involvement.

Economically, Japan depends heavily on maritime trade and energy imports, so any disruption of sea lanes around Taiwan would immediately affect energy security, food supplies, and industrial supply chains.

These concerns are further compounded by China's territorial claims over the Senkaku Islands (called Diaoyu by Beijing) and the frequent incursions of Chinese vessels and aircraft into nearby waters, reinforcing in Japan the perception that China's strategic ambitions could extend beyond Taiwan. From Japan's perspective, a significant shift in the regional balance following the use of force against Taiwan could place the country under constant strategic pressure, turning a Taiwan crisis into a direct national security issue.

Strategic Ambiguity and the Cautious Posture of the United States

With regard to Taiwan, the United States has historically maintained a policy of **strategic ambiguity**, under which Washington does not explicitly commit to defending Taiwan militarily in the event of a Chinese attack, but neither does it rule out intervention. This ambiguity serves a dual purpose: deterring China from using force by introducing uncertainty about the U.S. response, while also discouraging Taiwan from moving toward a formal declaration of independence by denying it an automatic security guarantee. Overall, the policy is intended to **prevent conflict** and **preserve the status quo**.

In the current context of rising tensions between Japan and China, the Trump administration has adopted a relatively more moderate tone. Washington appears to be seeking a balance between advancing trade agreements with China—including tariff negotiations—and reaffirming its commitment to Japan's security in the event of a regional crisis. This approach suggests a pragmatic prioritization of economic and strategic considerations, without explicitly abandoning existing security commitments.

Nevertheless, this cautious posture has been closely observed in Japan and has raised questions about the future role of the United States as the principal deterrent in maintaining stability in the East China Sea. It is therefore not surprising that within Japanese political and strategic circles there is a growing perception that traditional U.S. strategic ambiguity could gradually be replaced by a more transactional approach associated with President Trump's political style, potentially altering the current strategic balance surrounding Taiwan.

In this context, it is understandable that debates and positions have emerged in Japan advocating a review of its security policy aimed at strengthening greater **strategic autonomy**. Such an orientation would not necessarily represent an alternative to the defense alliance with the United States, but rather a complement intended to reduce vulnerabilities and enhance Japan's ability to adapt to potential changes in Washington's posture, particularly in light of the volatility of U.S. domestic politics.

Conclusion

For many analysts in East Asia, the current situation reflects long-standing structural tensions rather than a sudden policy shift. China views Taiwan as a critical issue of sovereignty and national unity rooted in its history, while Japan regards regional stability and freedom of navigation as essential to its own survival. Historical wounds continue to shape mutual distrust, even as both sides are aware of the enormous costs that an open conflict would entail.

Prime Minister Takaichi's remarks do not constitute a direct threat against China, but rather highlight the legal and strategic dilemmas Japan faces in an increasingly unstable regional environment. This episode illustrates how complex it is to address hypothetical security scenarios in a region where history, international law, and power politics are deeply intertwined.

Ultimately, both Japan and China continue to emphasize the importance of stability—a concept deeply rooted in both cultures—recognizing that control over language can be as important as control over military capabilities in preventing escalation. Both historical actors understand well that the human and material costs of war far exceed the costs of maintaining peace.