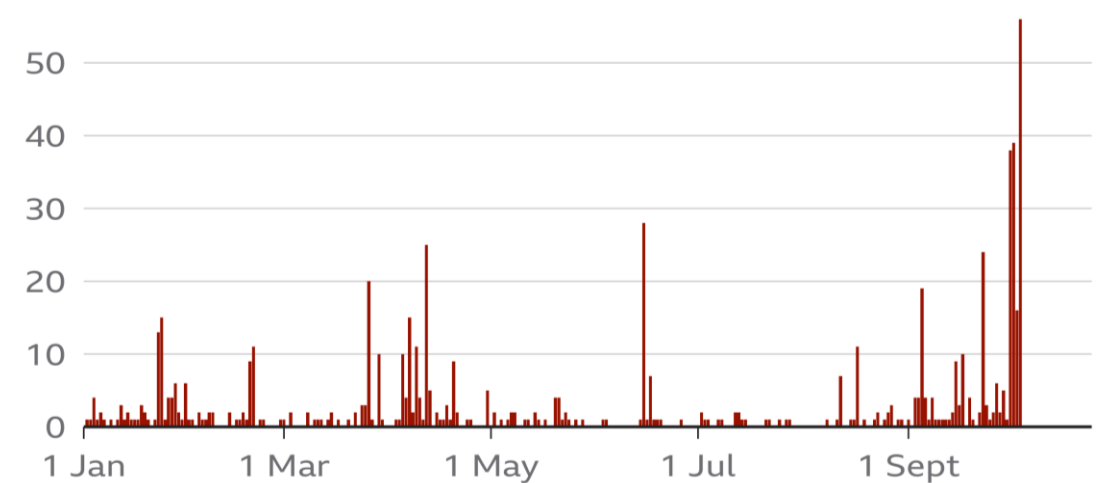


## USA, Japan, and the Defense of Taiwan

In 2021, China has intensified its rhetorical and policy intimidation of Taiwan, with record numbers of air force flights – part of Beijing’s warfare-adjacent “grey-zone” activity – into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone.<sup>1</sup> In the largest ever incursion, at least 38 Chinese aircraft flying in two waves crossed the island’s air defense zone in October of 2021, prompting the deployment of Taiwanese fighter jets.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 illustrates Chinese military jets’ incursions into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone, illustrating the escalation in the latter half of the year.

**Figure 1-** Chinese incursions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone, 2021

### Chinese military aircraft sorties reported this year



**Source:** Taiwan Ministry of National Defense

As a response to Beijing’s growing rhetorical and military intimidation, Taiwan passed an extra spending bill of \$8.6bn for 2022, on top of a record annual defense budget of about \$17bn.<sup>3</sup> J Michael Cole, a Taipei-based political and military analyst with the Canadian Macdonald-Laurier Institute, said in an interview, “[The extra spending bill] will also be welcomed by the United States, which often complains that Taiwan focuses too much on large conventional platforms at the detriment of smaller, more dispersible and less costly ‘asymmetrical’ capabilities.”<sup>4</sup>

## United States, Japan, and Security Policy vis-à-vis Taiwan

The United States (the U.S.) has no official ties with Taiwan; Washington’s relationship with Taipei is primarily driven by the *One China Policy* and the *Taiwan*

<sup>1</sup> Helen Davidson and Vincent Ni, “Fear of war dips in Taiwan despite rise in US-China tensions over island,” *The Guardian*, 14 January 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Al Jazeera, “Taiwan passes extra \$6.8bn defence budget as China threat grows,” 11 January 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

*Relations Act*, established in 1979. Following the establishment of diplomatic ties between Washington and Beijing, the U.S. began pursuing One China Policy, which is the diplomatic acknowledgement of China's position that there is only one China, and that Taiwan is part of China. The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act provides the legal basis for the unofficial relationship between the United States and Taiwan and enshrines the U.S. commitment to assist Taiwan in maintaining its defensive capability.<sup>5</sup>

As a concrete manifestation of this commitment, Washington has been selling billions of dollars' worth of weapons to Taiwan over the years. In 2020 alone, U.S. concluded \$5 billion worth of arms sales to Taiwan, including four aerial drones worth \$600 million, in the first such sale since U.S. policy on the export of sophisticated and closely guarded drone technology was loosened by the Trump administration.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, however, Washington does not support Taipei's formal independence and does not have a formal alliance with Taiwan, meaning that *it is not legally required to defend the island*. Put differently, Taiwan is *not* like Japan or South Korea, the countries U.S. has an alliance with and a formal obligation to provide military assistance in case they are attacked.

