

# Nuclear Escalation Control in a Taiwan Strait Crisis:

*Opportunities for Japan-U.S.-Taiwan Cooperation*

A Tabletop Exercise

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INSTITUTE FOR

**INDO-PACIFIC SECURITY**

# About the Organizations



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The Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF), established in 1986, has worked since its inception to advance international exchange and cooperation. SPF leverages the unique freedom granted by its status as a private foundation to explore innovative solutions and approaches for addressing a wide range of issues facing the world today in partnership with a diverse community of both domestic and international collaborators.



The Prospect Foundation (Chinese: 遠景基金會) is a nonprofit organization based in Taiwan, established in 1997, which aims to analyze the relations across the Taiwan Strait, international politics and economy, and provide suggestions of policies for the Taiwanese government.



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# Foreword

The rapid modernization of China's military has raised concerns about the People's Republic of China's (PRC, China) ability to threaten Taiwan and the wider Indo-Pacific region. Qualitative and quantitative advancements in the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) naval and air forces have made them a growing threat to their U.S. counterparts. Meanwhile, significant investments in nuclear forces are giving Beijing new ways in which to coerce potential adversaries and shape escalation in a conflict.

These investments in Chinese military capabilities are bearing fruit as 2027, the year by which Xi Jinping ordered the PLA to be ready to invade Taiwan, approaches. Mid-century, the timeframe in which Xi has promised to complete "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," is only two decades away—not that far off considering Beijing, Taipei, and Washington have been kicking the can down the road since 1949. But Xi, already 72 years old, may not have two decades left to make his mark. With a number of politically significant dates around the corner—for example, the 21st Party Congress and the 100th anniversary of the PLA in 2027, Taiwan presidential elections in 2028, the 80th anniversary of the PRC in 2029—Xi may soon assess the time is right to finalize unification with Taiwan.

In light of the growing urgency of the threat posed by China, the Institute for Indo-Pacific Security, the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, and the Prospect Foundation conducted a tabletop exercise to explore whether Japan, the United States, and Taiwan are prepared for a crisis that may be coming down the pike. Centered on a series of fictional and escalatory gray zone activities and nuclear signaling taking place in 2028, the exercise was designed to develop mutual understandings of views on Chinese threats in the Taiwan Strait among experienced Japan, U.S., and Taiwan national security practitioners. The exercise had three primary objectives:

- Understand the potential interests, goals, ambitions, and restraints for Japan, the United States, and Taiwan in the Taiwan Strait area;
- Identify each country's unique vulnerabilities in managing a crisis in the Taiwan Strait; and
- Explore the opportunities for, and means of, bilateral and trilateral cooperation among Japan, Taiwan, and the United States.

The high-stress, pre-conflict scenario was divided into three moves with opportunities for the control team to introduce additional developments to challenge participants. The participants were divided into three teams representing Japan, the United States, and Taiwan and asked to categorize their policies using the Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Economic, Financial, Intelligence, and Law Enforcement (DIMEFIL) framework. This report provides key highlights and takeaways from the exercise.

# Executive Summary and Policy Recommendations

In light of the growing urgency of the threat posed by China, the Institute for Indo-Pacific Security, the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, and the Prospect Foundation conducted a table-top exercise designed to develop mutual understandings of views on Chinese threats in the Taiwan Strait among experienced Japan, U.S., and Taiwan national security practitioners.

