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SHIFTING ALLIANCE DYNAMICS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

IS THE TAIWAN QUESTION GOING REGIONAL?

Heightened tensions surrounding the Taiwan question are lending urgency to efforts to revitalise the 75-year-old US network of alliances and security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region. The more proactive role of Japan is not to China's liking.

In the 2017 US National Security Strategy (NSS), the Donald Trump administration placed China and Russia at the top of its list of security challenges. President Joe Biden's 2022 NSS reiterated this view, with China described as a "pacing challenge", namely the most significant threat going forward, and Russia as an "acute threat". This bipartisan realisation has ushered in a newfound urgency to revitalise and bolster the Indo-Pacific security architecture, originally woven together during the Cold War, and often referred to as the hub-and-spokes system. These efforts are lent urgency by heightened tensions surrounding the Taiwan question.

The US is still formally committed to its One China policy, which means recognising only the People's

Republic of China as the sole legitimate government, while maintaining economic and cultural ties with Taiwan. However, since 2017, Washington has in many ways de facto strengthened and upgraded its ties with Taiwan economically, politically and militarily. President Biden has also on four separate occasions signalled readiness to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion, adding a touch more clarity to the long-standing US policy of strategic ambiguity.

Washington has also been working towards getting other close security partners in the region, primarily Japan and Australia, to become more involved in security preparations surrounding Taiwan conflict scenarios. The US Indo-Pacific strategy, which supports a greater strategic

role for Europe, explicitly encourages partners to strengthen their ties with one another, and take on regional leadership roles. This effort has gained more traction as Australia's relations with China have markedly deteriorated, while Japan has felt more threatened by China's greatly increased military presence close to its territorial waters, and aggressive military flight actions close to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands. Subtle adjustments are already starting to be visible: security ties in the region are tightening, and bilateral security cooperation between US partners and allies is growing.

Tokyo perceives Taiwan as an extremely important partner with whom it shares fundamental values. Cross-strait stability is paramount

for Japan’s security. This has driven forward Japan’s more proactive stance in defence and security policies. In 2014, Japan reinterpreted its constitution and gave itself the right to exercise collective self-defence, which now allows Japan to come to the aid of allies in maritime conflicts. Achieving more autonomy in terms of its defence is an aspiration that has only grown in importance since. Fearing that, according to Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow”, Japan has been strengthening its defence capabilities. Tokyo recently announced a substantial increase in defence spending, and is even mulling the option of raising it to 2% of GDP. This would mark a historic shift from the hitherto applied limit of 1%. Japan’s new NSS will appear by the end of the year.

As a result of this prominent perception of a possible conflict or contingency with China over Taiwan, Japan has been aiming to bolster relations with partners, who equally oppose any change to the status quo. Japan has been very active in the sphere of minilateral collaboration, that is, cooperation at the tri- and quadrilateral level, of which the trilateral security agreement between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS) and the cooperation between Japan, the US, India and Australia (the Quad) are examples.

Bilaterally, interaction is intensifying in particular with Australia and the UK. Japan and Australia signed a new joint declaration on security cooperation, deepening the sharing of military intelligence and setting up a consultation mechanism in case of contingencies, which would significantly help Japan to tighten its cooperation with the Five Eyes countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and US). Earlier this year, Japan and Australia signed a treaty to allow for mutual usage of military bases. Most recently, Japan and the UK concluded a joint exercise simulating remote island defense. The two countries will soon sign a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), which will further facilitate joint exercises and logistics cooperation. Tokyo is aiming to sign a similar agreement with the Philippines, and is starting negotiations with Singapore to conclude a defence equipment and technology transfer agreement.

The evolving security architecture is obviously not in China’s interests, as it is driven by apprehensions regarding Beijing’s actions and goals, and related to its most fundamental security interest: Taiwan. China has consistently been opposed to formal military alliances although it maintains long-standing security cooperation with several countries, the most strategic of which stems

from its relations with Russia and Pakistan.

The Chinese government has expressed concern about the emergence of a future “Asian NATO”, although the US denies that there is an effort to establish such an organisation. Consequently, in the joint communiqué issued by Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin in early February 2022, China and Russia opposed further expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe. The two leaders vowed to “stand against the formation of closed bloc structures and opposing camps in the Asia-Pacific region and remain highly vigilant about the negative impact of the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy on peace and stability in the region”.

Until a few years ago, it was unlikely that other US security partners in the Indo-Pacific would get involved in a potential future conflict over Taiwan, as most countries sought to maintain good relations with China. In today’s changed security context, Japan and Australia also perceive Taiwan as closely related to their own security. Consequently, a large-scale conflagration over Taiwan now has more potential to turn into a regional conflict. /