



**Geo-Economic motivations behind Japan's
security conundrum in Taiwan**

Omkar Bhole, Anuprita Lele, Ishani Kotwal

© Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

Institute of Chinese Studies,

B-371 (3rd floor), Chittaranjan Park,

Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110 019

Landline Telephone: +91-11-4056 4823 Fax: +91-11-23830728

Email: info@icsin.org

Website: www.icsin.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Omkar Bhole holds a master's degree in History and is currently pursuing MA in China studies. He has completed his graduation in history from the University of Mumbai. Omkar has been learning the Mandarin language for the past 4 years and is a keen observer of news related to China. Omkar's interests lie in China's foreign policy, politics, economic transformation and China's environmental policies. With this knowledge, Omkar aims to contribute towards a better understanding of China in India. He is currently doing an internship at the Institute of Chinese Studies.

Anuprita Lele is a student of M.A in China Studies from K.J Somaiya Institute of Dharma Studies. Anuprita wishes to explore various dimensions of China along with the Chinese language, culture and tradition. She has graduated in Microbiology and has been learning Mandarin for the last 4 years and her areas of interest are foreign policy, political science and Science & Technology. She has previously interned at the Indian Council of Cultural Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

Ishani Kotwal has completed her graduation in Arts and Law and is currently pursuing MA in China Studies at Somaiya Vidyavihar University. She has been learning Chinese for the past 5 years and with the increased interest in the language and China, she further wanted to learn more about the country. Ishani would further like to study and research China's various aspects including its foreign policy and domestic and international laws.

Contact: omkar.bhole@somaiya.edu, anuprita.l@somaiya.edu, ishani.kotwal@somaiya.edu

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Abstract

China's growing military presence in Taiwan strait and East China sea has caused significant concerns in Tokyo in recent times. As a result, Taiwan's defence and security has become one of the central themes of Japanese security policies as outlined by its recent defence white paper. 'China threat' is the most crucial reason for Japan's interest in Taiwan's defence as emphasized by previous research related to Taiwan-Japan relations. However, existing research fails to define different aspects of 'China threat' envisaged by Tokyo. Considering geographical proximity between Japan and Taiwan, Chinese control over Taiwan is likely to complicate Sino-Japanese relations. However, it is difficult to analyse these complex relations without understanding motivations that necessitates Japanese response to Chinese aggression in Taiwan. Economic factors like strong bilateral trade relations and Taiwan's strategic location at Japan's energy supply route motivates Tokyo to protect Taipei. This paper attempts to explore and analyse these geo-economic motivations behind Japan's growing engagement in Taiwan and helps in better understanding of Japan-Taiwan relations.

Keywords: Japan, Taiwan, East Asia, China threat, energy security

Introduction

Japan's interests in Taiwan dates back to as early as 1895 when Taiwan was ceded to Japan as its overseas colony after the first Sino-Japanese war. Japan ruled over Taiwan until 1945 and transferred it to then Kuomintang leader Chiang-Kai-Shek. After the Sino-US détente in early 1970s, Japan also parted ways with Taiwan and recognized People's Republic of China government (henceforth referred to as China) in Beijing. This ended the official contact between Tokyo and Taipei.

In later years, Japan preferred to keep safe distance from Taiwan and conduct their bilateral affairs through unofficial consulates based in Taipei. Even when USA passed Taiwan relations act in 1979 to govern the non-diplomatic relations with Taiwan, Japan did not consider passing a similar law to define its relationship with Taiwan and thus always maintained 'non-governmental, working-level relations' (Yoshihide, 2001). Despite this unofficial nature of relationship, both countries have deepened their economic relations which shows that non-existence of official diplomatic relations has not hindered relations in other sectors for both countries.

For China, 'reunification' with Taiwan is viewed as a symbol of its traditional national strength and self-respect (Bergsten et.al, 2009, p.170). Hence, whenever China reiterated its claim over Taiwan under its 'One China' policy, Japanese government earlier chose to remain silent, unlike its western partner USA. Japan always 'hoped' for peaceful resolution of cross-strait tensions.

Many USA officials have already warned about China's growing aggression in Taiwan (Tatsumi, 2021). But recently, many Japanese government officials have also come out with quite decisive language on various platforms, regarding its position on Chinese threat to Taiwan's security. Some scholars refuse to link Japan's recent expressions with the change in its attitude towards Taiwan (Liff, 2021). But it is quite certain that Japan is undergoing a

process where it is more concerned and aware of Taiwan’s security issues and are preparing for possible outcomes that may necessitate Japan’s active role in Taiwan’s defense (Kyodo news, 2021). Following is a list of instances when the issue of Taiwan was directly raised by Japanese authorities in the last one year.

