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Between Hostile and Amicable: Managing Japan's Relationship with a Rising China

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Abstract

Sino-Japanese relations have periodically alternated between hostile and amicable, with the former being the default position. As Chinese economic power grew in the 1980s and Japan's stagnated after its bubble economy burst at the beginning of the 1990s, Beijing became more vocal in asserting hitherto dormant claims to territories in the East China Sea and South China Sea that were either under Japan's jurisdiction or threatened Japan's perception of its economic and security interests. Already extant pressures escalated after Xi Jinping assumed control of the Chinese party state in 2012 and have continued to build. Different Japanese administrations responded in various ways ranging from efforts to smooth over differences to increasing defense budgets, shoring up the defenses of vulnerable remote islands, moving to a closer military relationship with the United States, and attempting to create a countervailing coalition with both regional and extra-regional powers. China generally portrayed these measures as instigated by an American-backed clique of ultra-nationalists who wish to return Japan to the quasi-fascist regime of the 1920s and 1930s. A mitigating factor is both sides' realization of the symbiotic economic relationship between them and that areas for cooperation exist. But there is also an awareness that these may not be sufficient to prevent kinetic hostilities. Conflict between the world's second and fourth largest economies would have disastrous effects on regional as well as global stability, making efforts to manage tensions imperative.

Keywords: Sino-Japanese relations, East China Sea, Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, Yasukuni Shrine, Xi Jinping, Hu Yaobang, Koizumi Shintaro, Ishiba Shigeru, Abe Shinzo

Introduction

The prolonged standoff between the two most powerful countries in Asia—and the world's second and fourth largest economies—has ominous potential for disrupting the peace and security of not only the Indo-Pacific region, but, given the emergence of intricately linked supply chains and the importance of managing strategic shipping lanes and communication links, global security and prosperity as well. Hence the need to manage if not eliminate tensions is imperative. Recent relations have shown a contradictory pattern of moves toward conciliation at the same time as both sides enhance their capabilities for armed conflict.

Historically, Sino-Japanese relations have periodically alternated between hostile and amicable, with the former being the default position (Dreyer 2017). As Chinese economic power grew in the 1980s and Japan's stagnated after its bubble economy burst at the beginning of the 1990s, Beijing became more vocal in asserting hitherto dormant claims to territories in the East China Sea and South China Sea that were either under Japan's jurisdiction or threatened Japan's perception of its economic and security interests. Already extant pressures escalated after Xi Jinping assumed control of the Chinese party state in 2012 and have continued to build. Different Japanese administrations responded in various ways ranging from efforts to smooth over differences to increasing defense budgets, shoring up the defenses of vulnerable remote islands, moving to a closer military relationship with the United States, and attempting to create a countervailing coalition with both regional and extra-regional powers. China generally portrayed these measures as instigated by an America-backed clique of ultra-nationalists who wish to return Japan to the quasi-fascist regime of the 1920s and 1930s. A mitigating factor is both sides' realization of the symbiotic economic relationship between them and that areas for cooperation exist. But there is also an awareness that these may not be sufficient to prevent kinetic hostilities.

A "Golden Age"?

Despite the characterization of the years from 1972 through 1989 as the Golden Age of Sino-Japanese relations (Vogel, Yuan and Akihiko 2002), they appear so only in hindsight. In fact, both sides went into the normalization of diplomatic relations for pragmatic reasons. After the violence of the PRC's Cultural Revolution abated, the Chinese leadership determined to industrialize the PRC and indicated that it valued Japanese technological and managerial expertise. With China open for business, Tokyo saw an expanding and potentially lucrative market for Japanese companies. Several factors were involved. First and most importantly, Tokyo saw an uptick in the number of countries recognizing Beijing or, like the United States, signaling that they wished to normalize relations. Japan did not want to be left behind. Second, Japanese industries were being squeezed by American business interests that felt threatened by rising competition from Japan and were resorting to various protectionist measures. The expectation was that increasing trade with China could compensate for the adverse impacts of US protectionism.

