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# THE INVISIBLE BUT INDISPENSABLE PARTNERSHIP: UNDERSTANDING THE CHINA FACTOR IN JAPAN-TAIWAN RELATIONS

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*This paper examines Taiwan and Japan's shared threat perception of rising China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by focusing on the indirect security link under the framework of the US-Japan Security Treaty (1960) and Japan and Taiwan's evolving position in the disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai/Diaoyu islands. Understanding that threat perception is a process rather than a distinguishable event, this paper analyzes Japan and Taiwan's official statements and documents to determine how both countries view China as the "infringer" in the 21st century. China's assertiveness in the past decade has been perceived as aggressiveness by both Taiwan and Japan. Because of their indirect security link, the two countries share the perception of threat even when China's aggression is only directed toward one side. The shared threat perception has pushed the two countries closer to one another, forming an unofficial partnership in hedging China. If China's democratization is an impossible dream, then Japan and Taiwan firmly believe in maintaining the status-quo indefinitely both in terms of the unification question and the post-Cold War power structure of the Far East. China's behavior has become unpredictable and the two countries' threat perception has increased significantly.*

## Introduction

China's controversial new national security law for Hong Kong came into effect on June 30, 2020. The new law criminalizes any act of secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign or external forces. It is seen as China's final effort to crack down on the ongoing pro-democracy movement in the city. The law undermines the principle of "one country, two systems," that promised to preserve separate legal and political systems within China and protect Hong Kong's independent judiciary system, as well as freedom of speech and the right to assemble. When the British handed over the territory in 1997, China promised to respect its integrity for at least

50 years. The critics of the law have labeled it as “the end of Hong Kong.”<sup>1</sup> Hong Kong authorities have recently arrested hundreds of protesters and activists, including media tycoon Jimmy Lai, politician and activist Agnes Chow, and a 15-year-old girl waving a Hong Kong independence flag during a protest. Consequently, there are growing fears about Taiwan — which Xi’s administration sees as “an inalienable part of China”<sup>2</sup> — becoming the next target of China’s belligerence.<sup>3</sup>

The United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom immediately criticized the law, publishing a joint statement expressing “deep concerns.”<sup>4</sup> These countries, alongside Germany, proposed to pass legislation to accept political refugees from Hong Kong. In contrast, China’s neighboring countries in Asia (such as South Korea, India, Russia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Thailand) — generally dependent on China’s economic power and under the influence of its “sharp power”<sup>5</sup> — responded with deafening silence, except for two nations: Japan and Taiwan. Taiwan, who has its own dispute with China, expressed its dismay openly and firmly and also proposed to accept political refugees. Japan, although hesitant at first, later joined the G7 Foreign Ministers’ Statement on Hong Kong and the joint statement adopted at the UN Human Rights Council by some other 26 countries.<sup>6</sup> The question is: what makes the two Asian countries different from the rest of China’s neighbors? Like other countries, Japan and Taiwan rely on China’s economic power and cannot ignore China’s “sharp power”. Wouldn’t it be more profitable for their national interest to stay silent and be on good terms with China? What does their position say about them? Does it affect how they perceive one another? With the Japan–China Joint Communiqué of 1972, Japan severed its official diplomatic ties with Taiwan and, since then, have only been maintaining nongovernmental relations. But what is the current nature of their relationship? Why are Japan and Taiwan’s strategies in

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1 “Hong Kong security law: What is it and is it worrying?” *BBC*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52765838>.

2 “White Paper — The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Norway, Accessed June 28, 2020, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceno/eng/ztxw/twwt/t110655.htm>.

3 “We’re next’: Hong Kong security law sends chills through Taiwan,” *The Japan Times*, July 7, 2020, [https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/07/07/asia-pacific/hong-kong-security-law-taiwan/#.Xz4j\\_y2B2u4](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/07/07/asia-pacific/hong-kong-security-law-taiwan/#.Xz4j_y2B2u4).

4 “Joint Statement on Hong Kong,” U.S. Department of State, May 28, 2020, Accessed August 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-hong-kong/>.

5 Sharp power refers to authoritarian governments’ effort to “pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environments in the targeted countries” through media, academia, think tanks, and culture. See more in Christopher Walker & Jessica Ludwig, “The Meaning of Sharp Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>.