Table 1

Actions by Japan showing its engagement in Taiwan’s independence

Month	Occasion	Mention	Significance
March 2021	USA-Japan Defence Ministers meeting	To closely cooperate in the event of a military conflict between China and Taiwan	First meeting of President Biden administration reflecting USA’s continuing support against any Chinese aggression
April 2021	Japan PM Suga’s USA visit – Joint Statement	Underscore the importance of peace and stability across Taiwan strait and encourage peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues	Mention of ‘Taiwan’ for the first time since 1969 in USA— Japan joint statement
June 2021	Japan’s Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi	The peace and stability of Taiwan is directly connected to Japan	This statement is important to understand interlinking of Taiwan and Japan’s security
July 2021	Japan’s Deputy PM Taro Aso	If a major problem occurred in Taiwan, it would not be going too far to say that it could be an ‘existential threat’ for	It indicates that Japanese policymakers (statement by 2 nd topmost official in the government) are concerned about threat posed by Chinese

		Japan	aggression in Taiwan
July 2021	Defence White paper of Japan	Stabilizing situation surrounding Taiwan is important for Japan's security. It is necessary that we pay close attention to the situation with a sense of crisis	Japan has linked Taiwan's security to its own security and officially called out cross-strait issues as a crisis
December 2021	Japan's former PM Shinzo Abe	Chinese attack on Taiwan would be an emergency for Japan	Although Mr. Abe has left power, but he is still a significant voice within ruling party and his statement certainly indicates Japanese government's concerns over Taiwan issue
January 2022	Annual budget of Japan's Foreign Ministry	Additional 100 million Yen were earmarked for "advancing the Japan-Taiwan relationship	This is the first time since 2012 that Taiwan has been specially mentioned in Japan's annual budget report

(Singh, 2021; Kyodo, 2021; Wilkins, 2021; Liff, 2021; Defense of Japan, 2021; Hille, 2021; Taipei Times, 2022)

CHINA-JAPAN TENSIONS

China and Japan are currently two of the largest economies in the world after USA and they have strong trade and investment relations despite conflictual positions on many issues. Both countries have achieved a certain degree of 'ritualisation' on outstanding issues (Kolar, 2017) which is manifested through regular bilateral diplomatic talks through various platforms to avoid escalation of these issues on ground (Katagiri, 2019). Hence, Sino-Japanese relations seem to have entered a phase of 'Asian paradox' characterized by economic interdependence on one hand and political rivalry on other hand (Lam, 2017).

Due to maritime proximity between both countries, issues over Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) regularly occur due to availability of oil and natural gas reserves, fishing grounds and important shipping lanes (Ogunnoiki, 2020). In addition, Japan's Ryukyu islands and Okinawa prefecture, of which Senkaku islands is one part, are extremely close to Taiwan. Hence, if PRC succeeds in establishing control over Taiwan, it will be a huge security challenge for Japan to protect its own territory from Chinese aggression as well as China's claim over resources in East China sea will strengthen. This will be more difficult for Japan to handle especially when its own self-defence forces are bound by Article 9 of the Japanese constitution which limits their offensive strength (Basu, 2016). Hence, Taiwan's independence is a crucial factor for Japan's own security and also for maintaining their claim over neighbouring maritime area. Thus, Taiwan's independence acts as a tool of 'soft balancing' for Japan against China's rise (Singh, 2021).

Beyond these territorial issues, there are other economic motivations for Japan which keep their policymakers concerned about Taiwan's security. Japan's booming trade with Taiwan has increased in the last few years and both countries have established critical partnership in some economic sectors which can reduce Chinese dominance in their respective trade compositions. Similarly, Japanese dependence on oil and natural gas has increased after Fukushima incident in 2011 which necessitates Japan to ensure seamless energy supply. Therefore, this paper attempts to establish these propositions as some of the motivations that drive Japan's policy towards Taiwan and overall cross-strait tensions.

Most of the research available on the topic of Japan's engagement in Taiwan focus on plausible scenarios of China's attack on Taiwan and how Japan will respond to it considering its own capabilities (Kolar, 2017; Newsham & Self, 2020; Xin, 2021; Wilkins, 2012; Swanstrom & Heck, 2020). However, very less research has been conducted on the reasons behind Japan's concerns in Taiwan's independence. It will be difficult to assess Japan's role in Taiwan issue without knowing motivations that drive Japanese engagement. Historical connection between Japan and Taiwan is certainly one of the most fundamental causes of closer ties between both countries (Usman & Khalid, 2021). However, there are more pertinent and more contemporary

economic reasons behind Japan's growing concerns in keeping Taiwan away from Chinese control.

