



SASAKAWA USA
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

Taiwan Crisis and Japan's Strategy

Abstract

On Tuesday, November 2, 2021, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) hosted a virtual event, "Taiwan Crisis and Japan's Strategy," featuring remarks by Lieutenant General Koichiro Bansho, Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) (Ret.), who served as the Commander of the Western Army of Japan from 2013 to 2015. He was joined by commentator Lieutenant General Wallace "Chip" Gregson, United States Marine Corps (USMC) (Ret.), who was the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs from 2009 to 2011. LTG Bansho discussed Japan's recent efforts to strengthen defense near Taiwan and the surrounding areas, how Japan would act in a potential Taiwan crisis, ways to improve Japan-U.S.-Taiwan trilateral relations, and how Japan and the United States can collaborate to ensure security in the region.

This talk was presented by Sasakawa USA's Policy Briefing Series and was held virtually via Zoom. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington, D.C. policy community, U.S. military, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, academia, and think tanks, along with former and current leaders of both U.S. and Japanese business and government. Introductory remarks were provided by Dr. Satohiro Akimoto, Chairman and President at Sasakawa USA, who also facilitated the event and moderated the Q&A discussion

The Importance of Southwestern Japan

LTG Bansho began his discussion with an overview of the strategic environment surrounding Japan. He noted that Japan is in a unique geopolitical situation because the archipelago lies between the Eurasian Continent and the Pacific Ocean. During the Cold War, Japan focused its homeland defense efforts on Hokkaido to counter potential invasions from the Soviet Union. But after the fall of the Soviet Union, Japan began to face several new challenges from China. China rapidly developed its military power, frequently provoking Japan with activities that include trespassing into Japan’s territorial waters. To adapt to this new security environment, Japan’s strategic focus changed from the north to the southwest.

(1) Japan’s Geopolitical and Strategic Importance

LTG Bansho illustrated how Japan is strategically important to the United States, especially in terms of establishing the power balance in the Indo-Pacific Region. The U.S. National Security Strategy names China and Russia as strong competitors, and North Korea and Iran as threats to the United States. Three of these four—China, Russia, and North Korea—are in the Indo-Pacific Region, and Japan is the only country to directly face those three powers.

LTG Bansho discussed how Japan’s location is also important when considering Taiwan. The distance between Yonaguni, an island in Okinawa prefecture, and Taiwan is only 110km (less than 70 miles). This distance can be easily overcome with modern systems. In terms of military operations, Yonaguni and Taiwan cannot be separated.

(2) China’s Recent Activities

LTG Bansho described some of China’s recent activities near Japan. These activities are part of China’s carefully planned “gray zone” strategy and have been ongoing even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chinese maritime and air incursions in Japanese territorial and administered areas of the East China Sea are at record levels. Chinese Coast Guard vessels chased a Japanese fishing boat near the Senkaku Islands in May 2020. According to the Japan Coast Guard, Chinese Coast Guard vessels invaded Japan’s territorial waters around the Senkakus for more than 57 hours in October 2020.

Chinese fighters and bombers have also been intruding on Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in extraordinary numbers since last month. And in October 2021, Chinese and Russian naval vessels conducted bilateral operations in the Sea of Japan for the first time, circumnavigating the Japanese archipelago. These bilateral operations demonstrated unprecedented military provocation toward Japan.

(3) Bilateral and Multilateral Efforts

LTG Bansho named a few examples of how Japan, the United States, and other countries have made public statements that are more aggressive than before. Many of these statements mention Taiwan because China has increased and strengthened its provocations near Taiwan and the Senkakus, and in the South and East China Seas.

In terms of bilateral efforts by Japan and the United States, at the "2+2" meetings held in March – the first time two U.S. Cabinet secretaries of the Biden Administration visited Tokyo—the four ministers underscored the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. At the U.S.-Japan summit meeting in April 2021, Prime Minister Suga and President Biden issued a joint statement that encouraged the peaceful resolution of Cross-Strait issues.