- **Move 1: Taiwan Election Disruption** opened on January 15, 2028. China-linked power outages and cyberattacks left thousands unable to vote in Taiwan's presidential and legislative elections, and incumbent President Lai Ching-te won with a plurality. This led to mass protests in Taiwan fueled by Chinese information operations. All three teams sought to maintain the status quo, ensure domestic stability in Taiwan, and avoid escalation. The control team introduced provocative statements from China, Russia's declaration of support for China, and North Korea's use of diversionary tactics against South Korea and Japan. The Taiwan and Japan teams increased defense readiness and the U.S. team stated that their Article V commitments to Japan extended to space and cyberspace.
- **Move 2: Chinese Provocation and Presidential Absence** opened months later, after the re-inauguration of President Lai. With Lai transiting the United States, the PLA announced Joint Sword 2028 exercises, mimicking a blockade around Taiwan. China also sailed aircraft carrier groups into waters between Taiwan and America's nearest allies (Japan and the Philippines) and announced a concurrent patrol with Russia. The Taiwan team decided that Lai would return as scheduled with U.S. support, and that they would call for the blockade to end within 72 hours. The control team allowed President Lai's plane to land, with Chinese fighter jets "escorting" Lai's escorts. Otherwise, China continued to escalate tensions, with the most serious development being the placement of a radar installation on Taiwan's uninhabited Mianhua Islet. The Japan team reacted strongly to the incident, deploying Ground Self-Defense forces to the Sakishima Islands in southwest Japan and threatening to establish formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan.
- **Move 3: Chinese Nuclear Posturing** opened days later, with continuing exercises and heightened nuclear threats from China and North Korea. All teams increased their defense readiness, and the Taiwan and Japan teams sought greater protection under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The Japan team also declassified intelligence on China's military activities and announced that China was preparing

China's military activities and announced that China was preparing for war. The U.S. publicly reassured allies of their deterrence commitments and privately sent an emissary to warn China of the consequences of continued aggression. The control group introduced heightened Chinese nuclear threats and posture. Across Eurasia, Russia began conducting a military buildup along its borders with Latvia and Estonia. The implicit threat to use nuclear weapons against Taiwan pushed all three teams towards embracing changes to the status quo and to thinking seriously about how to reshape the region post-crisis to strengthen deterrence of China. At the same time, all three underscored their firm resolve not to accept unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

Over the course of gameplay, alliances and partnerships not only held together, but arguably strengthened. The Japan and U.S. teams were both willing to go to great lengths to defend Taiwanese interests. However, team responses often required ad hoc cooperation that would be difficult to pull off in the real world. There were hints at potential friction points. For example, the U.S. team disagreed with the Taiwan and Japan teams about whether official diplomatic relations or recognition of Taiwanese independence should be options under consideration. They also left unanswered Japanese requests to deploy nuclear weapons to Japan.

## Recommendations

### Strategic Cooperation

- Establish a standing trilateral track 1.5 dialogue to foster high-level strategic discussions between a consortium of think tanks from each of the three countries. This discussion should focus on desired end states in the Indo-Pacific and nuclear issues.
- Begin including Taiwan in at least certain aspects of the existing Japan-U.S. extended deterrence dialogue. Taiwan's leaders would benefit from a deeper understanding of U.S. nuclear strategy and policy and of allied nuclear fears. American and Japanese leaders would likewise do well to learn how Taiwan thinks about managing a crisis under the nuclear shadow.

### Practical Cooperation

- *Information Sharing.* Japan, the United States, and Taiwan should commit to direct sharing of information, beginning at lower levels of classification, with the ultimate goal of establishing a manned, trilateral fusion center to be activated as needed.
- *Crisis Management.* Japan, the United States, and Taiwan should establish a contact group with assigned leadership and advisory roles. Importantly, the contact group should run regular crisis exercises in which it tests and hones its real-world capabilities.
- *Combined Training.* Trilateral joint training is necessary beforehand if the trilateral joint operations conducted in this exercise are to be carried out safely and effectively.
- *Interoperable Command & Control (C2).* Whether sharing information, coordinating policy, or training together, all three countries will need to operate on

coordinating policy, or training together, all three countries will need to operate on a shared network.

For Japan and Taiwan in particular, these steps will be radical when compared to the current baseline. Leaders, policymakers, and officers in all three countries should be prepared to move slowly—but they must start to move. Xi Jinping has Taiwan in his sights. Deeper trilateral cooperation now will help ensure that he never pulls the trigger.

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# Move 1: Taiwan Election Disruption

*Move 1 opens on January 15, 2028, with a Taiwanese presidential and legislative election. Power outages and cyberattacks, which initial attribution links to China, leave thousands unable to vote, but the threshold to reschedule the election is not met, so the election continues. Incumbent President Lai Ching-te wins the election with a plurality of votes. Foreign observers assess the elections to be free, fair, and conducted in accordance with Taiwanese election law, but domestic discontent over the legitimacy of the election rises, leading to mass protests. China employs aggressive information operations to stoke the discontent, declares that the Democratic Progressive Party stole the election, and invokes the Anti-Secession Law.*

## Box 1. The Anti-Secession Law

In 2005, the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China (PRC) passed the Anti-Secession Law, which provides a legal basis for the PRC's use of force against Taiwan:

- **Article 8.** In the event that the "Taiwan independence" secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan's secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan's secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> National People's Congress, "Anti-Secession Law" (2005), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004\\_2009/documents/fd/d-cn2005042601/d-cn2005042601en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/fd/d-cn2005042601/d-cn2005042601en.pdf).

