

Policy Recommendations on the Taiwan Issue

Japan's Greatest Challenge is How to Avoid War Involving Taiwan

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Centered around the competition for military superiority between the United States and China, the security environment in East Asia is destabilizing. As the possibility of China using force against Taiwan is under discussion, the United States is aiming to build a new military posture to prevent it. From the U.S. perspective, Taiwan is a symbol of democracy, while on the other hand, for China, Taiwan is a symbol of national unification. Therefore, as there is no room for compromise, there is a fear of war between the two countries.

A war between superpowers, such as the United States and China, would destroy the world economy. Today's economy relies on a network of supply and finance that transcends national borders. A war between the United States and China would not be limited to land, sea, and air; it would also physically and psychologically destroy the global economic network through the destruction and chaos of space and cyberspace.

The world has never experienced such war, and no one can accurately predict its impact. However, at the very least, it is certain that there will be no winner in this war and that it will result in the destruction of both the Chinese dream of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and US hopes to rebuild and strengthen its domestic economy and global leadership.

Furthermore, the firing of missiles will turn the entire region into a battlefield, which would lead to many soldiers and civilians losing their lives. It is unlikely that public opinion in the United States, China, and Japan, as well as the international community, would allow such a loss of lives. It is also inevitable that Japan will suffer damage from this missile war because of its proximity to Taiwan and its role as a host for US military bases.

Some people in Japan take it for granted that Japan will participate in the defense of Taiwan along with the United States. However, defending Taiwan would mean going to war with China, and it is hard to believe that Japanese citizens are prepared to do so. One cannot help but be concerned that a part of the public opinion is influenced by militant discussions that do not consider the costs of war and the prospects for peace and order after the war is over.

As there are rising concerns about the Taiwan Strait the greatest challenge is, “how to avoid war between the U.S. and China,” not only for Japan’s national security but to all countries concerned, including Taiwan.

Do Not Underestimate the Risk of a US-China War

Many people believe that the U.S. and China will never go to war because of the significant costs of war and the possibility of disastrous consequences with no winner. However, history has taught us that when two countries, full of mistrust and hostility, continue to provoke each other politically and militarily, minor conflicts caused by errors and misunderstandings may escalate into major wars.

In recent years, China has strengthened its military capabilities and increased military pressure to support reunification of Taiwan, while the United States has strengthened its countermeasures. Recently, the United States adopted policies to support Taiwan that may violate the “one China policy.” China signaled its dissatisfaction with these policies through provocative military action. The two have created a vicious cycle that the United States is using to provide Taiwan with weapons and strengthen its military posture.

In a telephone conversation with President Xi Jinping, President Joe Biden signaled he wanted to put on the brakes so “competition does not veer into conflict.” However, there have been no significant changes in the actions of both sides. There is still a risk of conflict occurring due to errors or misunderstandings. Political and military restraint from both the United States and China is needed.

The more Japan recognizes these risks, the more the discussion in Japan tends to lean towards military deterrence rather than requesting the United States and China exercise restraint.

Peacefully Resolve and Avoid Future Conflict with Taiwan

No one would disagree with a peaceful resolution of the issues in Taiwan. However, the reality is that most Taiwanese citizens do not desire to be reunited with China and that China will not change its desire for the reunification of Taiwan. Moreover, the further the possibility of a peaceful reunification gets, the more China is left with no choice but to resort to strong measures.

The coexistence between both sides have been maintained through a delicate understanding of the “One China policy”. Therefore, in the short term, the recognition of the “one China policy” and the “non-support for Taiwan’s independence” is necessary for a peaceful resolution regarding the Taiwan issue. In the medium term, all countries involved must act prudently to avoid creating a situation in which China has no other option but to use the force.

In the long term, the Taiwan issue can only be resolved by China and Taiwan. There is no reason not to believe in the wisdom of the next generation. However, because we do not have that wisdom now, the greatest mission for political leaders of the countries involved is to continue avoiding war.