In terms of multilateral initiatives, G7 leaders also referred to Taiwan when they met in the United Kingdom in June this year. They underscored the importance of peace and stability surrounding the Taiwan Strait and encouraged the peaceful resolution of Cross-Strait issues. This was the first time G7 members expressed collective concern over Taiwan's security.

Japan's Defense Posture in Case of a Taiwan Crisis

(1) The Southwestern Wall Strategy

Before discussing concrete measures to support Taiwan, LTG Bansho first explained what the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) unofficially calls its Southwestern Wall Strategy. There are about 2,500 remote islands from Kyushu to Okinawa, about 200 of which are inhabited. The Southwestern Wall Strategy is an operational approach to deter and respond to any hostile activities around or against those islands.

The Southwestern Wall Strategy helps the SDF fulfill its mission of protecting Japan’s territory and its inhabitants. It also seeks to limit China’s access to the Pacific, especially by defending “the first island chain.” This approach follows a precedent during the Cold War when the SDF contained the Soviet Fleet in the Sea of Okhotsk.

The Southwestern Wall Strategy consists of three primary measures:

- i. **Placing SDF camps and facilities throughout the southwestern islands:** LTG Bansho showed a diagram illustrating the JSDF’s recent deployments. He drew attention to the camps and facilities that have opened on Yonaguni Island, Amami-Oshima Island, and Miyako Island, and that another one on Ishigaki Island will open soon. Units placed here are responsible for the initial response and security in this region. These units secure sea and air superiority by conducting constant intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities, and by deploying security units, surface-to-ship, missile units, and surface-to-air missile units.
- ii. **Prioritizing rapid deployment to areas that already have modernized equipment and tailored units:** Units that have modernized equipment would be able to deter and immediately respond to an enemy threat. In 2018, the JGSDF established the Ground Component Command and Readiness Deployment Division/Brigade, which has since been strengthening its rapid deployment capability. This fall, the JGSDF is conducting its largest exercise in half a century.
- iii. **Establishing the SDF’s Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade (ARDB):** The ARDB is the SDF’s first fully amphibious operations capable unit. It was established in 2018. If enemy forces invade Japan’s remote islands before SDF units are deployed there, the SDF will conduct amphibious operations to regain those islands as a joint effort among the ground, maritime, and air Self-Defense Forces, in conjunction with U.S.-Japan bilateral operations.

(2) Japan’s Measures in a Taiwan Crisis

LTG Bansho said that another major reason Japan has been strengthening defense along the southwestern islands is to contribute to deterrence near Taiwan. This also allows the SDF to be prepared in case of a potential Taiwan crisis.

LTG Bansho then explained how Japan would act during possible scenarios:

- **Peacetime:** Japan conducts continuous ISR activities along the islands to deter China. The SDF also conducts unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral training and exercises to confirm readiness. Exercises can also convey a strong strategic message, especially if they were to be conducted in areas like the Senkakus (which are authorized as training areas based on the U.S.-Japan Security arrangement).
- **Gray Zone:** In a gray zone situation that endangers Taiwan, U.S. Forces may conduct strategic and operational measures, including forward deployments, to deter and stop China's military aggression. As an ally of the United States, Japan has a responsibility to support U.S. Forces in reception, staging, onward movement, and integration (RSOI). The Government of Japan will also implement various measures.
- **"Important Influence Situations":** The Government of Japan will define some situations as having an "important influence" on Japan's security – for example, if Taiwan is attacked but the territory of Japan is not invaded, and damage would appear to be limited. Legally, the Government of Japan and the SDF can strengthen activities such as ISR and rear-area support. Japan's most important role would be to defend its own territory. The United States will also likely ask the SDF for their assistance in several operational areas. Those support activities will be conducted in Japanese territory and may include: the protection of U.S. bases, logistical support to U.S. Forces (including supply, transportation, repair and maintenance, medical services, communication, airport and seaport services, accommodation, and engineering support), search and rescue operations, and ship inspection operations.
- **"Situations posing threats to the survival of Japan":** If Japan (including U.S. bases in Japan) is attacked, or if the Government of Japan defines the situation as "a threat to Japan's survival," Japan may conduct combat operations or use armed force. Based on legislation that was reformed in 2015, the SDF has the responsibility and authority to conduct a full spectrum of military activities. The SDF will conduct defensive operations such as initial defense, air defense, counter-air operations, maritime operations, anti-submarine operations, mine warfare, anti-ship operations, and land operations. Combat search and rescue and personnel recovery may also be conducted, likely using US-2 amphibious aircraft.