All three teams assessed that the circumstances were serious but manageable. Each team sought to maintain the status quo (a phrase that went largely undefined during gameplay), ensure domestic stability in Taiwan, and avert cross-Strait escalation.

To do so, Taiwan adopted a framework that would guide its actions throughout the exercise: inward, "China-ward," and outward. The Taiwan team's foremost objective was to preserve the legitimacy of the government. Inwardly, the Taiwan team focused

on political reconciliation and countering disinformation and evinced a determination to proceed with the presidential inauguration on the normal schedule. Financially, the Taiwan team prepared to activate the National Stabilization Fund to maintain market operations. Towards China, the Taiwan team adopted a posture welcoming cross-Strait dialogue without preconditions. It eschewed taking steps in the military domain to avoid further raising tensions, but the Mainland Affairs Council condemned China's post-election information operations and accused Beijing of attempting to undermine Taiwan's social stability through disinformation campaigns. Outwardly, the Taiwan team employed diplomacy to seek recognition of the legitimacy of the recent election. The team also sought cooperation with U.S. and Japanese intelligence agencies to investigate foreign interference and disinformation activities and proposed intelligence sharing on concerning maritime developments.

To maintain the status quo, ensure domestic stability in Taiwan, and avert cross-Strait escalation, the U.S. team employed diplomatic and information tools, with military signaling designed to underscore American concern. It issued a statement supporting Taiwan's ability to resolve internal unrest on its own and coordinated with allies to communicate to China that nothing that happened in Taiwan crossed a threshold justifying Chinese intervention. The U.S. team also offered to contribute U.S. capabilities to improve Taiwan's cyber integrity and counter disinformation. It would investigate the power outage and go public with the results.

From the start of the crisis, even as it began lending support to Taiwan, the U.S. team prioritized ensuring that there was no daylight between Washington and Tokyo. It also sought to initiate trilateral cooperation, suggesting the establishment of a contact group and, short of that, an information fusion cell through which Japan, the United States, and Taiwan would cooperatively counter China in the information space.

The objective of the Japan team was to maintain the status quo and prevent escalation. It threw its diplomatic weight behind Taiwan, adopting messaging consistent with America's, and offered to cooperate with both countries on cybersecurity. The Japan team saw the invocation of the Anti-Secession Law as directly impacting its security and urged the United States to make explicit commitments regarding the defense of Japan and the Senkaku Islands. It requested activation of the Alliance Coordination Mechanism and Bilateral Planning Mechanism and sought clarification from the United States on any plans to use Japanese territory in the event of a military contingency. The Japan team also began to prepare economic sanctions and tariffs that could be used on China at a later date.

**Move 1b:** *As the Japan, U.S., and Taiwan teams ramped up coordination, additional developments complicated the crisis. Qiushi, the CCP's theoretical journal and news magazine, published an article by Xi Jinping stating that Taiwan has "always been part of China." A Taiwanese pro-China news outlet, Zhongtian, reported that there has been a surge of Taiwanese businessmen residing in China that are renouncing their Taiwanese citizenship. Meanwhile, beyond the Taiwan Strait, Russia issued a*

*statement declaring that it stands with China in its efforts to fight separatism and North Korea sent trash balloons over the inter-Korean border and launched a satellite on a rocket that overflew Japan.*

While each team still primarily focused on using diplomatic levers, they also took more steps in the military realm. The Taiwan team took the Qiushi essay very seriously, and other teams followed suit. The Taiwan team requested that intelligence-sharing channels between Taiwan and Japan be upgraded and expanded to allow for direct high-level exchanges; they worried that Japanese intelligence reports passed through INDOPACOM would be delayed. They also requested that the U.S. team accelerate and increase deliveries of military equipment, munitions, and essential defense supplies to Taiwan and assist in engaging Japan and the Philippines in opening bases or logistical facilities to Taiwanese assets.