BILATERAL ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE

Trade has been an enabling factor for many countries, especially in today's globalised world, to develop strong relations with other countries. Japan, as a developed country, is currently one of the largest contributors in global trade. With growing trade, Japan has also built strong bilateral relations with many countries. But some estimates suggest that Japan's contribution in global trade is going to decline significantly by 2050 (Gujrati, 2015). In fact, according to 2021 UNCTAD report, Japan's share in global exports has already declined from 7.3% in 2000 to 3.6% in 2020 and it is further estimated to be declined to 2.4% by 2050 (Gujrati, 2015). To avoid this, Japan needs to build stronger supply chains which involve Taiwan as an important element.

On the other hand, Taiwan is also emerging as a major trading partner in the global trade and constantly contributing over 2% in total global trade (UNCTAD, 2021). This is despite the fact that majority of countries do not have official diplomatic relations with Taiwan. With respect to Japan-Taiwan economic engagement, Taiwan is an important location for overseas branches of many Japanese companies (Jung and Tseng, 2013). In future, economic interdependence is expected to deepen between two of the major economies in Asia-Oceania region (Tatsumi and Kennedy, 2021, p.16). Especially, Japan needs Taiwan for supply chain resiliency of semiconductors as an alternative to China (Japan Times, 2021).

With respect to Japan-China trade relations, there has been a significant increase in trade volume in the last 5 years. But this was largely due to China's shift towards Japan due to Sino-USA trade war (Eves, 2020). Similarly, Japan also tried to pacify existing tensions with China by increasing its economic engagements with China (Tamaki, 2020). But this is likely to change under Biden administration which is keen on engaging with China and also ready to

support Japan to maintain balance of power in East Asia. Hence, this phase of boom in economic cooperation is expected to be short-lived and other outstanding issues between China and Japan are likely to come to the forefront very soon. This includes concerns about China ‘s alleged Intellectual property thefts, restrictions on market access and unfair subsidies to SOEs (Schoff & Ito, 2019). Recently, Japan has appealed in World Trade Organization against China’s unfair imposition of anti-dumping measures on Japanese stainless-steel products (WTO, 2021). In this scenario, if China controls Taiwan, Japan will lose a major trading partner.

According to Japan’s Foreign Affairs ministry, Japanese exports to Taiwan were worth \$45.9 billion while imports from Taiwan accounted for \$23.4 billion in 2020. Data suggests Taiwan was Japan’s 4th largest trading partner whereas Japan was Taiwan’s 3rd largest trading partner in 2019 (Bureau of Foreign Trade, 2020). The exports mainly consisted of electric equipment, machinery, metal products, telecommunication equipment, and chemical products. While imports from Japan to Taiwan mainly consist of machinery, electric equipment, chemical products, metal products, plastic and rubber products.