LTG Bansho emphasized that a Taiwan crisis is automatically a Japan contingency. Considering Taiwan’s geopolitical features and the impact any Taiwan crisis may have, Japan must prepare full spectrum operations and provide full support to U.S. Forces. It is also essential that Japan conducts these activities on its own initiative.

(3) Other Factors to Consider

LTG Bansho listed a few other important factors to consider in case of a Taiwan crisis. First, Japan and the United States must prepare for the possibility of nontraditional warfare, including cyberattacks, hybrid operations, and cognitive domain warfare, such as information operations, fake news, or disinformation.

Second, depending on the severity of the crisis, Japan must consider how to support people who live in Taiwan. The Government of Japan may initiate a Noncombatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) of Japanese, American, and other foreign nationals from Taiwan. The Government of Japan may also handle refugee flows into Japan, especially into the southwestern islands.

Looking Ahead

(1) The Japan-U.S.-Taiwan Triangle

To better illustrate the challenges of a potential Taiwan crisis, LTG Bansho called attention to the nature of current trilateral relations among Japan, the U.S., and Taiwan. Shown in a diagram, LTG Bansho illustrated how Japan and the United States have a strong alliance, and the United States and Taiwan have the Taiwan Relations Act, but that there is no official direct relationship between Japan and Taiwan.

LTG Bansho then raised three challenges within the current trilateral relationship (the roman numerals correspond to the numbers in the diagram):

- i. **Japan does not have official diplomatic and military channels with Taiwan:** The Government of Japan limited its relationship with Taiwan in 1972, and there are still no official communication channels or ways to coordinate military cooperation. Japan should create a Japanese version of the Taiwan Relations Act and establish a legal basis to cooperate with and support Taiwan.

- ii. **Existing measures between Japan and the United States are insufficient to coordinate bilateral cooperation in any Taiwan crisis:** Japan and the United States have not had thorough discussions on how to support Taiwan. The governments of both countries, as well as the SDF and the U.S. forces, should consult closely to build an effective strategy. This would be an important agenda item for the next Japan-U.S. defense guidelines.
- iii. **Japan, the United States, and Taiwan do not have adequate cooperation and consultation mechanisms to manage a Taiwan crisis:** Japan and the United States should lead the effort to create a trilateral framework. The Japan Taiwan Exchange Association, the unofficial representative of the Government of Japan to Taiwan, recently joined the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF), which is a step forward in building a formal trilateral relationship.

(2) Japan's Own Efforts

LTG Bansho said that Japan must prepare for the worst by updating its strategy and accelerating its defense buildup with budget and defense capabilities. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which recently won the general election, is committed to doubling Japan's defense expenditure to 2% of the country's GDP (the same rate as NATO countries). LTG Bansho argued that this would be a good time to review Japan's National Security Strategy and National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), and in the near future, to formulate a new defense strategy. These strategies should include measures to strengthen Japan's defense capability, especially in the southwestern islands; upgrade the sustainability and resilience of the SDF; expand support to the United States and other friendly forces; and consider ways to improve economic security.

(3) Measures to Coordinate Strategies Between Japan and the U.S.

LTG Bansho laid out a few ways Japan and the United States can strengthen their defense cooperation:

- **Revision of the U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines:** The U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines, which were last updated in 2017, need to be revised to better reflect changes in the security environment in the past few years.