6 “Joint Statement on Hong Kong”; “UN Human Rights Council 44: Cross-regional statement on Hong Kong and Xinjiang,” GOV.UK, June 30, 2020, Accessed August 29, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/un-human-rights-council-44-cross-regional-statement-on-hong-kong-and-xinjiang>.

dealing with China so similar? This paper attempts to answer these questions by examining Taiwan and Japan's mutual threat perception of China and by exploring the invisible but indispensable unofficial partnership between the two countries.

The first part introduces a theoretical framework of the threat perception theory, while the second part provides the Taiwanese perspective on the unification question. After providing a short historical background of the two countries' relations, the last part analyzes the China factor in Japan-Taiwan relations, specifically in two areas: (1) the US-Japan security alliance, and (2) maritime disputes. This paper argues that Taiwan and Japan have moved closer to one another because of their shared threat perception of rising China in the 21st century. They both perceive the other as a crucial partner in hedging China because both wish to maintain the unification status-quo indefinitely.

### Theoretical Framework: Threat Perception Theory

According to Robert Jervis (1977), threat perception is a characteristic of subjective security based on one's estimate of another's power or willingness to cooperate.<sup>7</sup> Because it is subjective, whether or not one perceives the other's action as threatening depends on the perception of one's power and vulnerability, history of friction or cooperation, and similarity or difference in values. Raymond Cohen (1978) analyzed the conditions under which one perceives threat by dividing the process into two stages: observation and appraisal. Observation is the first stage where the decision-maker selects which signal to pay attention to from a pool of various contemporary events. Whether verbal or nonverbal, official or unofficial, in the perspective of the decision-maker, if that signal strongly suggests an infringement "of rules of the game governing relations between the actors involved," then it is recognized as a threat.<sup>8</sup> Rules of the game (i.e. universally accepted rules of behavior that harmonize the mutual expectation of participants) prevent unwelcome conflicts in situations where there is no means of direct and free communication.<sup>9</sup> Appraisal, the second stage, refers to the anticipation of the consequence and the selection of an explanation or a solution to the threatening signal. When one infringes the rule, its behavior becomes unpredictable to the observer who would conclude that the infringement is "a challenge to the existing balance of relations as a whole," aiming at domination and aggression.<sup>10</sup> Barbara Farnham (2003) further showed that regime types, domestic political norms, and democratic norms can also be strong indicators in the

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7 Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no.2 (1978): 175.

8 Raymond Cohen, "Threat Perception in International Crisis." *Political Science Quarterly* 93, No.1 (Spring, 1978): 100.

9 Cohen, "Threat Perception," 103-105.

10 *Ibid.*, 101, 107.

perception of threat.<sup>11</sup> Understanding that the threat perception is a process, and not a distinguishable event, this paper analyzes Japan and Taiwan's official statements and documents to determine why Japan and Taiwan's strategies in dealing in China are so similar and if the threat perception of China brought the two countries closer.

### The Taiwanese Perspective: The "1992 Consensus"

To understand Taiwan's perspective on the unification question, different interpretations of the "1992 Consensus" between Taiwan and China should be examined. The "1992 Consensus" is a formula "strategically constructed" by the Kuomintang (KMT) of Taiwan and the Communist Party of China (CCP) "to shelve their differing positions concerning which government is the legitimate" sole representative of "China". In a historical meeting, both parties agreed to "respect and accept" each other's interpretation of the "One China" principle.<sup>12</sup> The Consensus, negotiated by the CCP's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) and KMT's Strait Exchange Foundation (SEF), also allows for China and Taiwan to cooperate in other practical areas.<sup>13</sup> For the CCP, "One China" represents the People's Republic of China (PRC). For the KMT, it refers to the Republic of China (ROC). However, from 2019, China has been attributing a new meaning to the principle: "one country, two systems model for Taiwan," pressuring the current Tsai Ing-wen administration (Democratic Progressive Party, DPP) to adopt the Hong Kong model.<sup>14</sup> Taiwan never agreed to this interpretation and sees itself as a *de facto* independent state. The Tsai administration does not approve Xi's new interpretation of the "1992 Consensus," nor her predecessor's "One China, Respective Interpretation" formula. In response to China's new stance, President Tsai published a new guideline, stating:

*I want to emphasize once again that the government I lead is committed to maintaining cross-strait peace and stability, and supports normal cross-strait exchanges. However, we resolutely oppose "one country, two systems" and refuse any transitional arrangement that would lead to forced unification. This is not a choice between war and peace, but a choice between maintaining the status quo of the Republic of China's independent national sovereignty*

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11 Barbara Farnham, "The Theory of Democratic Peace and Threat Perception," *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2003): 395-415.