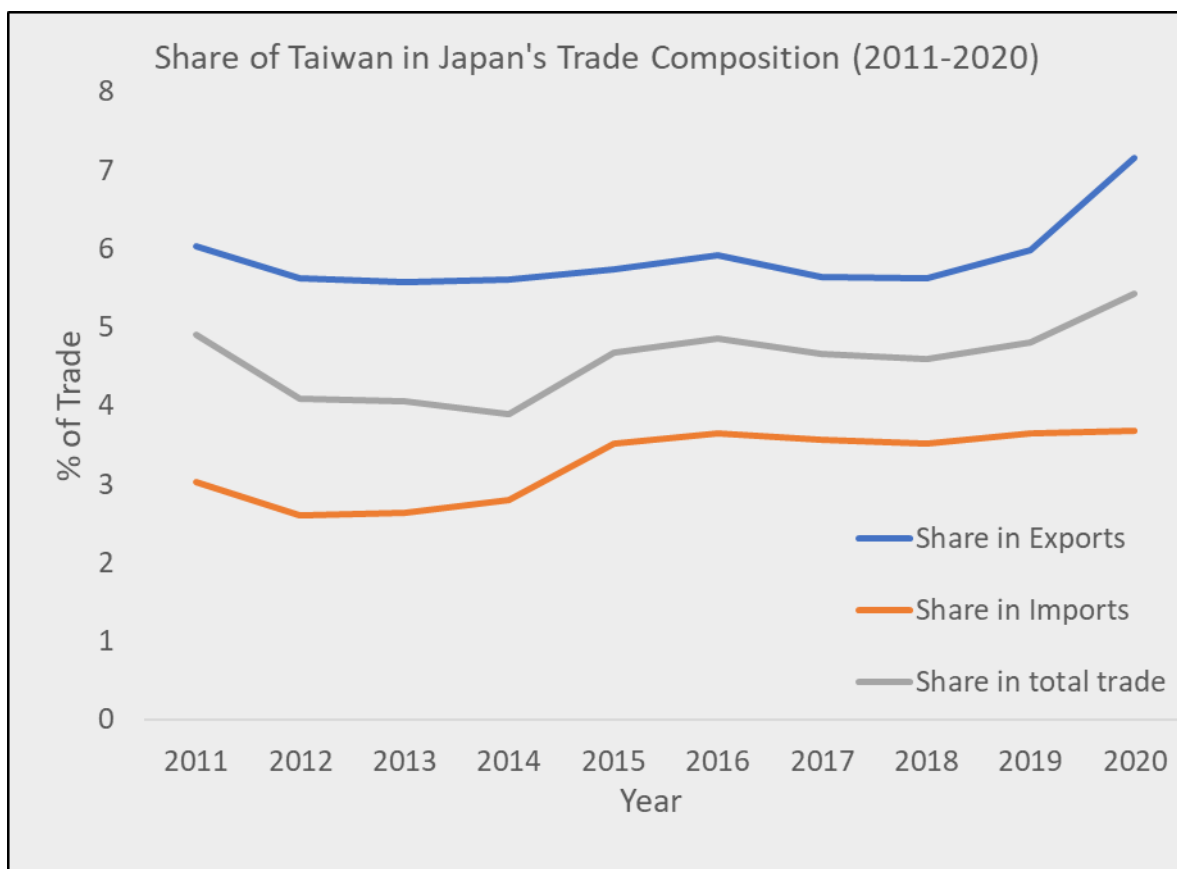
Table 2

Japan trade with Taiwan (2011-2019)

Year	Exports (in \$ billion)	Imports (in \$ billion)	Total bilateral trade (in \$ billion)
2011	49.5	15	64.5
2012	45.1	20.5	65.1
2013	39.9	20	59.9
2014	38.7	20.9	59.6
2015	35.8	20.1	55.9
2016	38	20.2	58.2
2017	39.2	22	61.2
2018	41.1	23.9	65.0

2019	41.6	23.8	65.4
2020	45.9	23.4	69.4

<https://oec.world/en/profile/country/jpn>; <https://trendeconomy.com/data/h2/Japan>



This table shows that Taiwan's share in Japan's total exports is consistently above 5% and its share in Japan's total imports has not fallen below 2.50% throughout the period of 2011 to 2020. Similarly, Taiwan's share in Japan's total merchandise trade volume has been hovering around 4% which is significant considering Japan has extensive trade relations with most of the countries in the world. Especially during pandemic period, Taiwan was an important partner for Japan to maintain supply chain resiliency which was disturbed by global slowdown. It was particularly crucial as Taiwan was able to control pandemic before it got worse and supplied Japan with many products to sustain supply chain in many industries.

SEMICONDUCTORS TRADE

In the world ranking, Taiwan ranks first in terms of production of semiconductors. Taiwan's semiconductor industry meets 63% of global semiconductor needs (EIAS, 2021). Major contribution of this dominance lies with Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) which holds almost 54% of total global revenue of semiconductors (Trendforce, 2021). During recent global chips shortage due to increased demand of electronics during the pandemic, Taiwan's role in semiconductor supply chain has become more crucial than ever. As a region as small as Taiwan has such a huge capacity of the semiconductors industry, China's takeover of Taiwan can give a huge boost to the Chinese semiconductors industry whose global share is currently less than Taiwan and South Korea. American Institute in Taiwan Director Brent Christensen's statement, "Taiwan is truly the central node for global trade in ICT products and Taiwan's semiconductor industry is the envy of the world", summarizes Taiwan's critical role in global supply chains (Taipei Times, 2021).

Moreover, TSMC has announced its plans to set up computer chip plant with the help of Sony group worth \$7 billion in Japan by 2024 (Kageyama, 2021). TSMC has also announced opening up of research and development centre in Japan which will help technology transfer for semiconductors manufacturing to Japan (Business Standard, 2022). It will be crucial for Japan as this step can provide chips for Japan's own massive electronics industry and thus it will reduce Japan's import dependency. Due to this, the Japanese side is extremely apprehensive of the Taiwanese takeover by mainland China, as it could seriously hamper the trade ties between Taiwan and Japan.