Japan must adhere to its agreement in the 1972 Japan-China Joint Communique, which states that Japan “understands and respects China’s position” on Taiwan. Japan must also request both the United States and China to exercise restraint while continuing to express Japan’s position that “a war that could destroy the world must be avoided.”

Deterrence with Reassurance

The logic of deterrence is to make the opponent who is contemplating war aware of one’s ability and willingness to inflict damage that outweigh the perceived gains of war. If China believes that “the independence of Taiwan would undermine the core interests of the Communist Party rule and cannot be tolerated at any cost,” it would be difficult to deter China with military superiority alone. It is essential to leave room for the opposing side to believe that “even without the use of force, its core interests will not be threatened.” In other words, reassurance is also needed.

In the case of the conflict over Taiwan, the 1972 political decision on the “non-support of Taiwan’s independence” serves as reassurance to China.

The purpose of deterrence is to discourage China’s use of force. The heart of the issue is a growing Taiwanese desire for independence. China has been constantly strengthening its armed forces and has expressed the possibility of using force to prevent independence. On the other hand, the U.S. is “changing the political status quo” by strengthening political relations with Taiwan and gradually treating Taiwan as an independent country. This is further provoking China into further expanding

its military capability to prevent independence. To keep deterrence from escalating endlessly, the addition of reassurance on non-support for independence is essential.

Japan taking actions to change the existing political relationship with Taiwan would undermine reassurance and destabilize deterrence.

The U.S. Deterrence Strategy and Japan

Strategic plans and military posturing for deterrence against China are being examined by the Biden Administration. The United States is focusing on preventing China from occupying the main island of Taiwan. In other words, since China would need to position thousands of military units across the Taiwan Strait to occupy Taiwan, the U.S. strategy is to destroy China's naval vessels with cruise missiles and submarines. This strategy focuses on "deterrence by denial" to stop a military invasion, rather than as punitive measures on mainland China.

At the same time, the United States is developing new ground-based intermediate-range ballistic missiles that can destroy military facilities in mainland China that poses a threat to U.S. armed forces. Although the U.S. policy regarding the deployment of this missile is undecided, from the range and purpose of this missile, deployment within the first island chain, which includes the mainland of Japan, would be the viable option. In such a case, the next wave of military competition between the United States and China will become an intermediate range ballistic missile arms race in which Japan will become a battlefield. This situation would further increase the dangers of a missile war due to errors and misunderstandings.

Japan and the United States should both limit the purpose of deterrence to stop China from occupying Taiwan and using military force to invade the territory of Japan. In other words, they should limit it to "exclusively defense-oriented deterrence by denial" and should not include preemptive or punitive elements, such as neutralizing the missile facilities inside mainland China. The deployment of ballistic missiles in Japan and Japan's possession of an enemy base attack capability are not necessary to accomplish this purpose.

At the same time, Japan should strongly urge the United States and China to pursue dialogue to prevent conflicts stemming from misunderstandings. They should also develop a shared crisis management system to avoid political errors.

The Problem with the "Autocracy" vs "Democracy" Debate

The Biden administration has defined its relationship with China as a "competition between autocracy and democracy" and has called for unity among allies. At the same time, the United States has also called for cooperation on global issues, such

as new infectious diseases and climate change. However, it is not easy to build a cooperative relationship to tackle global issues while promoting a global political rivalry.

When looking at these issues through the narrow lens of “competition with autocracy” it tends to divert attention from global issues. Furthermore, if one spends all its time in a zero-sum confrontation to inflict loss on the other side for its own benefit, neither the United States nor China can become a trusted and respected superpower.

Japan, as a friend and neighbor, must continue its efforts to persuade both the United States and China that repeating self-serving claims will not benefit either country. From the perspective that international cooperation on global issues is the priority, Japan should not join the U.S.-led “battle over values.”

In addition to the summit meeting with the United States, Japan should urgently hold the postponed summit meeting with China. A dialogue among the leaders as well as communication at various levels, including on security issues, are needed regularly in this situation of significant differences with a lack of concrete results.

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