Contrary to business interests' enthusiasm for normalization, however, were conservatives who did not trust a communist government, were worried that Beijing would seek to export its revolution to Japan, and did not want to abandon ties with the anti-communist Republic of China on Taiwan. Although China might be considered the supplicant to its economically far more powerful neighbor, the Chinese leadership presented the appearance of unity,[1] while the Japanese leadership had to deal with influential factions with publicly clashing interests. In the end, Beijing was able to drive the harder bargain though that was not necessarily clear to everyone involved at the time. Tokyo broke relations with Taiwan, settling for a wording similar to that Washington had crafted in which it acknowledged Beijing's position that Taiwan was a part of

1 In fact, behind the façade of unity, power struggles were raging behind the scenes among Zhou, a Lin Biao faction, and the more radical faction around the Gang of Four. Zhou himself was dying of cancer.

China without explicitly saying it agreed with that. Premier Zhou Enlai stated that he believed every country should carry out its own revolution, thereby implying that China had no intention of seeking to export its revolution to Japan, and that the disposition of the islands known to China as the Diaoyu and to the Japanese as the Senkaku Islands, under Japanese jurisdiction since 1894, need not be resolved immediately.

Trade expanded rapidly. Japan's trade with China in 1972 was $1.1 billion, $2 billion in 1973, and $3.79 billion in 1975 (Eto 1983, 61). Japanese media described the euphoric mood as "China fever" (Johnson 1986, 410-419). However, beneath a surface appearance of bonhomie that included museum exhibits praising the glories of each other's culture, the planting of symbolic evergreen trees, and constant repetition of the mantra that the two sides were separated only by a narrow strip of water, other issues simmered. Beijing objected to Japanese textbooks that made light of the imperial army's behavior in World War II, and when it discovered that the Yasukuni Shrine had secretly added the souls of Class A war criminals in 1978. Japan became angry when, partly because of the expense of China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979, Beijing announced the suspension of industrialization projects that had been underwritten by the Japanese government. Other issues, including a lengthy dispute over the disposition of a dormitory in Kyoto, dragged on. Much of Japanese aid was funneled through Tokyo's Official Development Assistance (ODA) program; additionally, Japanese retirees were encouraged to volunteer to move to rural China to lend their expertise to worthy projects. To the disappointment of many Japanese, this was not always appreciated, with some Chinese voicing resentment that their country was becoming colonized by Japan in a modern-day reincarnation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere of 1920s Japanese imperialism. In 1985, there were major student demonstrations against Japan and, implicitly, against the Chinese government's open-door policy and those officials that the students believed were personally profiting from it (Burns 1985).

Tensions were soothed over by mutual interests, aided by the

personality of Chinese leader Hu Yaobang who seemed genuinely interested in furthering Sino-Japanese friendship, to the extent of planning major youth exchange programs, apparently without consultation with the CCP elite. Party leaders urged students to channel their patriotism in support of the open-door policies. Party-to-Party relations between the CCP and sympathetic members of the LDP and Komeito also helped mitigate frictions.

The End of the "Golden Age"

In December 1986 and January 1987, widespread student protests occurred across China over domestic issues like corruption, inflation, poor living conditions, and lack of democratic governance. They were seized on by Hu Yaobang's enemies, who charged him with a long list of alleged sins that included tolerance of "bourgeois liberalization" and being too close to Japan. Hu was removed from power though allowed to retain his Politburo seat. His sudden death in spring 1989, reportedly while arguing in favor of increased educational expenditures, proved the catalyst for larger demonstrations involving far wider segments of the population and in over a hundred cities. The army was brought in, resulting in many casualties in what became known as the Tiananmen Massacre.

These mass demonstrations indicated that for many Chinese citizens the élan of the communist revolution had faded, along with faith in Marxism. After suppressing the demonstrations, arresting their leaders, and taking stringent measures to deal with the inflation and economic imbalances that had been a major cause of discontent, Party and government began to encourage a more assertive nationalism, which foreign analysts attributed as an effort to restore the CCP's waning popularity. As the 1985 anti-Japan demonstrations had shown, strident nationalism inspired passion among young people in a way Marxism did not. For whatever reasons, nationalism proved very popular and was to have adverse repercussions for Sino-Japanese relations.