JAPAN'S ENERGY ANXIETY

Historically, Japan has been a resource-poor country and it still depends on other countries for its energy security. After the negative impact of oil crises of 1973 and 1979, Japan successfully reduced oil dependency by almost 50% in 2010 (Vivoda, 2012). But Fukushima nuclear accident in 2011 drastically changed the energy security scenario in Japan. Moreover, a report by The Federation of Electric Power Companies of Japan (FEPC) mentions that there are

restrictions on importing electricity from neighbouring countries since Japan is an island nation. Even though Japan has focused on renewable energy sources for increasing energy self-sufficiency rate in the last few years, it is not yet sufficient. All this compelled Japan to return to oil for meeting its substantial energy requirements.

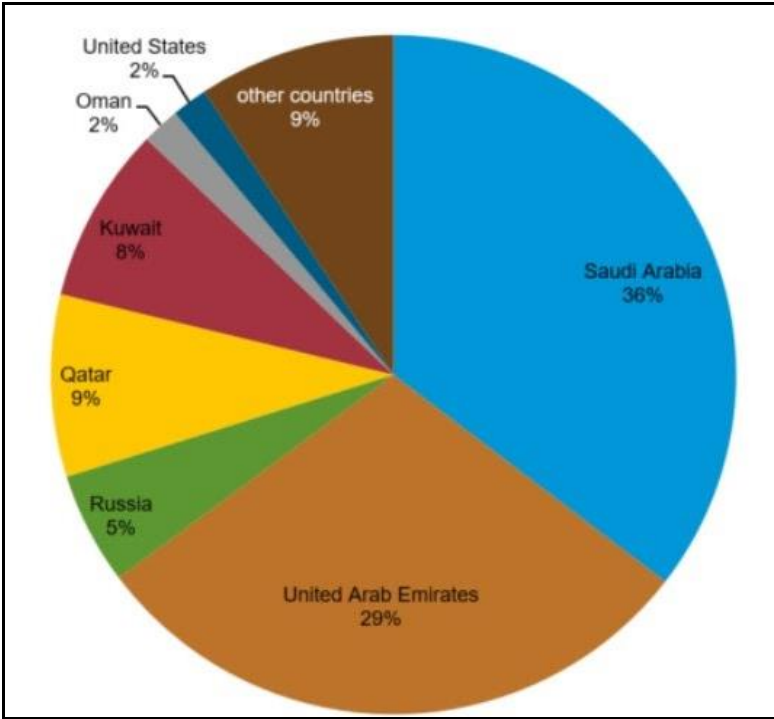
Maximum proportion of crude oil in Japan come from the Middle Eastern countries such as UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, accounting for more than 80% of the share of imports and enters Japan via East China sea as well as from Pacific Ocean neighbouring Taiwan (Newsham & Self, 2020) [Figure 2]. Even Japan's substantial natural gas and coal imports come from Australia through the same route which makes the Taiwan strait strategically extremely important for Japan. Taiwan, as a friendly nation, has not caused any troubles for these ships and assisted Japan's energy security in a way. But same thing cannot be guaranteed about China. If China controls Taiwan, it can directly control Japan's shipment route which China can use for bargaining in case of conflicts over other issues like Senkaku islands (Blazevic, 2010).

Japanese Prime Minister Kishida in a speech last year highlighted the need to adopt new energy security strategy and strengthen energy diplomacy in the coming years (MOFA 2021). Japan is one of the largest energy consumers in the world. According to USA Energy Information Administration, Japan is world's 4th largest crude oil importer, largest importer of natural gas and 3rd largest importer of coal in 2019. Hence, Japan relies heavily on the imports of energy resources (METI 2019).

