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## **Mapping the Unknown and Thinking the Unthinkable: How US Allies Might Respond in a Crisis over Taiwan**

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# MAPPING THE UNKNOWN AND THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE: HOW US ALLIES MIGHT RESPOND IN A CRISIS OVER TAIWAN

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## ABSTRACT

*While a conflict in the Taiwan Strait is neither imminent nor inevitable, it is becoming increasingly imaginable. As the United States grapples with questions of how to maintain deterrence to prevent a war, and how to win a war if deterrence fails, it views its alliances in the Indo-Pacific as a unique strength that can help mitigate China's geographic advantages. At the same time, the level of support these allies would offer is unknown. Nonetheless, the decisions that Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea make during a conflict over Taiwan would have enormous implications for their relations with the United States.*

**KEYWORDS:** TAIWAN, CHINA, JAPAN, SOUTH KOREA, PHILIPPINES, AUSTRALIA, ALLIANCES, CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS, DEFENSE POLICY

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## INTRODUCTION

This special series of *EWC Occasional Papers* is the result of the 2023 *Taiwan & Asia Program Conference* entitled “Washington-Taipei-Beijing Relations at a Crossroads: the 2024 Elections and Geostrategic Implications from the Individual, Domestic, and International Levels of Analysis,” which was hosted by Ramapo College of New Jersey and sponsored by the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) in Washington, DC. The conference organizers gratefully acknowledge the intellectual contributions of the speakers and discussants in providing their views, research observations, and comments to improve the manuscripts as well as the East-West Center in Washington and its editors for reviewing and publishing this series.

Taiwan is the likeliest venue for a conflict between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China), two nuclear-armed powers with the world’s two largest militaries and its two largest economies.<sup>1</sup> While a war over Taiwan is neither imminent nor inevitable, it is becoming increasingly imaginable. If one were to erupt, the United States and China would likely be involved in a conflict marked by the most intense fighting since World War II, with thousands of casualties on both sides and almost incalculable global economic consequences.

A conflict in the Taiwan Strait would force US allies in the Indo-Pacific (Australia, Japan, Philippines, and South Korea) to make difficult decisions that could determine the future of their region and their relationship with the United States. If the United States chose to directly intervene on Taiwan’s behalf and American lives were at stake, it would expect its allies to fully support and contribute to that intervention, even if doing so opens them up to Chinese retaliation. US allies would thus be faced with a stark choice: support US operations and risk a forceful Chinese response or remain on the sidelines and risk rupturing the alliance that underpins their security.

US allies must also reckon with what the Indo-Pacific would look like after a Chinese takeover of Taiwan. China would become the region’s dominant power; its navy would be able to control the South China Sea, seal major chokepoints, and project power beyond the first island chain. Beijing could be expected to convert this substantial military power and presence into even greater economic might as it would have the ability to target seaborne commerce in East Asia. With the diminishment of US power and credibility, allies would have to choose to either pursue greater strategic autonomy – potentially including developing nuclear weapons – or to accommodate China’s interests in the hope that doing so moderates its behavior.

The dire consequences of a conflict make clear that maintaining deterrence and preventing Chinese aggression against Taiwan is far more preferable. For the United States, its allies are a top asymmetric advantage over China. Given the significant geographic limitations it faces, the United States would need substantial support from these regional allies – above all Japan – if it were to come to Taiwan’s defense. Indeed, the United States cannot defend Taiwan without the use of bases and facilities located on its allies’ territory and given China’s military modernization, it likely needs far greater support from these partners.

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Sejong Research Institute’s “2023 Forum on the US-ROK-Japan Nuclear Strategy” in Seoul, South Korea on November 30, 2023.

As China's military power continues to grow, US allies can also play a critical role in bolstering deterrence. Faced with an increasingly capable, assertive, and risk-acceptant China, the United States will need to substantially boost coordination and preparation with its allies, with the aim of sowing doubt in the minds of China's leaders that an attack will succeed.

Although US allies are beginning to grapple with the implications of Chinese aggression against Taiwan and the need to prepare for such contingencies, just how much support they would offer is unclear. This unanswered question also opens the door for divergent expectations during a crisis, which could significantly strain and even irreparably damage Washington's relationships with its allies. Beijing would attempt to split US alliances by spreading the narrative that the United States is dragging its allies into a war they should have no part of. It could then potentially refrain from attacking those allies until the United States commences operations from their territory to defend Taiwan.

To avoid such fissures, boost deterrence, and enable an effective defense of Taiwan, the United States must work with its Indo-Pacific allies to define roles and responsibilities during Taiwan contingencies, optimize their collective capabilities and preparedness, increase interoperability, and pursue greater trilateral and multilateral cooperation. Doing so will be difficult as other threats persist. But it is essential to prevent what would be a calamitous conflict that would reshape the world.

## A CHANGING CONTEXT AND EVOLVING CALCULATIONS

From Beijing's perspective, Taiwan is an integral part of the PRC's territory that must be returned, by force if necessary. It defines the Taiwan issue as a question of sovereignty and "the core of the core interests of China" that is not subject to negotiation. In the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) narrative, Taiwan's continued separation serves as a reminder that its civil war remains unfinished and is an injustice that it continues to bear because it was weak in the face of foreign aggression.<sup>2</sup> In the PRC, Taiwan is deeply entwined with modern Chinese nationalism and national identity.

While its position on Taiwan has been clear and consistent since the PRC's founding in 1949, for decades China lacked the requisite military capabilities to take the island by force. As a result, it was willing to put the pursuit of Taiwan on the backburner in favor of prioritizing economic development. But this appears to be changing. Over the past two decades, China has undertaken the largest peacetime military build-up in history, focusing on the capabilities it would need to take over Taiwan. In addition, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has demonstrated an increased appetite for risk-taking, a comfort with exercising military power, and a desire to resolve the "Taiwan question" on his watch.

Indeed, the largest – and ultimately unanswerable – question revolves around Xi's intentions and what he might do with China's growing military and economic power. While Xi has not put forward a timetable to achieving unification, he has repeatedly linked it to China's "rejuvenation," which he says must be achieved by 2049. Beijing's 2022 white paper on Taiwan, for instance, asserts that unification

<sup>2</sup> As China stated in its 2022 white paper on Taiwan, "from the mid-19th century, due to the aggression of Western powers and the decadence of feudal rule, China...went through a period of suffering worse than anything it had previously known...Japan's 50-year occupation of Taiwan epitomized this humiliation...The fact that we have not yet been reunified is a scar left by history on the Chinese nation." The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era," August 2022, available at: [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202208/10/content\\_WS62f34f46c6d02e533532f0ac.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202208/10/content_WS62f34f46c6d02e533532f0ac.html).

