

POLICY BRIEF

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Democratization and International Relations: The Case of Japan-Taiwan Relations

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In the new national security document released by Japan in December 2022, Tokyo states that Japan's basic position on the Republic of China (Taiwan) remains unchanged. However, it also declares that "Taiwan is an extremely important partner and a precious friend of Japan, with whom Japan shares fundamental values, including democracy."¹ In a context of growing global tensions between countries that share a set of common values, including a commitment to the fundamental principles of democracy, and autocracies grouped around Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC), relations with Taiwan have thus deepened beyond common strategic interests. The remarkable development since the 1980s of Taiwan's democracy, which now ranks 11th among the world's democracies and first in Asia, has implications for the nature of relations between Japan and Taiwan.² The issue of trust, often raised by the PRC authorities to explain the recurrent tensions between Beijing and Tokyo, is in fact an essential element in the management of relations between Tokyo and Taipei. This trust is also based on Taiwan's democratic specificity unique in the Chinese world. Indeed, the nature of the political systems and their degree of openness weigh on the positive or negative evolution of relations between two states formerly bound by ties of colonial subordination or occupation.

Japan's Role in Taiwan's Democratization Process

The history of Japanese-Taiwanese relations is often considered only from the perspective of the long history of colonization of the island between 1895 and 1945.³ The relative absence of resentment on

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1 https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we_000081.html

2 <https://atlasocio.com/classements/politique/democratie/classement-etats-par-indice-de-democratie-monde.php>

3 Taiwan became the first Japanese colony after the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki with the Qing Empire in 1895.

the part of the Taiwanese population, in contrast to the situation in the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Korea, with nuances depending on the political majorities in the latter case, is sometimes noted with wonder. While Japanese colonization of Taiwan was not without its tensions and repression, it also allowed a relatively large faction of Taiwan's elites, through a significant higher education program and other means, to come into contact with a democratic mode of operation, especially during the period known as Taisho democracy in Japan. In this respect, Japan offered opportunities that the Republic of China, mired in civil war and warlordism, could not. As for Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT), which came to power in Nanjing in the 1920s, its inspiration was more Leninist than democratic.

Despite its limitations, which can be found in other Western countries at the same time, the process of gradual democratization that began in Japan in the Meiji era (1868-1912) and accelerated under the Taisho era (1912-1926) is real. It has long served as a model for other aspirational nationalist movements in Asia. It was in Japan that Kuomintang figures such as Sun Yat-sen, the first president of the Republic of China after the overthrow of the Manchu (Qing) dynasty in 1912, found refuge. Many concepts of Western political philosophy were introduced into China from Japan, where they had been translated at the end of the 19th century.

Colonization thus introduced to Taiwan a political culture that had developed in the archipelago since the Meiji period, which experienced a period of relative liberalization during the 1920s before militarism took control of Japanese democratic life. Political modernity

and the emergence of a pluralistic society thus came to Taiwan through the Japanese colonizer, which represented a model of non-Western modernity in Asia for Sun Yat-sen and others.⁴ The role of Taiwanese students in Japan between 1915 and 1935 is important in this regard: they published a newspaper in Chinese, the *Shinminpo* 新民報, as early as 1920 and invited Sun Yat-sen to visit Taiwan to talk about the "new China".⁵ Culturally, Japan's influence at the time could be felt not only in the social sciences, but also in the arts, cinema, popular music and lifestyles.

Today, it is rather the "positive", idealized aspect of the Japanese colonial period that is presented in Taiwan by pro-independence spheres, provoking regular condemnations from Beijing, whose "united front" operations are, on the contrary, aimed at strengthening pro-Chinese, nationalist currents on the island, including the Kuomintang, which has long dominated political life on the island.⁶ This perception is reinforced by the fact that Japan also allowed pro-independence movements to establish themselves on its territory during the imposition of martial law (1949-1987) in Taiwan by the Kuomintang nationalist authorities who took refuge on the island after the Communist Party seized power on the mainland on October 1, 1949. The Taiwan Youth Society 台灣青年年社, which supported Taiwan independence, was established in the archipelago in 1960. It became the 台灣親年圖利聯盟 (Taiwan Independence Alliance) in 1965.

Japan is also a model for soft power. Since democratization and the end of the rule of a Kuomintang that insisted almost exclusively on the influence of classical Chinese culture and

4 Philippe Chevalierian, "Taiwan from the 1930s to the 1950s: the birth of a pluralist society," *Chinese World*, 2019/2, no. 58.

5 Liao Ping-Hui, David De-Wei Wang, eds, *Taiwan under Japanese Colonial Rule: History, Culture, Memory*, New York, Columbia University press, 2006.

6 "赴陸倡「認識對日抗戰史」退將鄭旗生：因為台灣不講了," 20-08-2019 in <https://www.ettoday.net/news/20190820/1517136.htm>

Sinicization, cross-cultural relations with Japan have become an important dimension. The Taiwan Design Center, for example, organizes numerous collaborations with Japanese designers. In this field, as in fashion, references to Japan, a non-Western model of contemporary creativity, are omnipresent, as if to better reflect the island's specificity against the exclusive references to Chinese culture. On the other hand, contrary to China, Taiwan is perceived positively by more than 80% of the Japanese public.⁷

Common values and strategic interests

Because of this dual ideological and strategic dimension, Taiwan occupies an increasingly important place in Japan's foreign strategy in the face of a China that is not abandoning its aggressive posture despite the health and economic uncertainties facing the regime. In 2022, China's growth rate did not exceed 3%, according to official figures, and after an abrupt change of policy following three years of complete closure, the Covid epidemic has affected several hundred million people and the future remains uncertain.