The Japan team implemented budgetary measures to enhance combat readiness, strengthen surveillance systems, and heighten vigilance against North Korean ballistic missiles. They along with the U.S. team agreed to have more robust trilateral engagement with South Korea to monitor North Korea. Despite the intrusion of Russia and North Korea in the crisis, the Japan team's primary focus remained on developments in the Taiwan Strait.

The U.S. team was unsurprised by Russian support for China, North Korean diversionary tactics, and additional Chinese information operations. Like the Japan team, it continued to keep its focus on the Taiwan Strait. The United States not only offered its cyber forensics capabilities to debunk the Taiwanese businessmen rumor but also began to message the United States' offensive cyber capabilities.

Although all three teams sought to maintain the peace, each began taking modest steps to prepare for and signal its readiness for escalation. Both the Japan and Taiwan teams increased defense readiness and the U.S. team publicly stated that America's Article V obligations to Japan apply in space and cyberspace.

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## Move 2: Chinese Provocation and Presidential Absence

*Months have passed since the election (Move 1), and President Lai has been re-inaugurated. Domestic political tensions are still simmering. On the way home from his first state visit to Taiwan's diplomatic allies in the Caribbean, President Lai stops in New York to give a speech at a U.S. think tank and meet with the U.S. House Speaker. While Lai is in the United States, the PLA Eastern Theater Command announces that Joint Sword 2028, a live-fire exercise around Taiwan, will start early the next day. It will entail a series of air and sea "exclusion zones" declared outside of the ports of Keelung, Taipei, Taichung, Kaohsiung, and Su'ao, and will block the approaches to Taoyuan and Songshan airports, mimicking a blockade around Taiwan. The PLA has announced that to ensure the safe passage of civilian maritime and air traffic to Taiwan, ships and aircraft must be processed in either Hong Kong or Shanghai before being given permission to proceed through the declared exclusion zones. President Lai does not have time to return to Taiwan before the exercise; his return flight would have to traverse the de facto air blockade. Chinese aircraft carrier groups are already sailing between Taiwan and the American allies in the vicinity, Japan and the Philippines. China has also announced a concurrent but "unrelated" joint naval patrol with Russia.*

All three teams saw these developments as representing a serious escalation, with Taiwan adopting a more assertive posture, Japan seeing direct threats to its security interests, and the United States preparing to intervene directly.

The Taiwan team again employed its "inward, 'China-ward,' outward" formula. The Taiwan team decided that President Lai will return to Taiwan as scheduled, which it saw as necessary for the proper functioning of government and for asserting its sovereignty, while requesting that the Japan and U.S. teams assist with necessary logistical and security support. The Taiwan team asked that Japan make Okinawa available as an alternate landing site in case it becomes clear that Lai's safety is at risk, a request to which the Japan team agreed. The Taiwan team also decided to issue statements for domestic and international audiences that it will take steps to ensure air and maritime travel are secure and safe.

Towards China, the Taiwan team sought to avoid giving China a pretext for escalation,

at least initially. It said it would refrain from publicly calling the exercise a blockade and would instruct the Air Force and Navy to accommodate the exclusion zones to the greatest extent possible while closely monitoring the situation. Coast Guard assets would take primary responsibility for maritime security during the exercise and would be tasked with securing maritime corridors to Kaohsiung and Keelung. All the while, Taiwan would be preparing counter-blockade measures and consulting with Japan and the United States regarding Taiwan's contingency plans. If the exercise continued for more than 72 hours, the Taiwan team would consider it a blockade, call for its end, and test it with Coast Guard vessels.

The Japan and U.S. teams agreed that keeping Taiwan open for business was the top priority. Both were prepared for direct intervention. The U.S. team decided to escort Lai's plane to within 12 nautical miles of Taiwan's territorial waters, with the Japan team agreeing to provide support for the operation as necessary. Both teams evinced a willingness to, in cooperation with Taiwan, secure trade routes for commercial ships via convoying and to reflag vessels if necessary. The Japan team explicitly recognized and accepted the risk that its naval vessels might be fired upon. Together with other partners, the Japan and U.S. teams also resolved to shadow the China-Russia naval transit and keep watch on North Korea.