“is indispensable” and “an essential step” for achieving national rejuvenation.<sup>3</sup> Xi’s subsequent report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China notes that “resolving the Taiwan question and realizing China’s complete reunification is...a natural requirement for realizing the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”<sup>4</sup> In his March 2023 speech to the National People’s Congress, Xi asserted that achieving unification “is the essence of national rejuvenation.”<sup>5</sup>

Given that Xi’s age would likely prevent him from ruling China in 2049, the question turns to whether he has committed to resolving this issue sooner and is thus working under tighter constraints. Xi has stated that the Taiwan issue “cannot be passed from generation to generation,” which could mean that he is determined not to hand this off to his successor.<sup>6</sup> Xi clearly sees himself as a pivotal leader in Chinese history, but it is unclear how he would seek to substantiate such a claim, especially as China encounters serious economic and societal challenges. Taking Taiwan, something that eluded even Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, would cement his place in history.

Beyond a desire to burnish his legacy, Xi could also be driven by the need to rebuild the foundation of the CCP’s political legitimacy, which for over four decades has been premised on sustained economic growth. As China’s economy struggles under the weight of an aging and shrinking population, slowing productivity growth, and high levels of debt, Xi could turn to Taiwan as a distraction from these issues to rally support for the CCP and his personal rule.

Beyond statements of intent, Xi’s government has increased military intimidation, diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and disinformation campaigns against Taiwan. These coercive activities are intended to erode the Taiwanese public’s confidence in US support, undermine its elected government, and convince its people that unification with China is inevitable and, therefore, resistance is dangerous and ultimately futile.

China’s growing pressure on Taiwan, its improving military capabilities, and official statements from Beijing raise concern in Washington and in capitals throughout the world that a conflict is becoming more likely. As this analysis has become more prevalent, so too has an appreciation for Taiwan’s importance and US commitments to Taiwan.

While the United States severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan (officially the Republic of China) in 1979 and recognized “the Government of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China,” it does not take a position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan and views its ultimate status as undetermined.<sup>7</sup> Under the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), the United States considers “any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States.” The TRA also requires the United States to provide Taiwan with defensive arms and to maintain the

<sup>3</sup> The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and the State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era,” August 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Xi Jinping, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism With Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects,” report to the Twentieth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 16, 2022, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/11cnSr-gMAbMv1XF4FzseClcGL05LhF\\_k/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/11cnSr-gMAbMv1XF4FzseClcGL05LhF_k/view).

<sup>5</sup> State Council Information Office, “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Speech at First Session of 14th NPC,” People’s Republic of China, March 15, 2023, [http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/topnews/2023-03/15/content\\_85168965.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/topnews/2023-03/15/content_85168965.htm).

<sup>6</sup> “Full Text: Speech by Xi Jinping at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the CPC,” Xinhua, July 1, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c\\_1310038244.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038244.htm); Ben Blanchard, “China’s Xi Says Political Solution for Taiwan Can’t Wait Forever,” Reuters, October 6, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asia-apec-china-taiwan/chinas-xi-says-political-solution-for-taiwan-cant-wait-forever-idUSBRE99503Q20131006>.

<sup>7</sup> American Institute in Taiwan, “US-PRC Joint Communiqué (1979),” January 1, 1979, <https://www.ait.org/tw/u-s-prc-joint-communicue-1979>.

capacity 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.” At the same time, the TRA leaves ambiguous whether the United States would defend Taiwan against a PRC attack.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these commitments to Taiwan, for decades the United States viewed Taiwan as an issue to be managed and an impediment to more productive US-China relations. As the United States sought to partner with the PRC to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War and then shifted to pursuing close economic and trade ties with China, Taiwan was largely viewed as a thorn in its side. But in recent years this context has fundamentally changed. Taiwan’s democratization, its willingness to partner with the United States on global issues, and its position as a critical economic partner have combined to create the foundation for a deep bilateral relationship.

Meanwhile, Beijing and Washington were unable to identify a new strategic rationale for the relationship following the end of the Cold War. Economic ties, which had acted as a ballast, became a source of friction and frustration. Growing Chinese assertiveness in the region, including coercion of US allies and attempts to revise the US-led international order, also led to the conclusion that Beijing is the United States’ primary geopolitical challenger.

As a result of these dynamics, there is a growing appreciation in the United States for Taiwan’s importance and there are increasing calls to safeguard its current de facto independent status. The United States has vital strategic interests at stake in the Taiwan Strait, namely:

- Security: If the PRC were to gain control of Taiwan and station its military on the island, it could project power far beyond the first island chain, which stretches from Japan through Taiwan and down to the Philippines. With that broken, the United States would be unable to operate freely in international waters in the Western Pacific and would find it significantly more difficult to defend its allies.<sup>9</sup>
- Alliances: Should the United States fail to counter Chinese military aggression against Taiwan, its allies would have grave doubts as to whether they could rely on the United States for their security, especially extended deterrence. They would then have to choose to either accommodate China or pursue strategic autonomy, potentially including developing nuclear weapons.
- Economic stability and prosperity: A conflict in the Taiwan Strait, regardless of whether the United States chose to intervene on Taiwan’s behalf, would trigger an immediate and prolonged worldwide economic depression that would shave trillions of dollars off economic output. Given Taiwan’s dominant position in the global semiconductor industry, most companies would struggle to make much of anything that contains technology, which would profoundly disrupt people’s lives throughout the world.
- Global order: In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a Chinese annexation of Taiwan against the will of the Taiwanese people would be yet another demonstration that countries can unilaterally redraw borders, further undermining the most basic tenet of international rules and norms.
- Democracy: If the PRC were to take control of Taiwan, whether by force or coercion, it would extinguish a liberal democracy, with chilling effects on societies around the world.

<sup>8</sup> Taiwan Relations Act, H.R. 2479, 96th Cong. (1979), <https://www.ait.org.tw/policyhistory/taiwan-relations-act>.