Like the U.S., Japan also has no formal or official ties with Taiwan. Indeed, foreign and defense ministers of Taiwan are prohibited from visiting Japan. At a basic level, a shared sense of strategic threat from Beijing unites Tokyo and Taipei, despite the lack of official diplomatic relations. In terms of coming to Taiwan's aid in case of an attack, *there is no formal or de jure pledge on the part of Japan to guarantee Taiwan's security* in the event of a cross-strait conflict.<sup>7</sup> De facto, however, as Thomas S. Wilkins, a Senior Lecturer in International Security at the University of Sydney argues, "Japan's own security and its commitments to the U.S. alliance ensure that in the extreme event that Taiwan's existence was seriously menaced, Tokyo would be virtually compelled to support Taipei."<sup>8</sup> This is because of Japan's geographical proximity to Taiwan, as well as the stationing of tens of thousands of American troops in Japan that would most likely be involved in the event of a cross-strait conflict. If American troops stationed in Japan come to Taiwan's aid and China retaliates against them, this would automatically trigger Article 5 of the Japan – U.S. Security Treaty, necessitating Tokyo's involvement.

When it comes to the role that the United States and Japan play in helping defend Taiwan, the primary onus is on Washington. Since 1979, the U.S. has pursued the policy of *strategic ambiguity*. Put simply, this policy means that Washington is neither confirming nor rejecting commitments to help Taiwan in case of unprovoked attack from China, to deter provocative action by both Beijing and Taipei. Due to the political sensitivity of the issue, there is very limited publicly available information on

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<sup>5</sup> Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Relations with Taiwan*, 31 August 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Reuters, "Timeline: U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in 2020 total \$5 billion amid China tensions," 8 December 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas S. Wilkins, "Taiwan-Japan Relations in an Era of Uncertainty," *Asia Policy*, Number 13 (January 2012), 116.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 117.

the policy similarities and differences U.S. allies and partners, including Japan, have in the event of China-Taiwan conflict. At the US–Japan leaders’ summit in April 2021, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and President Joe Biden emphasized “the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait” and encouraged “the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues.”<sup>9</sup> The reference to Taiwan was *the first such reference in a US–Japan joint leaders’ statement since 1972*, when Japan and China normalized their diplomatic relations.<sup>10</sup> This seems to reflect a consensus between the two sides on the issue of confronting Chinese potential aggression. However, despite the lack of publicly available information, it is highly unlikely that Japan would provide military assistance to Taiwan in the absence of U.S. assistance. Therefore, Washington’s involvement is a precondition for Japanese involvement in case of China’s attack against Taiwan. However, Huang Kwei-bo, a Professor of Diplomacy at the National Chengchi University and former KMT deputy director questioned the likelihood of U.S. assistance in case of an all-out Chinese attack, “I think they [i.e., the Taiwanese public] have illusion about our capability and the US commitment to help Taiwan.”<sup>11</sup>

## United States, Japan, and Security Assistance vis-à-vis Taiwan

In case Washington and Tokyo decide to provide military assistance to Taipei, what kind of security assistance will be provided? According to unnamed Japanese government sources, Japan and the U.S. military have drawn up a draft joint operation plan that would enable the setup of an attack base along the southwest Nansei island chain in the event of a Taiwan contingency.<sup>12</sup> Under the draft plan, U.S. Marines will set up a temporary attack base at the initial stage of contingency on the Nansei Islands, a chain stretching southwest from the prefectures of Kagoshima and Okinawa toward Taiwan.<sup>13</sup> In such a scenario, the U.S. military will deploy its high mobility artillery rocket system to a temporary base location while Japan will be tasked with logistical support by providing ammunition and fuel.<sup>14</sup> Due to its pacifist Constitution, Japan is limited in how it can deploy and organize its military, called the Self-Defense Force (SDF). As Sheila A. Smith, Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations argues with respect to Tokyo’s role, “Japan’s role would likely involve two distinct actions. First, Japan would be asked to provide support for US operations. Second, Japan’s Self-

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<sup>9</sup> The White House, U.S.-Japan Joint Leaders’ Statement: “U.S.- JAPAN GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR A NEW ERA,” 16 April, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Editorial Board, ANU, “The Taiwan factor in U.S.-Japan alliance relations,” *East Asia Forum*, 6 September 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Davidson and Vincent Ni, “Fear of war dips in Taiwan despite rise in US-China tensions over island.”