The Japan and U.S. teams also began using economic tools. The Japan team announced it would provide support for commercial enterprises requiring shipping insurance, premiums for which were expected to rise significantly. The U.S. team, meanwhile, began sanctioning Chinese elites and high-tech exports.

**Move 2b:** *China allowed President Lai's plane to land, with Chinese fighter jets "escorting" Lai's escorts to "avoid any accidental violence." Even so, Beijing adopted an escalatory posture. China's Coast Guard detained a Taiwanese fishing vessel just outside the territorial waters surrounding Kinmen during "maritime law enforcement activities." More troubling, China briefly occupied and established a radar installation on Taiwan's uninhabited Mianhua Islet northeast of Keelung. China ramped up diplomatic pressure, too, with eight of Taiwan's twelve remaining diplomatic allies severing ties with Taiwan. Beijing also responded to Japanese intervention in the crisis, imposing a complete embargo on the export to Japan of all rare earth elements and using information operations to support Japanese peace activists, who began protesting outside of American bases in Japan. North Korea continued its diversionary tactics, shelling outlying South Korean islands and refusing to engage with Seoul.*

All teams agreed that the most serious development was the installation of a Chinese radar on Mianhua Islet. The Taiwan team said it would destroy or remove the radar installation and arrest and charge any personnel found on the island. The U.S. team indicated a willingness to support Taiwan in the effort, though Taiwan was intent on acting alone. The Japan team saw the Mianhua seizure as highly threatening, with direct security implications for the Senkakus and southern Japanese islands. The

Japan team demanded China withdraw from Mianhua Islet and declared a "crisis situation threatening national survival."<sup>2</sup> It would deploy Ground Self-Defense forces to the Sakishima Islands in southwest Japan. The Japan team also suggested Japan would establish diplomatic relations with Taiwan if China did not take measures to withdraw, noting that China was not pursuing peaceful unification in accordance with the 1972 China-Japan agreement on normalization.

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<sup>2</sup> Days before this exercise, Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae, in response to a question received during an appearance before the Diet, said a naval blockade of Taiwan could constitute a "survival-threatening situation" for Japan.

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## Move 3: Chinese Nuclear Posturing

*Move 3 begins days later, with Joint Sword 2028 continuing with no end in sight. China has responded to increased tensions with Japan and the United States by warning external countries not to interfere in "China's internal affairs," stating that China will use "whatever means necessary to protect its sovereignty," in what seems to be a thinly veiled threat to use nuclear weapons. China has started to mobilize its nuclear and conventional forces, raising the PLA Combat Readiness Level to 2. Leadership and military-to-military level communications with Japan, the United States, and Taiwan have been cut off completely. U.S. intelligence indicates that leave has been canceled for all PLA Rocket Force personnel, and some of China's road-mobile medium-range (MRBM) and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), most of which are nuclear-capable, are on the move. The PLA Rocket Force's DF-26 and DF-17 MRBMs are on standby. DF-5 class and DF-31 class missile operators have been put on alert. Similarly, the first new PLA Navy-operated Type 096 ballistic nuclear submarine (SSBN) has gone on its maiden patrol, joining a number of older JIN-class SSBNs that have just put to sea.*

*The Japanese government faces growing peace protests, Chinese information warfare campaigns, and Chinese cyberattacks; the latter have shut down functions at Japan's power plants, substations, and distribution facilities and have created traffic signal outages, which have led to five motorist deaths. North Korea announces it has successfully conducted an underground nuclear weapons test.*

Although all three teams maintained their initial shared objectives—to maintain the status quo, ensure domestic stability in Taiwan, and avert cross-Strait escalation—all three recognized circumstances had changed significantly. They were accordingly willing to take significant steps, arguably designed to begin shaping the escalation that was already underway.