<sup>9</sup> Brendan Rittenhouse and Caitlin Talmadge, “The Consequences of Conquest: Why Indo-Pacific Power Hinges on Taiwan,” *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 4 (July/August 2022), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-06-16/consequences-conquest-taiwan-indo-pacific>.

A heightened appreciation for its interests in the Taiwan Strait and an increased apprehension regarding China's intentions have led the United States to prioritize preparing for Taiwan contingencies. As one senior Department of Defense official remarked, the Pentagon now views China as its pacing challenge and Taiwan as the pacing scenario.<sup>10</sup>

Given the formidable military challenge China poses, the United States cannot effectively defend Taiwan alone. Indeed, the PRC might soon believe that it could neutralize US military power in the Taiwan Strait. Deterrence will be strengthened, however, if China is forced to assume US allies would actively support and even participate in US operations. Contingency planning thus needs to include close consultations with US allies and candid discussions about expectations, roles, and responsibilities.

## JAPAN

Japan is by far the most critical US ally for a defense of Taiwan, a result of its geography, the scale of the US military presence in the country, and Japan's military capabilities.<sup>11</sup> Japan hosts 54,000 US troops, as well as the largest overseas-based US Navy fleet (the Seventh Fleet), and the United States' only forward-deployed carrier strike group.<sup>12</sup> The United States' only forward-deployed Marine expeditionary force is headquartered in Okinawa (with an air group with operational F-35 and KC-130J squadrons in Iwakuni). This gives the United States a "ready force" in Japan that is capable of responding to a crisis and conducting major combat operations.

Japan's geographical proximity to Taiwan ultimately makes these capabilities relevant to Taiwan contingencies. Yonaguni Island, the westernmost point of Japan, is only 110 kilometers from Taiwan, while Japan's Southwest Islands offer critical proximity to Taiwan for military operations. Kadena Air Base, the United States' largest military installation in the Indo-Pacific not on US territory, is one of only two US air bases (both in Okinawa) from which fighter jets can conduct unrefueled operations over Taiwan. Without the ability to use these bases, the United States would have to operate largely from Guam, 2,770 kilometers from Taiwan, greatly hindering its ability to respond promptly and effectively to Chinese aggression against Taiwan.

In addition to enabling US operations, Japan can also make significant, and potentially decisive, contributions to a US-led effort to defend Taiwan. Japan's military—officially the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF)—has relevant cutting-edge capabilities, including a layered missile defense architecture, sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), undersea and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities, an advanced air force that can maintain air superiority in the skies above Japan, and proficiency offering rear area support. Japan could employ these capabilities to defend sea lines of communication, conduct chokepoint control and minesweeping operations, defend US forces operating from Japan, cut off military supply shipments to China, and prevent China's military from breaking out of the first island chain.

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<sup>10</sup> US Department of Defense, "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America," October 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>; *Future of US Policy on Taiwan* (testimony of Ely Ratner).

<sup>11</sup> This discussion draws on Sacks, *Enhancing US-Japan Coordination*.

<sup>12</sup> Commander, US 7th Fleet, "Facts Sheet," accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.c7f.navy.mil/About-Us/Facts-Sheet/>.

Japan is also potentially the most willing ally to assist the United States because a Chinese attack on Taiwan poses the starkest threat to its own security. If China were to station military forces on Taiwan, the PLA would be perilously close to Japanese territory, making it far more difficult for Japan to protect its sovereignty. In addition, given that China views the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands as a part of “Taiwan Province,” it could attempt to seize them during a conflict over Taiwan.

A successful Chinese annexation of Taiwan would also undermine Japan’s economic security and prosperity. Over 40 percent of Japan’s maritime trade passes through the South China Sea and the country imports over 90 percent of its energy supply. With control over Taiwan and its military installations throughout the South China Sea, China could threaten Japan’s import-dependent economy.<sup>13</sup>

Recognizing these implications, Japanese leaders have been publicly highlighting Tokyo’s stake in cross-strait peace and stability. In 2021, Japan’s Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide and US President Joe Biden included a clause on Taiwan in their joint statement, the first time the two countries mentioned Taiwan in a leader-level joint statement in five decades.<sup>14</sup> Later that year, former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo declared, “A Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency, and therefore an emergency for the Japan-US alliance.”<sup>15</sup> Japan’s Prime Minister Kishida Fumio has argued that the “front line of the clash between authoritarianism and democracy is Asia, and particularly Taiwan.”<sup>16</sup>

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and China’s decision to launch missiles over Taiwan that landed in Japan’s exclusive economic zone to protest then-US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan have further clarified the stakes for Japanese leaders. Kishida drew an explicit parallel between Ukraine and Taiwan, declaring, “We must...never tolerate a unilateral attempt to change the status quo by the use of force in the Indo Pacific, especially in East Asia. Ukraine may be East Asia tomorrow.” He added, “Peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is critical not only for Japan’s security but also for the stability of international society.”<sup>17</sup> In early 2023, Kishida became the first Japanese prime minister to visit a war zone when he traveled to Kyiv. This trip underscored Japan’s growing willingness to play an active role in geopolitics.<sup>18</sup>

Japan’s landmark 2022 national security strategy formalized this major shift, describing Japan’s security environment as “the most severe and complex...since the end of World War II.”<sup>19</sup> In late 2022 Japan announced that it would increase its defense budget by 65 percent over the next five years and create a Permanent Joint Headquarters that would make its military more operationally effective. It also

<sup>13</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, “How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?,” <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea>.

<sup>14</sup> Takuya Mizorogi, “Japan and EU Name Taiwan in Joint Statement for First Time,” *Nikkei Asia*, May 28, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-and-EU-name-Taiwan-in-joint-statement-for-first-time>.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Blanchard, “Former PM Abe says Japan, US could not stand by if China attacked Taiwan,” Reuters, November 30, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/former-pm-abe-says-japan-us-could-not-stand-by-if-china-attacked-taiwan-202112-01>.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Landers, “Japan Prime Minister Contender Takes Harder Line on Missile-Strike Ability,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/contender-for-japan-leader-sees-need-for-missile-strike-ability-11631015401>.