Moreover, due to Fukushima disaster of 2011, contribution of nuclear energy from Japan's energy mix declined drastically from 25.1% (2010) to merely 3.1% (2017) [Figure 3]. Consequently, share of fossil fuels increased up to 80.9%. As a result, Japan is heavily dependent on hydrocarbons for its energy security and thus cannot afford to have full Chinese control at any point of its supply route. Hence, Japanese concern for unhindered transport of its energy sources makes it vouch for the autonomy of Taiwanese region. The Chinese control of

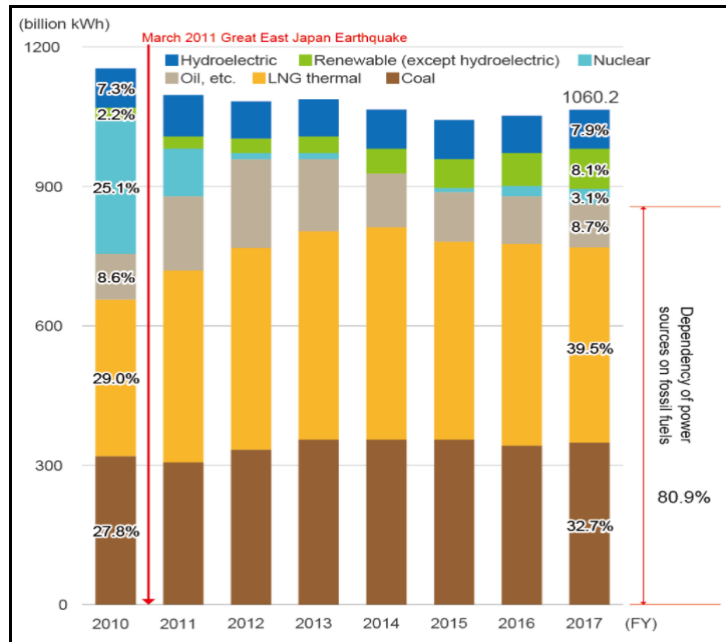
Taiwan may lead to obstructing these waterways for Japan and can pose a serious threat to the energy supplies to Japan.

Figure 2
Crude oil imports sources of Japan in 2019



(EIA, 2020)

Figure 3
Changes in composition of energy generation sources (2010-2017)



(METI, 2019)

In 2010, China became the largest consumer of energy by surpassing the U.S (Blazevic 2010). This also made it the highest importer of oil. Thus making all the routes in the East and South China Sea of utmost strategic importance for energy trade. China and Japan have for long witnessed the dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. After the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East reported the high probability of oil in the East China Sea, the area attracted considerable interest from countries surrounding it. As a result, we have seen rising intrusions of China in maritime zones of Japan and other East Asian countries (CFR, 2020). From this, it is almost certain that if this region comes under the control of China, China may exercise excessive control over the region which may lead to serious clashes in the region.

As a result, Japanese policymakers have advised the government to secure an alternative route away from China for its energy imports (Suda, 2021). Similarly, energy security is also one of the chief motivations behind Japan's call for 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy (Kesavan, 2020). But Japan's Arctic development policy and oil stockpiling safeguard have also achieved limited success in limiting dependency on vulnerable trade route. Hence, Japan is most likely to indirectly remain dependent in the near future on Taiwan and other countries adjacent to

Western Pacific Ocean for securing its own energy supply. Hence, it will be crucial for Japan that China does not get direct access to this route through annexation of Taiwan.

CONCLUSION

Japan has recently begun to publicly acknowledge, breaking years of silence, its growing concerns about China's attack on Taiwan and loss of Taiwan's de-facto independence. This concern has stemmed from various motivations that drive Japanese policymakers to have an independent view regarding Taiwan despite Beijing's opposition. Japan's growing economic engagement with Taiwan and Taiwan's critical role in supply chain resiliency for semiconductors necessitates Japan to ensure Taiwan's security. Taiwan's strategic position in Japan's energy supply route makes Taiwan a key location which needs to be kept away from Chinese control.

China's growing ambitions to rule over its eastern neighbourhood have already caused significant tensions in this region. Japan, worried by this fact, wants to ensure that Taiwan continuously remains a thorn in China's side. Japan's attempt to hyphenate itself with Taiwan in Taiwan strait crisis thus, has strong motivations and concerns. However, China has been applying continuous pressure to keep Japan away from investing in Taiwan issue. As a result, even Japan's strategy is highly ambiguous given that it does not have any legal mechanism to deal with Taiwan like USA's Taiwan relations act. This creates a conundrum for Japan in a sense that it is trapped between strong motivations to protect Taiwan and fear of retaliation by China. Hence, all future happenings regarding Taiwan's status will be closely monitored by Japan and it will be interesting to see whether these motivations outweigh fear of consequences or not.

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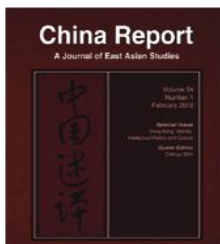


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INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES
B-371 (3rd floor), Chittaranjan Park,
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