12 Shirley A. Kan, "China/Taiwan: Evolution of the "One China" Policy—Key Statements from Washington, Beijing, and Taipei," Congressional Research Service, October 10, 2014.

13 Yu-Jie Chen and Jerome A. Cohen, "China-Taiwan Relations Re-Examined: The '1992 Consensus' and Cross-Strait Agreements," *University of Pennsylvania Asian Law Review* 14, no. 1 (2019): 14.

14 Elaine Hou and Evelyn Kao, "Xi's '92 consensus' speech challenges status quo: pundit," *Focus Taiwan*, January 6, 2019. <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/201901060010>.

*or being unified by China.*<sup>15</sup>

*We must take advantage of the international circumstances favorable to Taiwan and join forces with the world community to counter the Chinese Communist Party's aggression aiming to destroy our sovereignty.*<sup>16</sup>

## Japan-Taiwan Relations

While official diplomatic ties between Japan and Taiwan have ceased in 1972, the two nations have been maintaining a steady relationship through informal mechanisms. In the 1972 joint communique between Japan and the PRC, Japan recognized the government of the PRC “as the sole legal Government of China.”<sup>17</sup> But again, Japan made only indirect references to the Taiwan issue, stipulating that “[t]he Government of the People’s Republic of China reiterates that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China,” and that Japan “fully understands and respects this stand of the Government of the People’s Republic of China.”<sup>18</sup> Japan positions itself as a non-actor in the Taiwan issue.

Japan’s policies toward Taiwan in the post-1972 has been based on the principle of separation between economy and politics (*seikei bunri*). Japan maintained private contacts with high level Taiwanese officials mainly for economic purposes, which does not contradict PRC’s “one-China” principle. But because Japanese political objectives align with the country’s economic interests, Japan could often disguise political matters as economic matters. Because of the private nature of the informal contacts between the two countries, the PRC has been unable to chastise this comportment.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, after the democratization of Taiwan, which ended the KMT’s one-party authoritarian regime, a new Taiwan-centric national identity discourse arose among the elites and rapidly spread to the public.<sup>20</sup> Pressured by China on the unification question, the elites had to delay the issue indefinitely. One strategy to achieve this was the Taiwanization campaign, which emphasized the distinct

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15 “President Tsai convenes National Security Meeting, finalizes strategy and mechanisms for responding to PRC’s ‘one country, two systems model for Taiwan’,” Office of the President Republic of China (ROC), March 11, 2019, <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/5656>.

16 Ibid.

17 “JOINT COMMUNIQUE BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, Accessed June 28, 2020. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121325>.

18 Ibid.

19 Phil Deans, “Taiwan in Japan’s Foreign relations: Informal politics and virtual diplomacy,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 24, no. 4 (2001): 152-156.

20 Yinan He, “Identity Politics and Foreign Policy: Taiwan’s Relations with China and Japan, 1895-2012,” *Political Science Quarterly* 129, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 472.

identity and history of Taiwan. Major revisions were made in textbooks: Taiwan's multiethnic nature was highlighted, and the legacy of the Japanese colonization was reevaluated to stress its more positive aspects.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, the atrocities carried out by the authoritarian KMT were emphasized. This unique history of Taiwan is what separates Taiwanese people from the Chinese. It has become the cornerstone of the Taiwan-centric identity discourse. Taiwan stands out as the only country to remember positively Japan's colonial past. When compared to China and South Korea – who are in constant dispute with Japan over the issue of history textbooks, the imperial flag, politicians' visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, forced labor, and the "comfort women" reparations – Taiwan's positive interpretation of the colonial past is heartwarming for the Japanese people.<sup>22</sup>

However, the aforementioned history of Japan-Taiwan relations cannot explain either why both countries' strategies in dealing with China are so alike, or whether or not they share a threat perception from China. Japan and Taiwan do not have official diplomatic ties nor do they form a security alliance that legally binds one country to the other. Therefore, in order to analyze their *observation* and *appraisal* of the threat perception of China, the indirect security link between the two nations under (1) the US-Japan Security Treaty, and (2) their handling of maritime disputes should be examined.