<sup>17</sup> Kylie MacLellan, “Ukraine Plight Could Be Replicated in East Asia, Japan’s Kishida Warns,” Reuters, May 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/peace-stability-taiwan-strait-is-critical-japanese-pm-2022-05-05>.

<sup>18</sup> Office of the President of Ukraine, “Joint Statement on Special Global Partnership Between Ukraine and Japan,” March 21, 2023, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/spilna-zayava-pro-osoblive-globalne-partnerstvo-mizh-ukrayin-81717>.

<sup>19</sup> Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, “National Security Strategy of Japan,” December 2022, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>.



committed to acquiring long-range strike capabilities, the core of which will be roughly 400 Tomahawk missiles, and subsequently expedited that procurement.<sup>20</sup> Japan is also reportedly expanding its military presence in its southwest Kyushu region, establishing a squadron of F-35B fighters and a surface-to-ship missile unit in the area.<sup>21</sup>

In 2023, Japan and the United States made significant strides to advance their alliance, including the US decision to establish its first forward-deployed Marine littoral regiment in Okinawa. In an apparent reference to Taiwan, the countries “renewed their commitment to oppose any unilateral change to the status quo by force regardless of the location in the world.” They also “reiterated the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite Japan’s public statements of concern regarding potential Chinese aggression against Taiwan and its initial steps to bolster deterrence, the extent to which Japan would actively participate in a Taiwan contingency is unknown. This uncertainty is mainly due to Japan’s long-standing constitutional limits on the use of military force for anything other than self-defense. Japan likely also does not want to be more definitive than the United States, which through its policy of strategic ambiguity also declines to state whether it would intervene on Taiwan’s behalf.

Japan also must consider the costs of assisting Taiwan or the United States during a conflict. If Japan were to allow the United States to use bases in Japan to conduct operations in defense of Taiwan, those bases could come under attack. China could also choose to target Japanese assets— such as ballistic missile defense units—that are supporting US operations. China is Japan’s largest trading partner and could retaliate by significantly curtailing bilateral trade, including cutting off the export of strategic items. China could also attempt to interdict critical shipments of oil and gas to Japan.

On balance, though, Japan is likely to, at the very least, enable the US military to operate from military and potentially civilian airfields and ports, while also providing rear-area support such as fuel, ammunition, and maintenance. Direct involvement by Japan’s military, however, is far from certain.

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<sup>20</sup> Ken Moriyasu and Ysuke Takeuchi, “Japan brings forward Tomahawk acquisition by a year,” *Nikkei Asia*, October 5, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/Japan-brings-forward-Tomahawk-acquisition-by-a-year>.

<sup>21</sup> “Japan boosting SDF presence in southwestern area of Kyushu,” *The Japan Times*, October 8, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/10/08/japan/politics/sdf-boosting-presence-kyushu>.

<sup>22</sup> US Department of State, “Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee (‘2+2’),” January 11, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-security-consultative-committee-22>.

	Importance	Likelihood of providing basing access	Likelihood of direct military intervention	Relevant assets	US requests
Japan	Very High	High	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> US forward-deployed carrier strike group</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> US Marine expeditionary force</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> US F-35 and KC-130J squadrons</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> SDF advanced missile defense</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> SDF fighter jets that can maintain air superiority</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> SDF submarines that can conduct chokepoint control</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Bases from which US can conduct unrefueled operations</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ammunition and fuel supplies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Timely approval and unfettered use of military bases and civilian airfields and ports</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Rear area support: Assistance with search and rescue operations, logistical support</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Information and intelligence sharing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Combat operations</li> </ul>

## PHILIPPINES

The Philippines offers critical geographic proximity to Taiwan. Its northernmost inhabited island is only 150 kilometers from Taiwan, while its waters are optimal for deploying submarines. Until recently, however, America's oldest treaty ally in Asia seemed unwilling to play any role during a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, primarily due to broader tensions in the alliance. In recent years, though, the Philippines' stance has begun to evolve. This is both a result of China's heightened aggression in the South China Sea and a change in leadership in Manila.

After the Cold War ended, the US-Philippines alliance lost much of its strategic rationale; when the Philippines failed to renew the bilateral Military Bases Agreement in 1991, the United States withdrew its forces with barely a protest. China soon filled the strategic vacuum by occupying Mischief Reef, a feature located in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, and later seizing Scarborough Shoal.

Judging that China posed a threat to its security, the Philippines sought to revive its alliance with the United States. In 1997, the two countries signed a Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which enabled bilateral military exchanges.<sup>23</sup> In 2014, the defense relationship was deepened through the signing of

<sup>23</sup> "Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Government of the United States of America Regarding the Treatment of United States Armed Forces Visiting the Philippines," February 10, 1998, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1998/02/10/agreement-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-the-philippines-and-the-government-of-the-united-states-of-america-regarding-the-treatment-of-united-states-armed-forces-visiting-the-philippines-f/>.

the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which allows the United States to build infrastructure at agreed-upon Philippine military installations and to strategically locate equipment and rotate forces through those bases. Two years later, the countries designated five Philippine military installations as EDCA sites, with the United States committing US\$82 million to upgrade command and control infrastructure, fuel storage, ammunition warehouses, runway improvements, and aircraft hangars.<sup>24</sup>

Rodrigo Duterte's election as president in 2016 put a halt to this progress. Duterte prioritized closer relations with Beijing with the hope that doing so would lead to a calming of tensions in the South China Sea and open up economic opportunities for the Philippines. He quickly announced an end to joint US-Philippines military exercises and later his intention to cancel the VFA.<sup>25</sup> When China's harassment of the Philippines in the South China Sea continued despite his overtures to Beijing, Duterte dropped his threat to cancel the VFA. Still, the alliance was largely rudderless during Duterte's six-year tenure.