The Taiwan team stated that the Coast Guard would expel unauthorized vessels within 24 nautical miles of the coastline and ignore everything beyond that. The Taiwan team also decided to raise military readiness and enhance civilian protection measures, but without mobilizing troops. Alarmed by China's nuclear signaling, the Taiwan team privately informed the United States that China may be considering the use of nuclear weapons, noting that Beijing's evolving nuclear posture suggests the possibility of a

first-strike policy even against a non-nuclear state. Most striking, the Taiwan team said it would request inclusion in the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

The Japan team issued a Defense Operation Standby Order and requested that the United States move bombers to Japan and begin discussions about improving the effectiveness of extended deterrence. It decided to revise the Three Non-Nuclear Principles to allow the introduction of U.S. nuclear weapons to Japanese soil. The Japan team said it would use conventional forces to balance nuclear threats. It also announced they would declassify intelligence on China's military activities and announce that China is preparing for war.

The U.S. team stated it would publicly message that Taiwan is not pursuing independence; that it will abide by extended deterrence commitments, including the nuclear umbrella; and that China is moving to a war footing. In private, the U.S. team would send a trusted presidential emissary to China with the message that China had already conducted two acts of war—the de facto blockade of Taiwan and the cyberattack on Japan, for which the United States would invoke Article V— that the United States is prepared to honor all commitments to Japan, and that all options are on the table for coming to Taiwan's aid under the Taiwan Relations Act. The U.S. team decided to disperse troops, move forward logistics and maintenance capabilities, and posture for operation plans relating to the defense of Taiwan. It would also reveal some nuclear weapons capabilities in the region.

**Move 3b:** *The crisis continued to take on a nuclear character. China stated that "even the threat of annihilation would not deter the Chinese people from achieving their historical destiny in reunifying Taiwan with the mainland," and a PLARF commander with the Eastern Theater Command asserted that China's nuclear "no first use" principle does not apply to "internal conflicts" or "imperial puppet-masters"—a pejorative term aimed at Taiwan's foreign backers such as Japan and the United States. Meanwhile, U.S. naval forces lost track of a Chinese Type-096 ballistic missile submarine. North Korea's Sinpo-C class ballistic missile submarine put to sea. Russia began conducting a military buildup along its borders with Latvia and Estonia.*

The implicit threat to use nuclear weapons against Taiwan pushed all three teams towards embracing changes to the status quo—and to thinking seriously about how to reshape the region post-crisis. While again requesting inclusion in the American nuclear umbrella, the Taiwan team threatened to use its own "nuclear bomb," declaring formal independence, if China used nuclear weapons against Taiwan.

The Japan team stated it would start multilateral coordination to deter the change of the status quo in Europe and East Asia. The U.S. team began preparing allies in Europe and South Korea to take the lead on handling Russian and North Korean threats, respectively, as the United States focused its energies on China.

Both the Japan and U.S. teams began developing initiatives to shape the post-crisis regional order and ensure that the result for China was a significant strategic setback.

# Key Takeaways

The scenario was designed to highlight potentially divergent interests among the three countries and thus complicate efforts at cooperation. In the course of gameplay, however, alliances and partnerships not only held together, but arguably strengthened. All three teams struggled to respond to gray zone challenges, but did not have trouble staying on the same page to do so. The Taiwan team was seemingly surprised by the lengths to which Japan and the U.S. teams were willing to go to defend Taiwanese interests. What is more, neither the emergence of threats from Russia and North Korea nor Japan's legal limitations significantly inhibited the Japan team from providing significant, tangible support to the United States.

Indeed, the Japan team's decisions made clear that, at least for some Japanese national security elites, Taiwan's security is intimately tied up with Japan's own. The urgency of the Japan team's reaction to the installation of a Chinese radar on Mianhua Islet, which surprised the other country teams and the control team, made this manifest. Russian and North Korean provocations were tolerable; the action at Mianhua, less than 90 miles (145 kilometers) from both Yonaguni island and the Senkakus, was not.

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that cooperation would be smooth or easy in the event of a crisis or conflict. Throughout the course of the exercise, team responses required ad hoc cooperation—from jointly combating disinformation to a variety of combined military operations—that would be difficult to pull off in the real world. The spirit might be willing, but the body is weak, at least as of now. To enable effective, seamless integration of capabilities when that integration is needed, Japan, Taiwan, and the United States should begin preparing now.

There were hints at potential friction points as well. Even as the three teams were broadly aligned on short-term aims and the means to achieve them, there were important differences on some major policy goals. During the exercise, the Taiwan team threatened China with declaring independence and Japan threatened to recognize it, but the United States made no similar moves. In the post-exercise discussion of how to shape a post-crisis regional order, the Taiwan team raised the potential establishment of diplomatic relations with Japan and the United States. The U.S. team was highly doubtful such an option would or should be under consideration.