#### *Japan-Taiwan Relations under the US-Japan Security Treaty*

The framework of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan (1960) indirectly links Japan's security to Taiwan. The two countries, thus, form a strategic alignment. After World War II, Japan renounced its right of belligerency and has been relying on the US for its security. Considering the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), Japan remains a *de facto* armed country, although its ability "to develop an independent strategy" is tied to the US.<sup>23</sup> In the Treaty, the two parties agreed to "consult together from time to time regarding the implementation of this Treaty, and, at the request of either Party, whenever the security of Japan or international peace and security in the Far East is threatened."<sup>24</sup> While the treaty doesn't specify the exact boundaries of the Far East, it likely encompasses all East Asian and South East Asian countries, most importantly China, Taiwan, and the two Koreas. Throughout the Cold War, along with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

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21 He, "Identity Politics and Foreign Policy," 484.

22 Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in Japan, published in December 26, 2019. Accessed June 26, 2020. [https://www.roc-taiwan.org/jp\\_ja/post/69207.html](https://www.roc-taiwan.org/jp_ja/post/69207.html).

23 Soeya Yoshihide, "Taiwan in Japan's Security Consideration," *The China Quarterly* 165 (2001): 130.

24 "TREATY OF MUTUAL COOPERATION AND SECURITY BETWEEN JAPAN AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Accessed June 28, 2020. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html>.

(NATO) alliance, this treaty had represented the cornerstone of the US defense strategy against the Communist bloc. Now, even after the Cold War, as alliances persisted and strengthened, the treaty has become one of the most threatening factors for China and has shaped the country's behavior and strategies in the Far East.

The "One-China Principle" is the foundation of the Chinese government's legitimacy. According to the principle, foreign countries' involvement in the Taiwan issue equates to interference in China's internal affairs. It contends that reunification with Taiwan is "Chinese people's just struggle to safeguard China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and its basis, both *de facto* and *de jure*, is unshakable." Moreover, it unwaveringly maintains that "[a]ll the facts and laws about Taiwan prove that Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory."<sup>25</sup>

The Taiwan issue is of concern for both Japan and the US. While the joint communiques (1972, 1978, and 1982) between the PRC and the US recognized that the PRC is the sole legal government of China, they only acknowledge (i.e. recognize the reality), rather than firmly claim, "that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China."<sup>26</sup> Communiques stipulate that the US doesn't challenge this position, which creates a space for the US to remain strategically ambiguous in regard to the Taiwan issue. The 1979 Taiwan Relation Act (TRA) further enables this strategic ambiguity. The act doesn't stipulate that the US is required to defend Taiwan. However, it does indicate that "it is the policy of the United States to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan."<sup>27</sup> It is unlikely that the US will defend Taiwan if Taiwan provokes China by unilaterally declaring independence. Yet, if the PRC tries to forcefully unify Taiwan, the US would have to get involved to protect the legitimacy of its military presence in East Asia post-Cold War and to defend its economic and security interests in the area.<sup>28</sup>

Taiwan plays a vital role in Japan's security. As expressed in the 1969 joint communique between Prime Minister Eisaku Sato and President Richard Nixon, "the maintenance of peace and security in the Taiwan area" is "a most important

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25 "White Paper — The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue."

26 "JOINT COMMUNIQUE BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA," Wilson Center Digital Archive, Accessed June 28, 2020. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121325>.

27 "Taiwan Relations Act," American Institute in Taiwan, Accessed June 28, 2020. <https://www.ait.org.tw/our-relationship/policy-history/key-u-s-foreign-policy-documents-region/taiwan-relations-act/>.