When Ferdinand Marcos Jr. succeeded Duterte as president in 2022, the US-Philippines alliance gained fresh momentum. Marcos Jr. granted the US military access to four additional EDCA sites, three of which are in northern Luzon, only 260 kilometers from Taiwan across the Luzon Strait.<sup>26</sup> The countries have accelerated construction at those sites, while the annual US-Philippines Balikatan exercise has grown larger and more ambitious; 2023 was its largest iteration in history, involving over 17,600 participants.<sup>27</sup>

The Philippines' strategic adjustment is also apparent through other lenses, above all its burgeoning security relationship with Japan. In November 2023, Kishida visited Manila, where he announced a security assistance package for the Philippines and the opening of formal negotiations for a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) that would allow Japanese forces to conduct exercises in and deploy to the Philippines.<sup>28</sup> Importantly, such an agreement would allow for US-Japan-Philippines trilateral military cooperation that would improve their ability to respond during a Taiwan contingency. Japan also pledged to provide patrol vessels and surveillance radars to the Philippine navy, which would help it monitor Chinese activity in the South China Sea. The Philippines followed this announcement by joining a Japan-led multinational naval exercise as an observer for the first time.<sup>29</sup>

As China continues to press its territorial claims and increase its pressure on the Philippines, an assessment of China as a revisionist power that poses a threat has consolidated among national security elites in Manila. This has also influenced the Philippines' perception of cross-strait tensions and sharpened its judgment of the stakes. The country's 2023 National Security Policy notes: "Major concern is also seen in the Cross-Straits relations that has the potential to be the flashpoint in the region. The

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<sup>24</sup> US Embassy Manila, "Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) Fact Sheet," March 20, 2023, <https://ph.usembassy.gov/enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement-edca-fact-sheet>; Center for Strategic Studies, "More Than Meets the Eye: Philippines Upgrades at EDCA Sites," October 12, 2023, <https://amti.csis.org/more-than-meets-the-eye-philippine-upgrades-at-edca-sites>.

<sup>25</sup> "Rodrigo Duterte to end joint US and Philippine military drills," *The Guardian*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/29/rodrigo-duterte-to-end-joint-us-and-philippine-military-drills>.

<sup>26</sup> US Department of Defense, "Philippines, US Announce Locations of Four New EDCA Sites," April 3, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3349257/philippines-us-announce-locations-of-four-new-edca-sites>.

<sup>27</sup> US Marine Corps, "US-Philippine Forces Sink Target Ship for First Time in Balikatan Exercise," April 27, 2023, <https://www.marines.mil/News/News-Display/Article/3376383/us-philippine-forces-sink-target-ship-for-first-time-in-balikatan-exercise>.

<sup>28</sup> Sui-Lee Wee and Camille Elemia, "Japan and Philippines, Wary of China, Look to Expand Military Ties," *New York Times*, November 3, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/03/world/asia/japan-philippines-china-defense-agreement.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Mari Yamaguchi, "Philippines Joins Japan-led Naval Drills as Brushes with China Rise in the Disputed South China Sea," *Associated Press*, November 11, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/japan-us-philippines-china-aircraft-carrier-512ef98a1cf43276538ebb22250e60c5>.

Philippines is concerned about its economic stability, a potential influx of refugees, and the welfare of overseas populations. Any military conflict in the Taiwan Strait would inevitably affect the Philippines given the geographic proximity of Taiwan to the Philippine archipelago and the presence of over 150,000 Filipinos in Taiwan.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, China's Ambassador to Manila has warned the Philippines not to get involved in cross-strait issues if it cares for the well-being of its citizens in Taiwan.<sup>31</sup>

While the Philippines' view of China as a strategic threat has hardened, it remains an open question whether the Philippines would allow the United States to use EDCA sites during a Taiwan contingency. The Philippines' foreign affairs secretary has said that the country would not allow the United States to stockpile weapons for use in defending Taiwan, nor would it allow the US military to refuel, repair, and reload at those bases.

Nonetheless, President Marcos Jr. continues to highlight the connection between peace in the Taiwan Strait and the security of the Philippines, assessing, "when we look at the situation in the area, especially the tensions in the Taiwan Strait, we can see that just by our geographical location, should there in fact be conflict in that area...it's very hard to imagine a scenario where the Philippines will not somehow get involved...we feel that we're very much on the front line."<sup>32</sup>

Reflecting these concerns, the May 2023 joint statement between Biden and Marcos Jr. affirmed "the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of global security and prosperity."<sup>33</sup> On that same visit, Marcos Jr. did not clarify whether the United States could place weapons at bases in the Philippines during a Taiwan contingency, but did note that they "will also prove to be useful" if China were to attack Taiwan.<sup>34</sup>

While the US-Philippines alliance has made big strides in recent years, the extent to which the Philippines would support the United States during a conflict over Taiwan largely hinges on the overall state of China-Philippines relations. If China continues to press its claims in the South China Sea and contest the Philippines' occupation of various features, Manila will turn to Washington for assistance. In turn, the Philippines could conclude that it must support such US operations if it expects ongoing support in the South China Sea. The United States, for its part, could also conclude that it should provide the Philippines with stronger support in the South China Sea if it hopes to enlist the Philippines' help in defending Taiwan.

Finally, domestic politics in Manila will play a major role in determining the Philippines' response during Taiwan contingencies. The past decade has shown that the country's president largely sets the direction of the country's foreign policy and thus a decision relating to Taiwan is susceptible to that person's whims.

<sup>30</sup> National Security Council of the Republic of the Philippines, "National Security Policy (NSP) 2023-2028," [https://nsc.gov.ph/images/NSS\\_NSP/National\\_Security\\_Policy\\_Manual\\_FINAL\\_E-COPY\\_with\\_WATERMARK\\_140823.pdf](https://nsc.gov.ph/images/NSS_NSP/National_Security_Policy_Manual_FINAL_E-COPY_with_WATERMARK_140823.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Camille Elemia, "Chinese envoy advises Philippine govt to oppose Taiwan independence," Benar News, April 14, 2023, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/ambassador-speaks-04142023121123.html>.

<sup>32</sup> "Transcript: Philippine President Marcos Speaks With Nikkei Asia," *Nikkei Asia*, February 13, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Transcript-Philippine-President-Marcos-speaks-with-Nikkei-Asia>.

<sup>33</sup> White House, "Joint Statement of the Leaders of the United States and the Philippines," May 1, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/01/joint-statement-of-the-leaders-of-the-united-states-and-the-philippines>.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Martina, Don Durfee, and David Brunnstrom, "Marcos says Philippines bases could be 'useful' if Taiwan attacked," Reuters, May 5, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/marcos-says-philippines-bases-could-be-useful-if-taiwan-attacked-2023-05-05/>.

In addition, there is not a broad consensus on the US-Philippines alliance or policy toward China. As a result, it is possible that certain leaders of the Philippines might enable the United States to make full use of EDCA sites and even provide logistical support, while others would choose to not allow it to conduct any operations from the Philippines and attempt to remain neutral during a conflict.