During the massive military exercises organized by Beijing in August 2022 to try and influence Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and to demoralize Taiwan with a show of force unprecedented since the 1990s, several missiles landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone off the coast of Okinawa in an obvious attempt to put pressure on Japan and Japanese public opinion. Japan, which hosts the largest US bases in Asia and whose Yonaguni Island at the southwestern tip of the archipelago is 111 km from Taiwan, will be on the front line in the event of a crisis between Beijing and Taipei. The

pressure and gray zone strategies used by the PRC against Taiwan are also used against Japan.

As tensions between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait have increased, relations with Taiwan have taken center stage in the strategic debate in Japan, with increasing consideration being given to the question of a possible incident in the Strait. Tokyo's new national strategy, released in December 2022, identifies China as the main "unprecedented" challenge to security and stability. The joint communique from the June 2021 meeting between President Biden and Prime Minister Suga mentioned a commitment to "peace and security in the Taiwan Strait", the first such mention in more than 50 years. This formula will be repeated when President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida meet in January 2023.⁸ The issue of Taiwan is now at the heart of the security alliance between Tokyo and Washington, and one of the main reasons for Japan's increased military budgetary efforts and redeployment of capacities.

Part of the strategic community in Tokyo is now making relations with Taiwan a central point of its positioning, yesterday against the spread of communism in Asia, today in support of a democratic "community of values", the most important of which, at the crossroads between the strategic and ideological dimensions, is the refusal to use force to impose a change in the status quo, be it in Ukraine or in the Taiwan Strait.

The intensity and public nature of the debate in Japan on the Taiwan question, fueled by growing public concern over Beijing's aggressive strategy, demonstrates a change in attitudes and orientations in favor of Taiwan, whose image is increasingly positive. In the

⁷ During the colonial period, Japan was also inspired by Taiwanese folk art production, which was integrated into the reflections on "folk art" (*mingei*) close to the Arts and Crafts movement in the United Kingdom. In 1927, an exhibition in Tokyo highlighted the creativity of Taiwanese artists and visual artists.

⁸ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/01/13/remarks-by-president-biden-and-prime-minister-kishida-of-japan-before-bilateral-meeting/>

media and public opinion as well as at the highest levels of government, more and more people are expressing positions favorable to Taiwanese democracy. In that domain, the counter example of the Ukraine war also plays a significant role.

Conclusion: The Senkaku Islands

The Senkaku Islands (Diaoyutai) question provides an example of the positive factor of democracy in the management of bilateral relations, despite the persistence of a dispute in the eyes of the Republic of China (Taiwan). Since the early 1970s, after the publication of a survey on oil and gaz potential resources in the vicinity, both Taiwan and the People's Republic of China have officially claimed these Japanese territories.⁹ In 2012, at the height of tensions between the Chinese regime and Japan after Tokyo bought the islands from their private owner, which did not change the territorial status of the islets, President Ma Ying-jeou (KMT) sent coast guard ships to support Taiwanese activists operating near the islets. In this matter, the Taiwanese KMT authorities followed the position of Beijing, which has since increased naval pressure around the archipelago, sending hundreds of ships every year to try to change the status quo by force and coercion.

In contrast however, Taiwan's proposal for an "East China Sea Peace Initiative," presented by President Ma on August 9, 2012, called for a "shelving" of the controversy and did not impose any sovereignty preconditions on possible talks. This initiative was addressed to both the People's Republic of China and Japan, while in 2013 Beijing defined an ADIZ that included the Senkakus administered by Tokyo and claimed

by Taiwan. Today, the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Taiwan reiterates the position of the Republic of China on the "Diaoyutai Islands dispute", reaffirming that these islets are part of the territory of the Republic of China (Taiwan), but the tone remains moderate.¹⁰ This is a far cry from the aggressive attitude that characterizes Beijing's positions on the issue. For instance, the Chinese (PRC) Foreign Ministry's website refers to "Japan's frequent provocations on Diaoyu Dao and its affiliated islands and on historical issues".¹¹

Moreover, the PRC is increasing its naval incursions near or in the territorial waters of the Senkakus, using a "gray zone" strategy with Japan as with Taiwan. Japan nonetheless signed a fisheries agreement with Taiwan in 2013 that allows Taiwanese vessels to fish in a 7,400-square-kilometer area near the claimed area but excluding the territorial waters around the Senkakus. The agreement stipulates that fishermen will be subject only to their own laws. For Tokyo, this was a strategic step forward in that Prime Minister Abe sought to avoid Beijing and Taipei sharing a common position on the issue when the KMT was in power on the island. Whatever its limitations, this agreement, which is regularly amended, demonstrates that an arrangement based on dialogue and the refusal to use force is possible with a partner that respects the values of international law and that, like West Germany and France during the Cold War, shares common strategic interests.¹²

9 Monika Chansoria, "1969 Report by the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East : A Turning Point in the Historical debate over Senkaku Islands", *Japan Review*, vol.2 n° 3, Winter 2018.

10 https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=1331&s=34199

11 https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2721_663446/

12 Tetsuo Kotani, "Japan Taiwan Fishery Agreement, Strategic Success Tactical Failure", AMTI.CSIS.org