28 China passed the "Anti-Secession Law" in 2005 establishing a framework that justifies military action against Taiwan's independence.



factor for the security of Japan.”<sup>29</sup> Against the backdrop of the third Taiwan Strait crisis and China’s increasing nuclear tests, the 1997 revision of the Guideline for Japan-US Defense Cooperation established a legitimate framework for bilateral defense cooperation in “areas surrounding Japan.” It stipulates that “situations in areas surrounding Japan will have an important influence on Japan’s peace and security,” whilst remaining equivocal about exact boundaries. The Guideline states the areas are “not geographic but situational.”<sup>30</sup> The role of JSDF was also expanded to rear area support. Hence, if China uses force to unify with Taiwan, Japan would likely be dragged into a war regardless of its wishes.<sup>31</sup>

According to the framework presented in the US-Japan Security Treaty, Japan and Taiwan form a strategic “alignment”. In other words, the two states “may expect to have each other’s support in disputes or confrontations with particular other states,” such as China.<sup>32</sup> Despite Chen Shui Bian (DPP) administration’s efforts, Taiwan failed to transform the alignment into a formal alliance. However, from the 2000s, there has been a steady increase of unofficial contacts between the two countries over security issues. Exchanges have taken place between retired Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) personnel and Taiwanese military personnel during unofficial events, such as academic conferences.<sup>33</sup>

Because of the indirect security link, Japan cannot firmly support China or Taiwan in regard to the Taiwan issue. In Japan’s perspective, as the importance of the Japan-China relations increases, the significance of the Japan-Taiwan relationship also increases. This is demonstrated in the Diplomatic Bluebook, which is published annually by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. The 2016 Bluebook, stated that the relationship with China is “one of the most important bilateral relations.”<sup>34</sup> Since 2018, the Bluebook also stopped mentioning that the two nations “have many political and social differences” and that “it is inevitable that there will be friction and conflict between the two countries,” a sentiment that was first expressed in the 2013 Bluebook.<sup>35</sup> As for Taiwan, the Bluebook stresses that the relationship with Taiwan is unofficial and nongovernmental. However, in the 2000s, the document started

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29 “Joint Statement of Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato and U.S. President Richard Nixon,” The World and Japan Database, Accessed June 28, 2020. <https://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/docs/19691121.D1E.html>.

30 “The Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation (September 23, 1997),” Ministry of Defense, Accessed June 28, 2020. [https://www.mod.go.jp/e/d\\_act/us/anpo/19970923.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/us/anpo/19970923.html).

31 Qingxin Ken Wang, “Taiwan in Japan’s relations with China and the United States after the cold war,” *Pacific Affairs* 73, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 372-373.

32 Brian Bridges and Che-po Chan, “Looking North: Taiwan’s Relations with Japan under Chen Shui-bian,” *Pacific Affairs* 81, no. 4 (Winter 2008-2009): 578.

33 Ibid, 588.

34 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/index.html>.

35 Ibid.



emphasizing the importance of their economic relations. In 2013, the word “partner” first appeared.<sup>36</sup> Starting from 2015, Japan recognized that “Taiwan shares basic values such as freedom, democracy, basic human rights, and the rule of law, and has close economic relations” and is “an important partner and important friend of Japan.”<sup>37</sup> In the recent 2020 Bluebook, Japan added that Taiwan is an “extremely” important partner.<sup>38</sup>

It is in the best interest of Japan — as it is in the interest of Taiwan and the United States — to avoid an Armageddon-like war situation in the cross-Taiwan Strait. Japan, thus, benefits from maintaining the status quo, in which Taiwan is able to behave as a *de facto* independent state. Taiwan could achieve a *de facto* independence by indefinitely delaying the unification question and gradually raising the cost of war (through deeper commitment from Japan and the US, and increased economic and cultural exchange with other countries).

