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New Frontiers for Security Cooperation with Seoul and Tokyo

Edited by Henry D. Sokolski



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Cover images, from top left clockwise: 1) testing of 5G networks in Thailand, 2) a Japanese H-IIA rocket carrying the NASA-Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA), Global Precipitation Measurement (GPM) Core Observatory at launch pad 1 of the Tanegashima Space Center, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2014, Tanegashima, Japan, 3) an Asian woman using face detection and recognition technology, 4) a demolition charge detonating 1,500 meters from the Avenger-class mine countermeasures ship USS Scout.

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Chapter 3

What to Expect from Japan and Korea in a Taiwan Contingency

Zack Cooper and Sheena Greitens

What are the prospects for ally contributions if a major contingency takes place between the United States and China? Several recent commentaries suggest that America's leading allies might sit out a conflict with China, and that some might also limit U.S. basing access. Mike Mazza contemplates the possibility "that in the event of a conflict, allies and partners by and large stay on the sidelines." Similarly, John Culver expects "a chilling set of answers if you approached authoritative people in our treaty allies... and ask them in the event that China attacks Taiwan, will you back our military alliance?"⁶ Divergent expectations about potential allied involvement have the potential not only to threaten Washington's relationships with key allies, but also to undermine America's ability to deter a contingency with China in the first place.

Taiwan is the trickiest potential challenge from an ally perspective. In a contingency over Taiwan, one can imagine at least three possible scenarios, of varying likelihood, each with different political dynamics and implications for U.S. allies.

In the first and most escalatory scenario, Beijing could attempt to invade Taiwan outright, while launching first strikes against U.S. forces and bases in the region, as well as those of U.S. allies. Japan, Australia, South Korea, and perhaps even the Philippines could find themselves forced into an undesired contingency. Depending on the circumstances that lead into this scenario, they may also have little warning, meaning that they could become participants in a contingency for which they are not politically or operationally prepared.

In a second scenario, Beijing might attempt to invade Taiwan, but avoid attacking U.S. forces and bases, or those of U.S. allies. This scenario presents China with distinct military risks, but it also comes with political benefits: Beijing may well bank on the reluctance of America's allies to get dragged into a costly shooting war, and on domestic politics to slow or constrain their military support. Additionally, China might consider striking U.S. forces or bases, but avoid hitting U.S. allies directly, in an effort to split Washington from its key regional allies. This would place the United States and its allies in the position of having to decide whether to intervene in a cross-Strait conflict, rather than responding to a direct attack on their own forces and personnel, slowing or complicating adversary responses.

6. David Wertime, "Former Intel Officers: U.S. Must Update Its Thinking on Taiwan," *POLITICO*, October 8, 2020, <https://politi.co/36LgfuS>.

A third scenario—and perhaps the most likely—could be even more difficult from a coalition-building perspective. Beijing might seek to coerce Taiwan without directly attacking, opting instead for an embargo, cyber-attack, and/or limited strikes short of full invasion. In this case, the United States would have to both calibrate its own actions while attempting to coordinate a regional response. Securing ally participation and basing permissions could prove particularly challenging in this scenario, leaving the United States with a smaller regional coalition and fewer access points, as well as uncertain political footing in the region during a conflict that could become protracted and economically damaging to a wide range of countries in the region.

In the two scenarios involving a direct invasion attempt, the allies most likely to contribute forces would probably be Japan and Australia. They would likely desire more defensive roles, acting as the alliances' shields rather than spears.⁷ They might also allow U.S. basing access, but this too would be a politically fraught decision, particularly if U.S. and allied forces were not targeted in an initial strike. Furthermore, Beijing would likely try to place blame on Taipei for the crisis or conflict, undermining domestic support among U.S. allies in the region.

Discussions of these issues are already tense in Tokyo and Canberra. Jeffrey Hornung notes that, “Japan expects that the United States will consult with it prior to conducting combat operations to obtain Japan’s consent if the United States is considering using its bases in Japan to engage in armed conflict with another country when Japan itself is not a party to that conflict.”⁸ Meanwhile, Natasha Kassam and Richard McGregor argue that, “Australia has no interest, or indeed ability, to be a decisive player in the Taiwan dispute.”⁹ As a result, political debates in both countries would take center stage and could impede rapid and coordinated responses to an invasion of Taiwan by the People’s Liberation Army.