<sup>12</sup> *The Japan Times*, “Japan and U.S. draft operation plan for Taiwan contingency,” 23 December 2021.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

Defense Forces would need to consider how best to defend Japanese territory during a conflict.”<sup>15</sup>

The cause and scale of Chinese attack is also likely to shape U.S. and Japanese response. If Beijing conducts a massive amphibious assault of the main Taiwan island, this is more likely to invite regional response and potential Japanese participation. This is because Beijing's control of Taiwan means that it could use the island as a forward operating base to put added pressure on Japan regarding the ongoing territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.<sup>16</sup> In addition, China's control of Taiwan would mean that Beijing could also threaten Japanese maritime trade routes and its dependence on foreign energy imports. Therefore, given the geographic proximity and the 50,000 or so U.S. troops stationed in Japan, Tokyo is the U.S. ally most likely to intervene in any Taiwanese contingency. However, the use of Self-Defense Forces to aid Taiwan would still have to meet three conditions in line with the 2015 Japan's security law: (1) that the Chinese attack “threatens Japan's survival and poses a clear danger to fundamentally overrun people's right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness,” (2) “there is no other appropriate means available to repel the attack and ensure Japan's survival and protection of its people,” and (3) “the use of force will be limited to the minimal extent necessary.”<sup>17</sup> Chinese full-scale invasion of the island is the only scenario likely to meet these requirements.

## United States and Military Adjustments in the Indo-Pacific Region

In line with China's growing military assertiveness, Washington has made adjustments in its military deployment, including in the Indo-Pacific region. In November 2021, the U.S. Department of Defense concluded 2021 Global Posture Review (GPR), mapping out the US military's global deployments and troop adjustments. While the full document remains classified, the Pentagon has listed the Indo-Pacific region as a priority and called for U.S. military infrastructure changes in Australia and the Pacific Islands. Washington's shift of priorities to the Indo-Pacific plays an important role, especially because this region differs from the European theatre in size, its maritime character, and the fact that the US does not have a comparably dense and institutionalized network of allies there as it has in Europe.<sup>18</sup>

Specifically in the Indo-Pacific region, the review directs additional cooperation with allies and partners to advance initiatives that contribute to regional stability and deter potential Chinese military aggression and threats from North Korea.<sup>19</sup> These

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<sup>15</sup> Sheila A. Smith, “Japan leans forward on China-Taiwan tensions,” East Asia Forum, 5 September 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Bonny Lin, *U.S. Allied and Partner Support for Taiwan: Responses to a Chinese Attack on Taiwan and Potential U.S. Taiwan Policy Changes*, RAND Corporation, 18 February 2021, 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Marco Overhaus, *The Biden Administration's Global Posture Review*, SWP, 20 December 2021.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *DoD Concludes 2021 Global Posture Review*, 29 November

initiatives include seeking greater regional access for military partnership activities, enhancing infrastructure in Australia and the Pacific Islands, and planning rotational aircraft deployments in Australia.<sup>20</sup> The GPR also calls for the permanent stationing of a previously-rotational attack helicopter squadron and artillery division headquarters in South Korea, announced earlier this year.<sup>21</sup> In line with this overall strategy, President Biden also announced the creation of a trilateral security partnership with Australia and Britain, known as AUKUS, that seeks to bolster the countries' military presence and co-ordination in the region. As Margarita Konaev, associate director of analysis and research fellow at Georgetown's Centre for Security and Emerging Technology put it in relation to these changes, "[It is] a shift away from counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism operations in the Middle East, towards a strategic competition with China, primarily in the Indo-Pacific."<sup>22</sup> While Washington will maintain its strategic presence in Europe and Latin America, the bulk of forces and military posture will likely be directed towards Indo-Pacific due to the continued rise in threat from peer competitors Russia and China.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

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