There were potential differences between Japan and the United States as well, though they did not openly emerge during gameplay itself. In the first move, the Japan team asked whether the United States had plans to bring nuclear weapons to Japan, an inquiry that went unanswered. When, in Move 3, the Japan team revised the three non-nuclear principles to allow U.S. nuclear weapons in Japan, the United States did not act on the policy change nor even endorse the new policy. Given longstanding reluctance to return U.S. nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula, it stands to reason that a revision of the three non-nuclear principles might introduce tensions to the Japan-U.S. alliance that do not currently exist.

The bottom line is that, on major and relatively minor questions alike, dialogue and action are needed now to prepare for a potential crisis in the Taiwan Strait and to lay the groundwork for reshaping regional order in the wake of a confrontation in the Indo-Pacific.

## Recommendations

A consortium of think tanks from each of the three countries should establish a standing trilateral track 1.5 dialogue framework to foster high-level strategic discussions. Initially, parallel discussions would focus on desired end states in the Indo-Pacific and nuclear issues. In regular "end state" talks, participants would explore a broad spectrum of potential ways in which the three countries might like to shape the Taiwan Strait and the Indo-Pacific in the years to come and in what ways the region would need to change in the aftermath of a crisis. Holding these discussions now would help to narrow potential differences among the allies once a crisis emerges and would be conducive to more effective policymaking as the crisis plays out.

Although many of the nuclear issues up for discussion are bilateral in nature—how can Japan and the United States work together to strengthen the effectiveness of the U.S. nuclear umbrella?—it is important that both countries begin including Taiwan in at least certain aspects of the existing Japan-U.S. extended deterrence dialogues. Taiwan may or may not face direct nuclear threats, but it will be operating in an environment shaped by nuclear dynamics and in which its primary ally will face direct threats of nuclear use, implicit or otherwise. Taiwan's leaders would benefit from a deeper understanding of U.S. nuclear strategy and policy and of allied nuclear fears. American and Japanese leaders would likewise do well to learn how Taiwan thinks about managing a crisis under the nuclear shadow.

Even as the allies explore greater strategic coordination, they should develop new means of practical cooperation as well. Four areas are ripe for consideration:

- **Information Sharing.** At present, information sharing is relatively stove-piped. Japan and Taiwan, in particular, have limited information sharing arrangements. As such, the United States currently acts as a clearinghouse, an arrangement which is cumbersome. The three parties should commit to direct sharing of information, beginning at lower levels of classification, with the ultimate goal of establishing a manned, trilateral fusion center to be activated as needed.

- **Crisis Management.** If a crisis erupts tomorrow and the three countries want to coordinate responses, where does that coordination happen? Who is responsible for effecting it? These are questions best resolved before trouble hits. Japan, the United States, and Taiwan should establish a contact group with assigned leadership and advisory roles. Importantly, the contact group should run regular crisis exercises in which it tests and hones its real-world capabilities.
- **Combined Training.** Japanese and U.S. forces train together regularly, the U.S. and Taiwanese militaries infrequently, and Japanese and Taiwanese forces not at all. Yet this exercise involved Japan and the United States providing air escort for the Taiwanese presidential plane, presumably in cooperation with Taiwan's Air Force. It also entailed the Japanese and American navies opening maritime corridors in or around which Taiwan's Coast Guard would be operating as well. Trilateral military training is necessary beforehand if operations such as these are to be carried out safely and effectively.
- **Interoperable Command & Control (C2).** Whether sharing information, coordinating policy, or training together, all three countries will need to operate on a shared network. They cannot do so at present. Of course, such a network would enable combined operations during wartime as well—making possible the types of collaborative actions the Japan, U.S., and Taiwan teams opted for during this exercise.

None of this will be easy. For Japan and Taiwan in particular, these steps will be radical when compared to the current baseline. Leaders, policymakers, and officers in all three countries should be prepared to move slowly—but they must start to move. Xi Jinping has Taiwan in his sights. Deeper trilateral cooperation now will help ensure that he never pulls the trigger.



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