### *Japan-Taiwan Relations in Maritime Disputes*

The 2008-2010-2012 territorial and maritime disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai/Diaoyu Islands (hereinafter Senkaku/Diaoyutai or Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands) exemplify Japan and Taiwan’s shared threat perception of rising China. The three countries share maritime boundaries, and all three parties claim sovereignty over the islands. Other than being strategically important, the islands are close to major shipping routes, provide rich fishing grounds, and lie near potential natural gas and oil deposits.<sup>39</sup> According to the San Francisco Peace Treaty (1952), Japan denies that there can be any dispute over its sovereignty claims. The Japanese Coast Guard (JCG) consequently patrols the maritime area. While the disputes have been going on for years, they escalated to an unprecedented level in 2010 when Japan detained a Chinese captain in the disputed area, which provoked massive anti-Japanese protests across China. This coincided with China surpassing Japan in GDP and overtaking Japan as the world’s second-biggest economy. Not only do the incidents highlight the regional power transition from Japan to China, they also demonstrate Taiwan’s cautious balancing against an “increasingly assertive China.”<sup>40</sup>

To understand the three countries’ evolving stance on the issue, we should first consider the 2008 incident between Taiwan and Japan. In 2008, president Ma Ying-jeou (KMT), perceived as an anti-Japanese figure who participated in the

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36 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/index.html>.

37 Ibid.

38 —, May 19, 2020, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO59278130Z-10C20A5PP8000/>.

39 “How uninhabited islands soured China-Japan ties,” *BBC*, November 10, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-11341139>.

40 Philip Yang, “China-Japan-U.S. Relations after Diaoyutai Incident: Taiwan’s Perspective,” *Tamkang Journal of International Affairs* 14, no. 3 (2011): 45.

Baodiao (defend the Diaoyutai Islands) movement as a student, came into office. On June 10th, a Taiwanese fishing boat sank near the islands after colliding with a JCG patrol ship. Japan rescued and returned the 15 people on board but detained the captain for questioning. Dozens of people gathered in the *de facto* Japanese embassy in Taipei, demanding his immediate release, burning flags and shouting slogans. Although the captain was released three days later, the situation escalated into a territorial dispute. The Presidential Office released an official statement claiming that the Diaoyutai Islands are part of Taiwan's territorial waters.<sup>41</sup> A few days later, Taiwanese activists on a private boat guarded by 9 Taiwanese Coast Guard vessels approached the islands to assert Taiwan's sovereignty over them.<sup>42</sup> A second group, which included a KMT legislator, was set to depart for another trip but decided against it after a call from the Presidential Office persuaded them that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Taiwan (MOFA) needed more time to negotiate and that there was no need for escalating tensions.<sup>43</sup> Although the debates focused on attribution (i.e. who ran into whom and who was responsible for the collision), the MOFA planned to put fishing rights on the negotiation agenda.<sup>44</sup> Pundits advised the government that "properly dealing with the incident could strengthen ties between Taiwan and the US-Japan alliance" and could further benefit "Taiwan strategically in the region". Damaged Japan-Taiwan relations would mean that both countries are "playing into the hands of the PRC."<sup>45</sup> Japan later apologized to the captain by sending the deputy chief representative of the *de facto* Japanese embassy to his house with an official letter.

The 2010 incident was a dispute between Japan and China. On September 7th, a Chinese fishing boat approached the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and collided with a JCG patrol ship. The JCG ship ordered the boat to stop for inspection, but the captain refused. It chased and stopped and inspected the boat, eventually arresting the captain and 14 crew members for obstructing public duty. While the crew members were released a few days later, the captain remained detained. China, enraged, demanded that the captain be released immediately. It suspended all ties, from official governmental contacts to cultural exchange events, with Japan, and more importantly, it abruptly stopped the export of rare-earth elements, which are crucial to Japan's high-tech sector. After 2 weeks, on September 24th, Japanese local prosecutors released the captain. They stated that "considering the effect on the people of our nation and on China-Japan relations, we decided that it was not

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41 "Sinking puts spotlight on Diaoyutais," *TAIWAN TODAY*, June 20, 2008, <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=10,23,45,10&post=14865>.

42 Shih Hsiu-Chuan and Flora Wang, "Officials drop plan to visit Diaoyutais," *Taipei Times*, June 18, 2008, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2008/06/18/2003415043>.

43 Hsiu-Chuan & Wang, "Officials drop plan."

44 "Sinking puts spotlight."

45 *Ibid.*

appropriate to continue the investigation.”<sup>46</sup> This incident sparked anti-Japanese protests across China, and it took repeated efforts from Japan to mend the damage.