	Importance	Likelihood of providing basing access	Likelihood of direct military intervention	Relevant assets	US requests
Philippines	Very High	Medium	Low	<input type="checkbox"/> Deepwater ports <input type="checkbox"/> Airfields within artillery range of the Taiwan Strait	<input type="checkbox"/> Use of EDCA sites and related supplies (fuel and ammunition)

## AUSTRALIA

Australia has fought alongside the United States in every major war in the past century, and in recent years the two countries have taken several important steps to expand their security ties and deepen their alliance. For instance, in 2011, as part of the “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia, the Obama administration announced that it would rotate US Marines through an Australian base in Darwin, which has expanded from 200 marines to 2,500.<sup>35</sup>

In September 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States announced a trilateral security agreement (AUKUS). Under this arrangement, the United States and United Kingdom will support Australia’s acquisition of a conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarine capability. The United States will also increase its nuclear-powered submarine port visits to Australia and establish a rotational presence of submarines near Perth.<sup>36</sup> Separately, the United States and Australia have agreed to locate munitions and fuel in Australia to support US capabilities.<sup>37</sup>

Although increased security cooperation between the United States and Australia is not solely or even primarily aimed at deterring a war over Taiwan or preparing for Taiwan contingencies, Washington and Canberra are increasingly focused on Taiwan scenarios. In November 2022, Biden and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese “recognized the imperative of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.” And their October 2023 Joint Leaders’ Statement noted, “We reaffirm the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and our shared opposition to unilateral changes

<sup>35</sup> Office of the Deputy Prime Minister of Australia, “Australia Welcomes United States Marines Back to Darwin,” March 22, 2023, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3338043/australia-welcomes-united-states-marines-back-to-darwin>.

<sup>36</sup> White House, “FACT SHEET: Trilateral Australia-UK-US Partnership on Nuclear-Powered Submarines,” March 13, 2023, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/03/13/fact-sheet-trilateral-australia-uk-us-partnership-on-nuclear-powered-submarines/#:~:text=As%20early%20as%202027%2C%20the,%20\(SRF-West](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/03/13/fact-sheet-trilateral-australia-uk-us-partnership-on-nuclear-powered-submarines/#:~:text=As%20early%20as%202027%2C%20the,%20(SRF-West).

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Hurst, “US to increase rotation of forces to Australia, condemns China’s ‘dangerous and coercive actions’ in region,” *The Guardian*, December 6, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/dec/07/us-to-increase-rotation-of-forces-to-australia-condemns-chinas-dangerous-and-coercive-actions-in-region>.

to the status quo. We call for the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues through dialogue without the threat or use of force or coercion.”<sup>38</sup>

Beyond these statements, Australian political leaders have highlighted the importance of Taiwan, while public opinion surveys reflect these evolving attitudes. In November 2021, Australia’s defense minister stated that it would be “inconceivable” for it to not join a US effort to defend Taiwan.<sup>39</sup> In 2023, Member of Parliament and former prime minister Scott Morrison stated, “this status quo is anchored in preventing conflict, ensuring respect for the autonomy of the people of Taiwan and the maintenance of a strategic balance within the Indo Pacific region... Any violation and/or subjugation of Taiwan would obliterate this balance.”<sup>40</sup> In 2022, for the first time, a slim majority of Australians (51 percent) supported using the Australian military if China invaded Taiwan and the United States chose to intervene—an eight-point increase since 2019.<sup>41</sup>

Given Australia’s distance from Taiwan – the northern Australian city of Darwin is over 4,000 kilometers from Taipei – the direct involvement of Australian forces during a Taiwan conflict is unlikely to prove decisive. The AUKUS initiative, however, would likely impact the level of subsurface capability the United States can bring to bear during a Taiwan contingency. This will be a key domain during a conflict and is one where the United States retains a major advantage over China. Under the auspices of AUKUS, the United States plans to sell up to five Virginia-class attack submarines (SSNs) to Australia beginning in the 2030s.<sup>42</sup>

Yet given constraints in US shipbuilding (the United States can only produce 1.2 Virginia-class submarines per year), every boat that is sold to Australia represents one that the US Navy does not have; as one Congressional Research Service report noted, selling just three submarines to Australia would reduce the size of the US Navy’s SSN force by roughly 6 percent.<sup>43</sup> As a result, it is possible that submarines sold to Australia would either not play a role in Taiwan contingencies (if Australia chose not to intervene) or would not be used as effectively as they would by the US Navy.

In the longer term, however, if Australia meets its objective of establishing a nuclear-powered SSN fleet of eight boats by the mid-2050s, this would be an additional variable that China’s military would have to consider. Anti-submarine warfare remains a major vulnerability for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), one that AUKUS can aggravate. There is also the potential for US submarines to dock at Australian ports and rearm during a conflict over Taiwan. Given this, Australian SSNs could significantly complicate China’s military planning.

<sup>38</sup> White House, “United States-Australia Joint Leaders’ Statement: Building an Innovation Alliance,” October 25, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/25/united-states-australia-joint-leaders-statementbuilding-an-innovation-alliance>.

<sup>39</sup> Lidia Kelly, “‘Inconceivable’ Australia Would Not Join US to Defend Taiwan— Australian Defence Minister,” Reuters, November 12, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/inconceivable-australia-would-not-join-us-defend-taiwan-australiandefence-2021-11-12>. Although Australia’s Defense Minister noted in March 2023 that Canberra did not commit to supporting the United States during a conflict over Taiwan in exchange for access to submarines, that statement only addressed a narrow question on the parameters of the AUKUS arrangement rather than Australia’s strategic interests and decisions. Sam McKeith, “Australia Did Not Vow to Help US Defend Taiwan in Submarine Deal, Minister Says,” Reuters, March 18, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/australia-did-not-promise-us-support-taiwan-submarines-deal-2023-03-19>.

<sup>40</sup> Scott Morrison, “One China 2.0,” address to the Yushan Forum, October 11, 2023, <https://www.scottmorrisonmp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Morrison-Yushan-Forum-2.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> Natasha Kassam, “Lowy Institute Poll 2022,” June 29, 2022, <https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/charts/war-over-taiwan>.