- **Strengthening Command and Control (C2):** Japan and the United States need to establish a joint bilateral command structure co-headed by senior leaders of the SDF and U.S. forces. This permanent structure would operate both in peacetime and wartime.
- **Demonstrating Strategic messages:** Japan and the United States should strengthen and increase opportunities for bilateral and multilateral activities, including well-coordinated training and demonstrations, to send strategic messages to China.

(4) The United States’ Extended Deterrence

LTG Bansho said that even though the Taiwan Relations Act stipulates that the United States must provide weapons and take adequate measures for Taiwan’s security, it is unclear whether this includes the U.S. nuclear umbrella. He remarked that even though the United States is keeping this issue strategically ambiguous, it may need to be reconsidered to send a stronger message to China.

LTG Bansho concluded his remarks by reiterating that a Taiwan crisis is a Japan crisis. Japan needs to strengthen its efforts to develop effective strategic and operational defense capabilities. The Japan-U.S. Alliance is also critically important in developing adequate deterrence and capabilities to support Taiwan. By preventing a crisis from happening and simultaneously preparing for the worst, Japan and the United States can ensure peace and security in the Taiwan Strait as well as stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Commentary by LtGen Gregson

LtGen Gregson’s views are his own and he does not speak for the USMC or any other part of the U.S. government.

LtGen Gregson praised General Bansho for his compelling arguments and raised five points:

- 1) We must think beyond military paradigms in order to face the future. Even though General Bansho is a former JGSDF officer, he presented a compelling description of maritime threats, as well as joint and combined capabilities and responses. With increases in the range and accuracy of weapons, forces in land, sea, and air affect each other more than ever before, especially in littoral areas.

- 2) The United States and Japan's forces must be operationally integrated, reinforcing each other. General Bansho's call to create a joint operational command is essential to developing capability. The alliance coordination mechanism must also be upgraded to a full-time, fully staffed crisis information and management center.
- 3) China's gray zone coercion includes not only military intrusions, but also activities in other fields such as economics, information, and finances. These are all designed to back up China's claims to sovereignty and access outside of international law. Strong deterrence based on a capability to prevail is needed to counter these threats.
- 4) Defense of the southwestern islands must be greatly strengthened. The geopolitical connection between Japan and China, as well as Japan and Taiwan, is particularly clear when viewed on map projections that focus on the numerous islands in the area. Without a free and democratic Taiwan, Japan's sea lanes are threatened.
- 5) The Taiwan Relations Act makes clear that the United States must assist with Taiwan's self-defense. Whether the United States would come to the defense of Taiwan needed to be left ambiguous when the act was established in 1979, since Taiwan was under martial law and not yet a vibrant democratic country. However, the United States never said that it would not defend Taiwan, and has supported Taiwan during many crises.

After LtGen Gregson shared his comments, there was further discussion on the fifth point. LTG Bansho responded that while strategic ambiguity likely needs to be maintained, the way the United States supports Taiwan is a key point in considering a Taiwan crisis. Dr. Akimoto then asked LtGen Gregson about President Biden's recent remarks about the United States' commitment to come to Taiwan's defense. LtGen Gregson replied that while there is vigorous debate on whether the United States should shift to strategic clarity, actions are louder than words. He said that Japan and the United States need to enhance alliance defense capabilities and prepare for potential attacks.

Q&A Discussion

Japanese Domestic Discussions on its Taiwan Strategy

Dr. Satoshiro Akimoto began the Q&A session with a question on whether there is consensus among Tokyo's leadership on Japan's Taiwan strategy, whether the

Japanese government communicated well with the public about how involved the SDF would be in a Taiwan contingency, and how controversial this change in Japan's approach might be.

LTG Bansho responded that recent discussions on defense policy have been more constructive, as indicated in the LDP's commitment to double the defense budget. Discussions about Taiwan are more difficult because the Japanese and Taiwanese governments have no official relations. However, there has been progress on the legislative front since 2015, so any decision is up to the Government of Japan, which in turn depends on public opinion. That is why Japan must have frank, open discussions about the current situation surrounding Taiwan.