The Japanese economy was about to have its own problems: its bubble economy burst at the beginning of the 1990s, ushering in a "lost decade" that stretched out to a quarter century. As Japan's economy stagnated, the PRC's economy, after a brief period of retrenchment to deal with the inflation that had been a big factor in the 1989 demonstrations, leaped forward, registering double-digit gains year after year. China's official media reported on Japanese troubles with barely concealed schadenfreude, although Beijing continued to encourage Japanese investment. Worrisomely from Japan's point of view, the product mix began to change. Whereas in the early 1980s, Japan imported mainly raw materials such as oil, coal, and silk, Chinese exports gradually became more labor intensive and higher value-added. PRC products began to dominate the market in processed foodstuffs, textiles, and apparel, footwear, sporting goods, toys, and games. Japanese companies noticed with dismay that the factories they established in China for items such as motorbikes had had their technologies purloined and adopted by Chinese-owned firms. They began to compete with Japanese products in areas like consumer electronics that Japan had dominated. In Hegelian terms, the master was becoming the slave.

While the Japanese media reported on the concerns that China's technological advances had engendered, the government's response was that the fears were without foundation: China was copying established designs while Japan was advancing and would continue to be ahead of the technology curve. A prosperous China would be a positive force for world peace as well as a larger market for Japanese products. Until his fall from power Hu Yaobang had attempted to soothe Japanese business's concerns, at one point telling a visiting group of industrialists that, although it was an old story in the Orient that after an apprentice is trained and experienced, he would leave his master unemployed, it would not work this way in new China; Beijing wanted investment and technology simply to raise its people's living standards. It had no intention of disrupting world markets, and China "meant what it said" (Xinhua 1986).

Resentments Accumulate

As China gained confidence and Japanese apprehensions grew, old Chinese grievances were voiced more stridently. Japan lost its status as the world's second largest economy in nominal terms to China in the 2010-2011 period. As the Chinese economy burgeoned, Beijing became more insistent on matters such as demanding more and more explicit Japanese apologies for Japan's wartime conduct, that ministerial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine cease, that it explicitly state that Taiwan was a part of China, and that it recognize the legitimacy of Chinese sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. These created resentments in Japan, where increasingly large numbers of citizens had been born after the war and did not feel that they bore responsibility for actions during it. Assertive Chinese nationalism encouraged right-of-center Japanese to respond in kind. Politicians pointed out that the Yasukuni Shrine had been established in 1869 to honor all Japanese who died in war and argued that visits that China viewed as threatening were an affirmation of their commitment to peace rather than war. Moreover, Japan had kept relations with Taiwan strictly unofficial, and the disputed islands were terra nullius and uninhabited when Japan annexed them in 1894, with no complaint from the then-Chinese government and in fact none until a 1968 United Nations survey indicated that the area might be rich in hydrocarbon deposits.

In April 2001, amid these accumulated resentments and after a series of weak prime ministers, Koizumi Junichiro took office. Conservatives were pleased to have a strong leader in charge, with Koizumi using nationalism to move away from faction-based politics toward populism-based politics since the former resisted the necessary economic reforms that were needed to jolt Japan out of two decades of economic stagnation (Nagy 2014, 1). One of Koizumi's campaign promises was that if elected he would visit the Yasukuni Shrine once a year, which he proceeded to do. Koizumi also upgraded the status of the defense agency, although the formal change from agency to ministry in 2007 was not finalized

until a year after he left office. Koizumi also gave the country's self-defense forces (SDF, a military in all but name) greater scope to operate outside the country. In 2005, "patriotic" anti-Japanese protests erupted in scores of Chinese cities over a host of issues including Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni, the education ministry's approval of a history textbook that glossed over Japan's conduct in World War II, and the proposal that Japan obtain a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Some speculated that the government had instigated the protests or at the very least not opposed them, while also trying to contain their scope. In any case, the demonstrators, having made their point, were brought under control.

Within Japan, Koizumi remained popular. Retiring voluntarily in 2006, he was succeeded by Abe Shinzo. Abe was Japan's first prime minister born after World War II and very much in Koizumi's mold. Abe resigned a year later, followed by a series of weak prime ministers who did not visit Yasukuni but with no discernible improvement in bilateral relations. With China's power steadily rising, Beijing had little incentive to make compromises.

This muscle-flexing was clearly seen in an incident in September 2010 when a Chinese fishing boat deliberately rammed two Japan Coast Guard vessels off the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, with the entire incident recorded on video. Incredibly, the Japanese government at first refused to make the recording public, eventually allowing Diet members to view it. Finally, a Japanese coastguardsman uploaded the footage to the internet, corroborating charges that the ramming had been intentional. Although the crew of the fishing boat was released, the captain was arrested and charged with destruction of government property.