<sup>42</sup> Idrees Ali, Phil Stewart, and Steve Holland, “Exclusive: Australia expected to buy up to 5 Virginia class submarines as part of AUKUS,” Reuters, March 8, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/australia-expected-buy-up-5-virginia-class-submarines-part-aukus-sources-2023-03-08/>.

<sup>43</sup> Congressional Research Service, “Navy Virginia-Class Submarine Program and AUKUS Submarine Proposal: Background and Issues for Congress,” October 23, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL32418>.

	Importance	Likelihood of providing basing access	Likelihood of direct military intervention	Relevant assets	US requests
<b>Australia</b>	Medium-low	High	Medium	<input type="checkbox"/> Australian SSNs (in mid-2050s) and associated ports <input type="checkbox"/> Military bases in Northern Australia (Darwin)	<input type="checkbox"/> Use of Australian ports <input type="checkbox"/> Australia's employment of SSNs

## SOUTH KOREA

Taiwan and South Korea (also known by its official name, the Republic of Korea, or ROK) are both liberal democracies and open societies that must contend with a nuclear-armed authoritarian neighbor that covets their territory. As one South Korean scholar has written, “Both South Koreans and Taiwanese citizens share a liberal aspiration to preserve their individual rights and protect their freedoms from being forced to sacrifice for the glory of national unification.”<sup>44</sup>

While South Korea might empathize with the challenge Taiwan faces, its prioritization of developments on the Korean Peninsula means that it has only begun to grapple with the question of how it would respond to Taiwan contingencies. A conflict in the Taiwan Strait would present South Korea with stark choices, and the decisions its government makes could very well dictate the country's future strategic direction. If South Korea assists the United States in defending Taiwan, China may encourage or even pressure North Korea – which supports China's claim to Taiwan – to attack South Korea in an attempt to open up a second front. Such a scenario would present the United States with grave operational dilemmas.

China's economic punishment of South Korea in response to its decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system is also fresh in the minds of policymakers in Seoul. They worry that a robust response to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would lead to crippling economic retaliation from its largest trading partner. However, a failure to provide meaningful assistance to the United States if it chose to directly defend Taiwan could very well lead to the dissolution of the US-ROK alliance.

Maintaining deterrence on the Korean Peninsula is understandably the top priority for South Korea's leadership, which believes that a conflict in the Taiwan Strait could embolden North Korea. As South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol stated in 2022, “In the case of military conflict around Taiwan, there would be increased possibility of North Korean provocation. Therefore...we must deal with the North

<sup>44</sup> Sungmin Cho, "Nationalism versus liberalism: A South Korean view of Taiwan issues," The Brookings Institution, May 5, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/nationalism-versus-liberalism-a-south-korean-view-of-taiwan-issues>.

Korean threat first.”<sup>45</sup> Consistent with that message, South Korea’s Vice Defense Minister Shin Beom-chul stated that “There haven’t been any discussions” between the South Korean and American militaries on South Korea’s role during Taiwan contingencies.<sup>46</sup>

South Korea is concerned that the United States would seek to use some of its forces on the Korean Peninsula to respond to Chinese aggression against Taiwan, which may in turn prompt North Korea to see a window of opportunity for aggression. They fear the United States could even ask South Korea to assist its operations, potentially either undermining deterrence or dragging Seoul into a conflict. During the United States’ war on terror, the George W. Bush administration sought “strategic flexibility” in the use of US forces on the Korean Peninsula, which led the Roh Moo-hyun administration to fear they could potentially be used for a conflict over Taiwan.

This was addressed in an arrangement in which South Korea stated it “fully understands the rationale for the transformation of the US global military strategy, and respects the necessity for strategic flexibility of the US forces in the ROK.” In exchange, the United States stated that it “respects the ROK position that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people.”<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, discussion about using US forces on the Korean Peninsula for anything other than the defense of South Korea is highly sensitive.

Despite these worries, South Korea has begun to register its stake in preserving cross-strait peace and stability and is gradually becoming more aligned with the United States on this issue. In 2021, a US-ROK Leaders’ Joint Statement mentioned Taiwan for the first time, as the two countries’ presidents emphasized “the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.”<sup>48</sup> The joint statement released the following year went further, reiterating “the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait as an essential element in security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.”<sup>49</sup>

In 2023, President Yoon stated that “the Taiwan issue is not simply an issue between China and Taiwan but, like the issue of North Korea, it is a global issue.”<sup>50</sup> Later, in the Joint Statement issued at Camp David between the United States, Japan, and South Korea, the three countries’ leaders “reaffirm[ed] the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community.”<sup>51</sup> South Korea is likely attempting to signal to China that it should not assume Seoul would remain on the sidelines during a conflict over Taiwan, with the hope that doing so bolsters deterrence.

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<sup>45</sup> Yoon Suk Yeol, Interview with Fareed Zakaria, *Fareed Zakaria GPS*, September 25, 2022, <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/fzgps/date/2022-09-25/segment/01>.

<sup>46</sup> Song Sang-ho, “Seoul official addresses concerns on possible USFK deployment in case of Taiwan crisis,” Yonhap News Agency, September 22, 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220922007400325>.

<sup>47</sup> US Department of State, “United States and the Republic of Korea Launch Strategic Consultation for Allied Partnership,” January 19, 2006, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/59447.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> White House, “US-ROK Leaders’ Joint Statement,” May 21, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement>.

<sup>49</sup> White House, “United States-Republic of Korea Leaders’ Joint Statement,” May 21, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/21/united-states-republic-of-korea-leaders-joint-statement>.

<sup>50</sup> Soyoung Kim, Ju-min Park, and Hyonhee Shin, “Exclusive: South Korea’s Yoon opens door for possible military aid to Ukraine,” Reuters, April 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-yoon-opens-door-possible-military-aid-ukraine-2023-04-19>.

<sup>51</sup> White House, “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” August 18, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states>.