For Japan, the detention of the captain was an unprecedented action. In previous cases, the JCG patrol ship would simply warn Taiwanese or Chinese boats that approached the islands. Even if crew members were arrested, as in 2008, the local prosecutors would issue a fine and release them after a few days. Such action testifies to Japan’s anxiety in regard to China’s rapid navy build-up, China’s lack of transparency in military spending, and the increase of China’s naval surveillance in the disputed areas. Japan wanted to establish *de jure* jurisdiction over the islands by prosecuting within the confines of its domestic laws.<sup>47</sup> However, Philip Yang contends that, although Japan caved in, China was ultimately the one that had to pay the price for its disproportionate reaction to the incident,<sup>48</sup> which undermined its efforts to build trust and reassure neighboring countries that its rise is peaceful and respects the liberal international order.<sup>49</sup>

Taiwan, as it did in 2008 and 2012, shunned China’s invitation to act in unison against Japan. The 2012 incident was a dispute between Japan and China. Japan purchased three isles of the disputed islands, which sparked massive anti-Japanese protests across China. Taiwan’s Ma administration declined China’s invitation to act together. President Ma, who desired good relations with China, preferred to keep his distance from territorial disputes. However, in order to have a stronger case for the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute in an international judicial forum, China needs Taiwan’s help in providing authentic historical documents, such as the original Shimonoseki Treaty (1895) and other official documents that show the ROC’s position from 1949 to 1971.<sup>50</sup> Here, Taiwan has leverage, which makes China hesitant to settle the dispute through international institutions. Instead, as of 2012, China has been sending more government and private vessels into “Japan’s territorial Sea” (near the islands), as seen in the data from JCG (Picture 1). Japan considers those intrusions a clear violation of its sovereignty and believes that China is attempting to “change the status quo through force or coercion.”<sup>51</sup>

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46 Yang, “China-Japan-U.S. Relations,” 49.

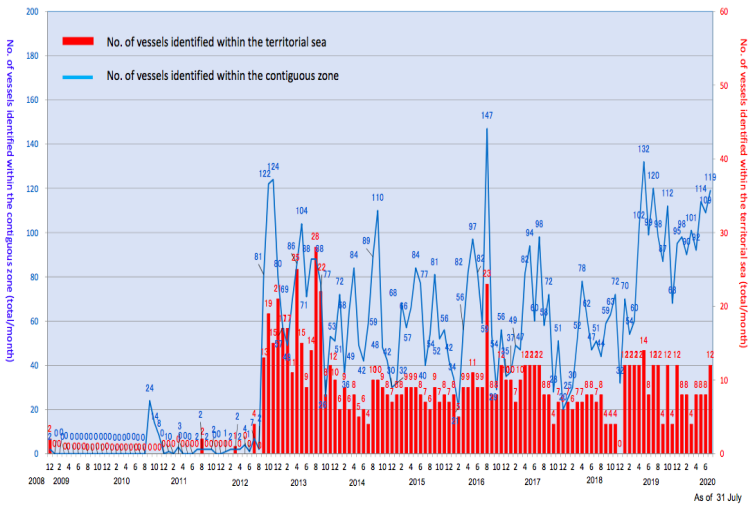
47 *Ibid.*, 59.

48 *Ibid.*, 84.

49 *Ibid.*, 81.

50 Hui-Yi Katherine Tseng, “The Taiwan Dilemma in the Diaoyu/Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands Sovereignty Dispute,” *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 21 (2014): 124.

51 “Trends in Chinese Government and Other Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Senkaku Islands, and Japan’s Response,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 5, 2020, Accessed August 20, 2020, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e\\_000021.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e_000021.html).



**[Picture 1]** The numbers of Chinese government and other vessels that entered Japan’s contiguous zone or Japan’s territorial sea surrounding the Senkaku Islands as of July 31, 2020. (Source: Japan Coast Guard & Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan)