The Chinese government demanded his release, with the Japanese government replying that Japan was a country of laws. The Chinese government's position was that since the islands belonged to China, the Japanese coast guard had no right to be there. It responded by threatening to withhold shipments of rare earths to Japan, a critical component in the catalytic converters of the country's auto industry. At the same time, it

subjected Japanese imports to lengthy inspection procedures and arrested several Japanese nationals on spying charges. In a distinct humiliation for Japan, the captain was released and China asserted the right to patrol the area, which it has done ever since.

Frustrated with what he regarded as the central government's inept handling of the contested islands, Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro announced in a speech in Washington that he intended to buy on behalf of Tokyo municipality four of the five islands from their private Japanese owners, the Kurihara family. One island was already owned by the central government. Further, Ishihara hinted he might build structures on the islands, thereby strengthening Japan's claim under international law while further angering Beijing. He invited private citizens to contribute, quickly collecting millions of yen. This prompted the central government to announce that it would buy the islands, which appears to have been Ishihara's intention from the outset. While still in the airport arrival area following his trip to the US, Ishihara announced that Tokyo municipality would desist if the central government took action (Mainichi 2012). The Kurihara brothers sold the three islands belonging to them, with the Kurihara sister refusing all offers.

Amazingly, and despite Beijing's warnings to the contrary, the Japanese government went ahead with the purchase, implying that no structures would be built on them. How much Beijing's subsequent rage was genuine and how much was opportunistic can be debated. International law experts agree that the Japanese government's purchase of the islands had no relevance to the sovereignty issue, since changing the name from individual owners to the state is simply a transfer within the Japanese legal system that has no meaning or force outside the system.[2]

Whether real or feigned, Beijing's anger had real consequences. Demonstrators called for boycotting Japanese products. Many Japanese

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2 Professor Donald Clarke, George Washington School of Law, personal communication to the author, December 6, 2014.

factories, restaurants, and cars were burned, even though many of those restaurants and cars were owned by Chinese. After a few weeks, the government began to clamp down on the demonstrations, signaling that it did not want an irreparable break in relations, and perhaps also noticing that some of the demonstrators were critical of their own government (Taylor 2012).

Two Strong Leaders Face Off

Abe then returned in 2012, which by sheer coincidence was also the year that the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party chose Xi Jinping as the country's new leader. Both countries thus had strong leaders. Predictably, tensions continued. In December, only a few months after taking office, Abe paid his first and only visit to the Yasukuni Shrine as prime minister, eliciting an immediate Chinese protest. In May 2013, Abe was photographed in a plane marked "731," the designation of the unit that had carried out grisly medical experiments in China during World War II (Spitzer 2013). Then, 2014 began with a scathing exchange between the Chinese and Japanese ambassadors to Great Britain. The former, alluding to the popular Harry Potter series, called the Yasukuni Shrine a kind of horcrux representing the darkest parts of the nation's soul, after which Japan's ambassador rejoined that China's choices were either to play the role of Voldemort in the region by letting loose the evil of an arms race and escalation of tensions, or cooperate for the greater good and obey international law (Dearden 2014). Whereas Koizumi had used nationalism as way to force restructuring of the Japanese economy, Abe appeared to use it as a means to restructure the nation's defense, which he did though falling short of being able to revise the constitution (Nagy 2014, 1).

On a more substantive note, China declared a unilateral ADIZ later in 2013, encompassing the Diaoyu/Senkaku area. This ignored Japan's administrative control over the islands and the airspace above them,

differing from other nations' ADIZs by claiming the right to "adopt defensive emergency measures to respond to aircraft that do not cooperate in identification" (Rinehart and Elias 2015).

In that same year, Xi announced his signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a creative reinterpretation and enlargement in scope of the silk routes that had once connected Europe and Asia, and founded the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a vehicle to help underwrite its costs. While Japanese businesses were interested, the government had security concerns, specifying for example that companies must not participate in developing harbors with security implications. Japan has not joined the BRI, citing concerns with overlap between the BRI's lending program and that of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), though saying that it would support Japanese companies if the projects satisfied conditions regarding transparency, financial sustainability, and purely civilian value. Those companies whose projects met these conditions would be eligible for support from such public financial institutions as the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (Teneo 2018). Despite concerns about competition, the AIIB and ADB have built a record of cooperation in some areas and signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between them in May 2016 to cooperate in a variety of areas relevant to international development (ADB 2016). In November 2024, on the sidelines of the UN Climate Change conference (COP 29) in Baku, the AIIB and the ADB renewed the MOU (AIIB 2024).