As tensions have increased in the Taiwan Strait, the South Korean public has taken note of the implications of a war in the Taiwan Strait for their country's security and the US-ROK alliance. According to a survey of South Koreans conducted after then-US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in 2022, 42 percent advocated providing rear area support for US military operations during a Taiwan contingency, 22.5 percent supported direct South Korean military intervention alongside US forces, and only 18 percent opposed any involvement.<sup>52</sup>

This surprisingly robust support for involvement in Taiwan contingencies likely reflects a growing recognition among South Koreans that the country's response during a Taiwan contingency would be viewed in the United States as a litmus test for the alliance. It could also impact US perceptions of defending South Korea if Seoul is seen as not contributing to a US-led effort to defend Taiwan. In addition, there would be major economic consequences for South Korea if China were to gain control of Taiwan. Eighty percent of South Korea's energy imports transit the Taiwan Strait; if China were to gain control of Taiwan, it would be able to control those vital sea lanes and gain even more economic leverage over South Korea.

A broad downturn in South Korea's relations with China has also impacted perceptions of China. The THAAD incident demonstrated China's expectation that Seoul defer to Beijing's strategic interests and its willingness to weaponize South Korea's economic dependence on China. There is also a growing realization in Seoul that China will continue to shield North Korea and will not rein in its nuclear program, regardless of South Korea's moves to placate China.<sup>53</sup> As a result, there is less incentive for South Korea to acquiesce to China's wishes on Taiwan or other issues.

The South Korean public also now views China skeptically, with one 2022 survey finding that China was its most negatively perceived country. Eighty-one percent registered negative attitudes toward China; in fact, South Koreans have among the most negative views toward China in the world.<sup>54</sup> Another survey found that while only 37 percent of South Koreans viewed China unfavorably prior to the THAAD incident, 77 percent viewed it unfavorably in 2021 (the most recent year the survey was conducted).<sup>55</sup> These trends signal that South Korea is now far more likely to think about cooperating with the United States to defend Taiwan.

During a Taiwan contingency, the United States would likely request rear area support from South Korea. It likely would not expect South Korea's military to participate in combat operations but would instead look for South Korea to maintain deterrence on the Korean Peninsula to prevent a wider conflict from erupting, thereby freeing up US assets. The United States would likely ask to use South Korean military bases to move some of its 28,500 troops off the Peninsula, and for South Korea to provide logistical support for US operations.

<sup>52</sup> Jeong Jin-woo, "What if war breaks out in the Taiwan Strait? Six out of ten citizens 'support the United States' [30 years of diplomatic relations between Korea and China] (대만해협서 전쟁 난다면? 국민 열에 여섯은 '미국 지원' [한·중 수교 30년])," The JoongAng, August 22, 2022, <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25096081#home>.

<sup>53</sup> Jung H. Pak, "Trying to Loosen the Linchpin: China's Approach to South Korea," The Brookings Institution, July 2020, . [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FP\\_20200606\\_china\\_south\\_korea\\_pak\\_v2.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FP_20200606_china_south_korea_pak_v2.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> Richard Q. Turcsányi, Klára Dubravčíková, Su-Jeong Kang, James Iocovozzi, Matej Šimalčík, and Lucia Husenicová, "South Korean public opinion on the world in times of global turmoil," Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2022, [https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Korean-poll-finaldraft-adjustments-3-1\\_rqt-1-2.pdf](https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Korean-poll-finaldraft-adjustments-3-1_rqt-1-2.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Global Indicators Database, Pew Research Center, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/indicator/24>.

The United States has begun to delicately broach this topic, with former United States Forces Korea (USFK) Commander General (ret.) Robert Abrams alluding to potentially “including [personnel] assigned to the USFK” in any response to Taiwan contingencies.<sup>56</sup> During his confirmation hearing for Commander of USFK, General Paul LaCamera staked out a larger regional role for US forces in Korea, stating that he would “advocate for inclusion of USFK forces and capabilities in [United States Indo-Pacific Command] contingency and operational plans supporting US interests and objectives in the region.”<sup>57</sup> He later responded to a question about a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait by noting that USFK does contingency planning for “anything.”<sup>58</sup>

If the United States desires to use some of its assets on the Korean Peninsula for a defense of Taiwan, it will need to make clear both publicly and privately that extended deterrence on the Korean Peninsula remains strong and attempt to allay any South Korean concerns on this front. It should also do more to ensure South Korea has the confidence to both assist US operations during Taiwan contingencies and simultaneously maintain deterrence on the Korean Peninsula.

	<b>Importance</b>	<b>Likelihood of providing basing access</b>	<b>Likelihood of direct military intervention</b>	<b>Relevant assets</b>	<b>US requests</b>
<b>South Korea</b>	Medium	Medium-low	Medium-low	<input type="checkbox"/> Airbases <input type="checkbox"/> Fuel and ammunition <input type="checkbox"/> Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities	<input type="checkbox"/> Assistance with noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO) <input type="checkbox"/> Rear area support, including refueling, ammunition, and maintenance of US platforms such as F-16s and F-35s <input type="checkbox"/> ISR support <input type="checkbox"/> Use of limited US assets for defense of Taiwan

<sup>56</sup> Michael Lee, "Hints dropped that USFK might have to help defend Taiwan," Korea JoongAng Daily, September 27, 2022, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/09/27/national/defense/Korea-Taiwan-South-Korea/20220927162716723.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Paul LaCamera, confirmation hearing before the US Senate Committee on Armed Services, May 14, 2021, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/GEN%20LaCamera%20APQs%2014%20May%202021%20\(FINAL\).pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/GEN%20LaCamera%20APQs%2014%20May%202021%20(FINAL).pdf).

<sup>58</sup> Song Sang-ho, "Seoul official addresses concerns on possible USFK deployment in case of Taiwan crisis," Yonhap News Agency, September 22, 2022, . <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220922007400325>.

## CONCLUSION

While a conflict in the Taiwan Strait is neither imminent nor inevitable, the chances of one occurring are growing. As China's military capabilities increase, its foreign policy turns more assertive, and as Xi Jinping looks to secure his legacy, the urgency of preparing for a conflict grows.

For the United States, its allies in the Indo-Pacific are a source of strength it must leverage to bolster deterrence and defeat Chinese aggression against Taiwan if deterrence fails. For these allies, the decision of whether and to what extent they should support a US-led defense of Taiwan could be the most consequential strategic choice they make in decades. Supporting US operations would make an ally vulnerable to Chinese attacks, but a failure to do so could lead to sharp questions in Washington about the value of these alliances. Indeed, the fate of these alliances could hinge on decisions made in Tokyo, Manila, Canberra, and Seoul during Taiwan contingencies.