Taiwan’s stance in the three incidents demonstrates its efforts to constrain China and maximize its maneuvering space. Strategically, Japan is a crucial partner because of the indirect security link that unites both countries. During the Ma administration, Taiwan and Japan deepened their partnership by signing various cooperation agreements: the Agreement on flights between Sonshan and Haneda (2009), the Memorandum on Promoting Exchange and Cooperation (2010), the Open Skies Agreement (2011), the Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Electrical Production Clarification (2012), the Taiwan-Japan Fisheries Agreement (2013), the Agreement on Sea Search and Rescue Cooperation (2013), and others.<sup>52</sup> Throughout the same period, the cross-strait relations stabilized and Taiwan was able to induce deeper commitment from Japan. The Fisheries Agreement (2013), which involved the overlapping exclusive economic zones (EEZs) around the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands, was a historic achievement, not just because it took 17 rounds of talks over 17 years, but also because of what the agreement represents. A “without-prejudice clause” ensures that the agreement does not undermine either nations’ sovereignty claims. Unlike any other fisheries agreements, it also stipulates that it

52 Tse-Kang Leng and Nien-chung Chang Liao, “Hedging, Strategic Partnership, and Taiwan’s Relations with Japan Under the Ma Ying-jeou Administration,” *Pacific Focus* 31, no. 3 (December 2016): 371.

aims to “ensure peace and stability in the East China Sea” and “promote friendly and reciprocal cooperation.”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the agreement demonstrates Taiwan’s effort to elevate its status in the international sphere by taking part as a “responsible stakeholder” committed to furthering peace in the Far East, which in turn raises the country’s legitimacy as a *de facto* independent state in the eyes of the international community.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

China’s increased assertiveness throughout the last decade has been perceived as growing aggressiveness by both Taiwan and Japan. Because of an indirect security link, the two nations share the perception of threat even if China’s aggression is directed toward one side. The shared threat perception has pushed the two countries closer. They are now forming an unofficial partnership in hedging China. Regarding unification and the post-Cold War structure of the Far East, Japan and Taiwan firmly believe in maintaining the status-quo indefinitely. It follows that, according to both countries, China’s behaviors in the Senkaku/Diaoyutai/Diaoyu disputes represent acts of “infringement” of rules of the game, which have historically maintained peace and governed relations in the Far East. China’s behavior has become unpredictable and Japan and Taiwan’s threat perception has increased significantly, which explains their anomalous position in Asia with regards to the new Hong Kong Security Law. Although both countries hope to maintain a peaceful and normal relation with China, infringement on the status quo represents a challenge for the existing system and is likely to be interpreted as Chinese aggression or domination. Japan draws the line at the Taiwan issue.<sup>55</sup> When China increases its assertiveness and aggressiveness towards Taiwan, Xi’s administration inadvertently increases the possibility of Japan’s official rearmament.

Other factors contributing to mutual threat perception should be further noted. Firstly, as emphasized in the Japanese Diplomatic Bluebook, both Japan and Taiwan share “basic values such as freedom, democracy, basic human rights, and the rule of law.” As Farnham argues, regime types, domestic political norms, and democratic norms are strong indicators in the *observation* and *appraisal* of perception of threat. When juxtaposed against China’s undemocratic one-party system, shared values increase the level of mutual perception of threat. Secondly, the historical memory of Japan’s colonization of Taiwan plays an important part in the two countries’ mutual understanding of the political context. After the decolonization of Taiwan, positive

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53 “The Taiwan-Japan Fisheries Agreement — Embodying the Ideals and Spirit of the East China Sea Peace Initiative,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), August 2013.

54 “The Taiwan-Japan Fisheries Agreement — Embodying.”

55 Andrea A. Fischetti and Antoine Roth, “Taiwan is where Japan draws the line,” *Tokyo Review*, July 25, 2020, <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2020/07/taiwan-is-where-japan-draws-the-line/>.

memories of the colonization were used to shape a Taiwan-centric national identity.<sup>56</sup> Taiwan, thus, stands out among Japan's neighbors (i.e. China and South Korea) as the only country to remember positively its colonial past.

Shared threat perception is yet to be theorized and explored further. This paper used the China factor in the Japan-Taiwan relations as a case study and found that the indirect security link between Japan and Taiwan is an important factor in their mutual understanding of threat perception. Although dealt with only slightly, democratic values and mutual understanding of a certain historical narrative also appear to be contributing factors. More case studies should be examined to theorize the shared perception of threat and understand how it encourages cooperative behavior between states.

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56      Yinan He, "Identity Politics and Foreign Policy: Taiwan's Relations with China and Japan, 1895-2012." *Political Science Quarterly* 129, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 472.