Other allies, namely South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand, would be even less likely to commit their forces to engage in an American-led coalition. Although these countries—as well as partners such as Singapore—might allow basing access, this would likely come with severe limitations. Seoul might be reluctant to widen a conflict or open a second contingency involving the Korean Peninsula, plus it would want to reserve its own forces for a peninsula-specific contingency. One Korean analysis, for example, notes that a request from Washington for ROK participation in a FONOP or a U.S.-China military conflict will put South Korea in a “compromising position,” in which Seoul will have to “reach an agreement with Washington about strategic flexibility.”¹⁰ For these and other reasons, Jung Pak concludes, “Beijing perceives Seoul as the weakest link in the U.S. alliance network, given its perception of South Korea’s deference and history of accommodating China’s rise relative to other regional players.”¹¹

7. Ankit Panda, “US-Japan Alliance: Still ‘Sword and Shield’?,” *The Diplomat*, November 5, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/11/us-japan-alliance-still-sword-and-shield/>.

8. Jeffrey W. Hornung, “Japan’s Potential Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency,” RAND Corporation, December 14, 2020, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA314-1.html.

9. Natasha Kassam and Richard McGregor, “Taiwan’s 2020 Elections,” Lowy Institute, January 7, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/taiwan-s-2020-elections>.

10. Lee Dae Woo, “The Possibility of U.S.-China Military Conflict in the South China Sea,” Sejong Institute, September 2, 2020, <http://sejong.org/board/22/egoread.php?bd=23&itm=0&txt=South+China+Sea&pg=1&seq=5497> and full Korean text at <http://www.sejong.org/board/1/egoread.php?bd=2&itm=&txt=&pg=1&seq=5482>. For a perspective that emphasizes quiet alliance coordination and “promotion of joint operational awareness” to try to maintain stability in the Western Pacific, see “China’s Naval Buildup and U.S.-China Military Competition,” Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (Korea National Diplomatic Academy, September 28, 2020).

11. Jung H. Pak, “Trying to Loosen the Linchpin: China’s Approach to South Korea,” *Global China: Assessing China’s Role in the World* (Brookings Institution, July 6, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/trying-to-loosen-the-linchpin-chinas->

The Philippines and Thailand might be similarly skeptical of basing access, particularly given recent U.S. criticism of leaders in Manila and Bangkok. Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte, for example, has vowed, “I will not go to America anymore. We will just be insulted there... So time to say goodbye my friend.”¹² While Duterte’s words are partially motivated by his ire at American criticism—for example, he once told President Obama to “go to hell” over condemnation of his conduct in combating illegal drugs—he is also explicit about a desire to avoid getting involved in a military standoff with China.¹³ He has even noted of disputes in the South China Sea, “China is claiming it, we are claiming it. China has the arms. We do not have it. So, it’s as simple as that... Unless we are prepared to go to war, I would suggest that we better just cool off.”¹⁴ Meanwhile, he has threatened to terminate U.S. military access by ending the Visiting Forces Agreement, and has scaled back joint exercises.¹⁵ These and other comments suggest that political support for basing access is far from guaranteed, even from some U.S. treaty allies in peacetime.

Finally, an even larger group of countries—including many concerned about China’s rise, such as Vietnam and India—would probably not contribute either forces or basing access. Many of these countries lack existing basing agreements with the United States, and have limited experience operating jointly with U.S. forces beyond basic training and exercises. Combined command structures and joint operational concepts have not been tested, particularly the kinds of close coordination that would be needed in a major contingency. As a result, the United States should not expect substantial force contributions or basing access from Vietnam, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, or most other regional players beyond those identified above.

Likely Ally and Partner Roles in a Taiwan Contingency

		Direct Military Engagement	
		Some	None
Basing Access	Some	Japan Australia	South Korea Philippines Singapore Thailand
	None	Taiwan	Vietnam Indonesia Malaysia India

approach-to-south-korea/.

12. Ben Blanchard, “Duterte Aligns Philippines with China, Says U.S. Has Lost,” *Reuters*, October 20, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-philippines-idUSKCN12K0AS>.

13. “Philippines’ Duterte Tells Obama to ‘Go to Hell,’” *BBC News*, October 4, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37548695>.

14. Richard Javad Heydarian, “Duterte Bans Exercises with US in South China Sea,” *Asia Times*, August 4, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/08/duterte-bans-exercises-with-us-in-south-china-sea/>.

15. U.S. forces’ access to the Philippines occurs on a rotational basis because the 1987 Philippine constitution forbids permanent foreign military bases. “The US-Philippine Alliance: Opportunities and Challenges,” *Strategic Asia 2014-15* (National Bureau of Asian Research, 2014-15).

In short, if a major contingency erupts between China and the United States over Taiwan, Washington will find its large number of regional allies and partners reduced to a handful of willing contributors, and even those may place significant restraints on the use of their forces or U.S. access to their bases.

