

Why Japan-Taiwan Security Talks Matter?

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Security talks between Japan's ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Taiwan's ruling party, The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) happened on 27 August 2021, was realized amid China's increased activities in the Taiwan Strait, East and South China seas as well as being a first for the parties.ⁱ There are two points worth noting here. The first is Japan's recently changed attitude towards Taiwan. The second is Taiwan's recent rapprochement with Japan within the framework of seeking support from major powers in the international system other than the USA. As it is known, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga visited Washington last April and had a meeting with United States President Joe Biden. During the meeting, both leaders emphasized the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Then, in July, two important developments took place in Japan regarding Taiwan. First, Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso stated that "if China invades Taiwan, Japan should defend the island" because it is perceived as a direct existential threat to Japan's security.ⁱⁱ The second important development is that Taiwan's security was mentioned for the first time in the Japan's Annual Defense Review report, which was published just after that. All this shows us that the US administration wants Japan to be more active in the Taiwan Strait and to develop its relations with Taiwan, and Japan sees this positively in terms of its national security.

As for the second point, as it is known, Taiwan has no allies in the international arena and lives under the constant threats of China, which aims to unite the island with mainland China by force if necessary. The most important supporter in the international system is the USA. The sudden withdrawal of the USA from Afghanistan created a concern in Taiwan that the USA might give up on them. In this vein, Taiwan hopes to develop relations and seek support with other great powers. It is important for Taiwan to develop relations with the great powers that have conflicts of interest, especially with China. Japan and India are the first major powers that come to mind in this regard.

But why does Japan consider Taiwan issue important for its national security? Why does Taiwan want to develop relations with major powers other than the United States? First of all, if we evaluate the issue from the point of view of Japan, Taiwan comes to a very important position for Japan in terms of the East China Sea. As an island country that is not rich in natural resources and dependent on global trade, Japan considers the safety and protection of sea lanes important for its national success and existence. After the Second World War and as a result of the San Francisco Peace Treaty signed with the USA in 1952 and the 1960 Mutual Cooperation and Security Treaties, Japan had to rely on the US Navy to ensure the continuation of its foreign trade. But that still doesn't end the existential anxiety for Japan. As Japanese Admiral Takei Tomohisa wrote in 2008, "Japan's national survival relies on unimpeded economic activities via Sea Lines of Communications...Protecting maritime interests and preserving shipping lanes in today's climate has become more challenging...and mitigating factors such as proliferation of Weapons of Mutual Destruction, maritime terrorism, piracy and a constantly global climate compound the security problems surrounding maritime interests".ⁱⁱⁱ The protection of the sea lanes has been the main mission of the Maritime Self-Defense Forces, as Japan considers maritime security to be very important and necessary.

Japan's particular concern for Taiwan's future underlines its concern for maritime safety. As Shigeo Hiramatsu of Kyorin University argues, "If Taiwan unifies with China, East Asia including the sea lanes will fail entirely under the influence of China. The unification of Taiwan will by no means

matter little to Japan”.^{iv} Similarly, Furusho Koichi, former Chief of Staff of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces, claims that “if you assume that conditions are balanced now, they would collapse as soon as Taiwan unifies with China. The sea lanes would turn all red”.^v

Another important issue that makes Taiwan a national security issue for Japan is related to the sovereignty issues over the islands in the East China Sea, which the Japanese call Senkaku and the Chinese call Diaoyu. Because Taiwan has similar arguments and claims with China on the islands. So Taiwan is part of this conflict. However, Taiwan and Japan have solved their sovereignty problems to a certain extent with The Taiwan-Japan fisheries agreement signed in 2013. The provisions of the agreement is as follows; refraining from taking antagonistic actions; shelving controversies and not abandoning dialogue; observing international law and resolving disputes through peaceful means; seeking consensus on a code of conduct in the East China Sea; and establishing a mechanism for cooperation on exploring and developing resources in the East China Sea.^{vi} Therefore, from the point of view of Japan, if Taiwan somehow unites with China, this agreement will be void and Japan will be exempt from an agreement in which it gains an advantage in terms of legitimacy. In addition, if China unites with the island of Taiwan, the Beijing administration will break the first island chain in the East China Sea Sea.

Coming to the reason why Taiwan sought support and to develop relations with major powers other than the USA in the international system, one of the most important reasons for this was the concern created by the sudden withdrawal of the USA from Afghanistan. Because Taiwan wants to continue its existence amid the increasing military activities and influence of the Beijing administration in the East and South China Sea. As it is known, since the USA does not recognize Taiwan as a state, there is no official alliance between Taiwan and the USA. However, relations are carried out through the Taiwan Relations Act, which was enacted in 1979. In the relations developed over this law, the US policy towards Taiwan has been "strategic ambiguity" for a long time. In this regard, the USA has repeatedly stated that it is against China's unilateral and forceful attempts to unify the island and supports Taiwan in this regard.

However, the concerns arising in the Taipei administration after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan led Taiwan to develop its relations with the great powers outside the US and to seek support against China. In this regard, Japan has gained importance for Taiwan as a country where it can both develop its relations and find support. Because both countries are important allies and partners of the USA in the region and Washington administration supports the development of their relations. In addition, the fact that both countries are governed by liberal democratic principles brings the parties closer to each other. However, the main driving factor for Taiwan to negotiate a joint security meeting with Japan has been China's recently increased military activities in the region. As a result, Japan, which does not recognize Taiwan as an official state, considers it essential to develop its relations with Taipei in terms of its national interests and security in the light of the changing balance of power in the Asia-Pacific in recent years. Therefore, it will not be surprising that the relations between the Tokyo and Taipei governments will be further deepened and strengthened and moved to a different dimension in the upcoming period.

ⁱ “Taiwan, Japan Ruling Parties Discuss China, Military Cooperation”, *The Straits Times*, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-looms-large-as-japan-taiwan-ruling-parties-talk-security>, (Accessed Date: 27.08.2021).

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- ii “Deputy PM Says Japan Must Defend Taiwan with U.S.”, *The Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/07/06/national/taro-aso-taiwan-defense/>, (Accessed Date: 30.08.2021).
- iii Takei Tomohisa, “Japan Maritime Self Defense Force in the New Maritime”, *Manuscript*, November 2008, p.3 and 7.
- iv Sigeo Hiramatsu, “After Defeat of DPP, What Are Chinese Submarines Aiming At?”, *Sankei Shimbun*, January 2008, OSCJPP20080130020001.
- v Furusho Koichi was cited in “Japan's Rivalry With China Is Stirring a Crowded Sea”, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/11/world/asia/japans-rivalry-with-china-is-stirring-a-crowded-sea.html>, (Accessed Date: 30.08.2021).
- vi Rafia Dossani and Scott Warren Harold, “Maritime Issues in the East and South China Seas”, *Rand Corporation*, January 2016, p.16.