LtGen Gregson then noted that as early as 2000, American and Japanese military leaders were discussing how China may attack Yonaguni to isolate Taiwan. But the United States and Japan have yet to create detailed counter options. He urged that this issue needs to be considered in the near term.

Defense Spending in Japan

The next question was directed to LTG Bansho about if there is a general consensus within the Ministry of Defense and SDF about how to prioritize and spend additional defense budget resources, if they become available.

LTG Bansho answered that the SDF needs more defense spending for everything, especially to ensure the sustainability and resilience of the Southwestern Wall Strategy. This includes maintaining the new camps; consolidating personnel and weapons; strengthening logistic capabilities to transport supplies such as fuel, ammunition, and food to remote islands; and protecting weapons, bases, facilities, and people. As these needs are all important, and it is difficult to prioritize one need over another.

Dr. Akimoto asked LtGen Gregson to share his perspective from the U.S. angle on what Japan should prioritize within its defense budget. LtGen Gregson said that it would be important to start with human capital, which is at the root of building capability. Both Taiwan and Japan have had difficulties recruiting in recent years. Japan and the United States need to enhance the reputation and status of the SDF through measures such as public information campaigns and consider better pay and career advancement to attract the best people.

Potential Attacks on the East Side of Taiwan

Next came a question about whether Japan and the United States are ready for possible attacks on the east coast of Taiwan, as opposed to the west coast.

LTG Bansho replied that since there may be hundreds of scenarios to be considered, Japan must be prepared for any kind of situation. LtGen Gregson added that to counter such attacks, Japan and the United States need to do a lot of contingency planning and practice to operate together.

U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy

The next question posed asked the speakers their views on the possibility of the Biden administration revising its nuclear weapons policy, specifically on declaring that the “sole purpose” of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is to deter or counter nuclear attacks, or promising “no first use” of nuclear weapons. It was also asked if the United States is communicating well with its allies about these possible changes.

LtGen Gregson responded that there is nothing compelling to change the current policy, especially when North Korea and others continue to acquire weapons of greater capability. In terms of communication, LtGen Gregson emphasized that Japan and the United States must enhance the alliance coordination mechanism through a joint operational headquarters staffed by a wide range of personnel who can develop political, economic, informational, and military options. Thus, the two countries would do not need to quickly build command and control during contingencies, as was the case after the Great East Japan Earthquake.

LTG Bansho said that while nuclear policy is sensitive, it needs to be discussed with allies through close consultation. Likewise, coordination and planning are essential in considering a Taiwan crisis, which affects the national security of Japan and the United States. LTG Bansho added that he oversaw the Japanese side of the bilateral coordination center after the Great East Japan Earthquake. He expressed his gratitude for U.S. support and said that strategic communication was smooth because the Japanese and U.S. participants respected one another.

Coordination Between Russia and China

The last question from the audience was about Tokyo's views on the growing convergence of strategic interests between China and Russia.

LTG Bansho responded that Japan is uncomfortable seeing these bilateral navies’ fleets passing through Tsugaru Strait and Osumi Strait together. This demonstration of will does not contribute to the peace and stability of the region. While Japan’s strategic focus has shifted from north to the southwest, recently Japan is having to pay attention to three areas at the same time: Russia in the north, North Korea in the middle, and China in the South. It is all the more important that Japan cooperate with the United States and other allies.

Dr. Akimoto closed the event by thanking LTG Bansho for his detailed presentation and remarks, and LtGen Gregson for his support for this discussion and other Sasakawa USA events. He said that the large number of questions indicates the importance of this subject matter, and while there was not enough time to answer everything this time, this conversation will be continued in the future with a similar discussion.

Sasakawa USA is grateful to LTG Koichiro Bansho, LtGen Wallace “Chip” Gregson, the Q&A participants, and attendees for their insightful discussion on Japan’s strategy and cooperation with the United States in a potential Taiwan crisis.

The summarized views of the speakers expressed herein are entirely the work of Sasakawa USA and do not represent the official positions of any of the speakers.

For more information about Sasakawa USA’s Policy Briefing Series, click [here](#).