These dynamics are likely to sharpen, not subside, if a conflict becomes protracted. As American analysts of the People's Liberation Army have noted, a failed amphibious assault on Taiwan will not necessarily end the conflict—and in an extended phase of conflict, such as a blockade, Beijing would retain significant advantages over even the most robust U.S.-led coalition.¹⁶ Even less is known about how U.S. allies and partners in the region could or would contribute to Taiwan's ability (and political will) to survive this kind of protracted scenario. There has been, as yet, almost no discussion of how America's regional allies and partners might view, let alone participate in, activities such as resupplying the island in the face of a Chinese maritime or air blockade, engaging in mine-clearing operations, or the risky but critical question of whether and how to suppress China's integrated air defense system.

What does this mean for how Washington should be approaching its allies and partners? First, the United States should be leading a series of detailed discussions with key allies about their roles in different contingency scenarios involving China and Taiwan (and for some, the South China Sea).¹⁷ These conversations should begin quietly, and many of the details can and should remain private. However, if these discussions do not ultimately engage the publics in these countries as well, then there will not be political support for participation in a contingency, and alliance coordination is likely to founder. This is especially true if part of Beijing's strategy in the early moments of a contingency is to split the United States from its allies and partners.

Perhaps more importantly, Beijing might not believe that key allies would fight in a contingency, increasing the possibility of China stumbling into an otherwise deterrable conflict. It is critical that the United States carefully balance the need to communicate a reliable deterrent with the necessity of avoiding unnecessary provocation. But this delicate balance would be easier if Washington is able to come to agreement with Tokyo, Canberra, Seoul, and other allies and partners before a crisis, and if some baseline expectations of allied and partner responses can be clearly signaled in peacetime. Part of that discussion should also include planning for how the United States and others would support countries against possible retaliation by China, not just militarily but also economically – an especially important factor in any protracted conflict scenario.

What does all this mean for U.S. military posture and the Biden administration's upcoming global posture review? As it stands now, the United States will have to be prepared not only to “fight tonight,” but also to fight far from home with limited ally and partner support. Ongoing tensions over basing arrangements in South Korea and the Philippines, unless resolved quickly, are likely to hold back the kinds of forward-looking conversations on regional contingencies that Washington should be having with its allies.¹⁸ As

16. Lonnie Henley, “PLA Operational Concepts and Centers of Gravity in a Taiwan Conflict,” Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Hearing on Cross-Strait Deterrence, February 18, 2021.

17. Jeffrey W. Hornung, “The United States and Japan Should Prepare for War with China,” War on the Rocks, February 5, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/the-united-states-and-japan-should-prepare-for-war/>.

18. “US committed to ‘mutually acceptable’ SMA deal with S. Korea: State Dept.,” *Yonhap*, February 6, 2021, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20210206000029>; “Philippines extends termination process of U.S. troop deal, eyes long-term defence pact,” *Reuters*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-usa-defence/philippines-extends-termination-process-of-u-s-troop-deal-eyes-long-term-defence-pact-idUSKBN27R0RD>.

a result, American dependence on Guam and other U.S. territories in Asia may grow, rather than shrink, despite U.S. efforts to distribute forces throughout the region. Dependence on Japan and Australia may increase as well, both for basing and for some key niche capabilities. Perhaps most importantly, Taiwan could find itself even more dependent on the United States.

Finally, what does this mean for U.S. force structure? The contingencies with China described above require greater emphasis on a set of forces that can credibly deny Beijing the ability to take the island or prevail in a protracted coercive campaign. They also require Washington to think about, and discuss with Taipei, the capabilities required to survive a protracted blockade even after an initial invasion attempt fails. This puts a premium on undersea systems, long-range stealthy aircraft, and ground-based missile forces to prevent a quick invasion, and mine clearing, logistics capacity, and munitions stockpiles to prevail in a protracted conflict. The major bureaucratic losers in this construct would likely be land forces, short-range fighter aircraft, and less survivable elements of the surface fleet. At present, however, Japan, Australia, and Taiwan have all invested significant sums in relatively expensive and vulnerable systems, meaning that it will be necessary for all three to consider more denial-focused postures, as Australia has recently done in its Defence Strategic Update.¹⁹ The United States should be talking with and pressing its allies to develop their own anti-access capabilities, rather than replicating the power projection capabilities of U.S. forces. Doing so would help to ensure that the United States and its allies and partners have the capabilities needed to credibly deny Beijing the ability to invade Taiwan, which will be especially critical if the United States can expect only limited basing access and force contributions from its regional allies and partners.

19. “2020 Defence Strategic Update & 2020 Force Structure Plan,” Australian Government Department of Defence, July 1, 2020, <https://www1.defence.gov.au/strategy-policy/strategic-update-2020>.

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