Willingness to trade and cooperate did not translate into political goodwill. A photo of Abe and Xi shaking hands at the APEC summit in Beijing in November 2014 became iconic, with their mutual distaste glaringly apparent (BBC 2014). Japanese investment in China fell 38.8 percent in 2014, the second straight year of decline, with major Japanese manufacturers Panasonic, TDK, and Daikin citing yen depreciation and rising labor costs in China as the reason for cutting back (Esparza 2015).

In 2015, despite some indications that relations were softening, Beijing announced a large-scale event to commemorate the 70th anniversary of

"China's" victory in World War II. While the Chinese ambassador to Japan stated that the event was not aimed at present-day Japan or people, Abe did not attend, nor was it clear that he had been invited. Chinese officials repeatedly stressed that the key to improving relations lay in how Japan dealt with "historical issues," indicating a desire for a more abject apology on the part of the Japanese government.

Abe served for eight years, thereby becoming the country's longest serving post-war prime minister and choosing to leave for health reasons. He did not return to Yasukuni while in office—though he did once after leaving—sending ritual offerings of sacred masakaki instead (Reuters 2018). While the Chinese press issues periodic complaints about the offerings and carefully details which ministers have attended, the protests have become formulaic—a ritual unto themselves. Nonetheless, there are cyberattacks on the shrine's website, as well as periodic defacement of surfaces within the shrine. The suspects are typically identified but have returned to China by the time arrest warrants are issued (Tsuchidate 2024).

Despite his presence at the shrine, Abe was able visit China in October 2018 (Government of Japan, 2018)—the first such high-level visit in nearly seven years and the last one by a sitting prime minister to date. Strategic competition aside, both sides were keenly aware of the value of good economic relations. Abe brought an estimated 500 business representatives with him to Beijing in 2018 with the stated goal of transforming relations from competition to cooperation, with the two sides signing deals amounting to $18 billion including joint promotion on infrastructure in third countries (Schiller Institute 2018).

Protocol dictated that Xi should pay a reciprocal visit to Japan, but that has not happened. At first, Covid was given as the reason, with hopes that a visit would soon take place, although this has not recently been discussed. Meetings have taken place, however, either on the sidelines of multinational meetings or at lower levels. A pattern has evolved in which the Japanese side professes to believe that relations are improving while the Chinese side endorses the desire for better relations though adding that relations are "unstable." Beijing insists Japan reflect on the lessons of

history—meaning more abjectly apologize for its conduct in China during World War II—and join with China to create a better future for the region—meaning abandon its close relationship with the United States.

Japan, however, has continued to declare support for a "free and open Pacific" —i.e. one largely policed by the US military—and its opposition to any changes in the status quo, meaning a cessation of China's intention to annex Taiwan and to cease its activities to dominate the East China and South China Seas (Ryall 2024). Summarizing these differences, the government-sponsored China Daily (2017) opined that it was "no exaggeration to say that the past five years have been among the darkest days in Sino-Japanese ties since the two established formal diplomatic ties."

However, relations became darker still. Beijing objected strenuously to Japan's release of treated water from the disabled Fukushima nuclear plant in 2023, imposing a ban on the import of Japanese marine products. The Japanese government responded that the United Nations Atomic Energy Agency had certified the safety of the water (IAEA 2023). China insisted that it must conduct its own independent investigation, but then delayed doing so. Japanese media also point out that Chinese fishing vessels have been active in waters near Japan despite Chinese concern about the safety of Japanese seafood products since the release of the water began (Fujii and Awashima 2024), and that China's own nuclear power plants release wastewater with higher levels of tritium than those from the disabled Fukushima plant (Hawkins and McCurry 2023).

Other recent issues have been the arrest of Japanese nationals on vaguely defined charges of espionage, particularly after the PRC in 2023 passed a revised and stricter version of an earlier espionage law. Japan also routinely raises concerns about the treatment of Xinjiang's Uyghur population and about the erosion of civil liberties in Hong Kong. These are regularly discussed at bilateral meetings, usually held on the sidelines of larger multilateral meetings such as the ASEAN Pacific Economic Forum (APEC) and the G20, but with each side repeating its talking points and no resolution. The issue of the so-called comfort women in Japanese

military brothels during World War II seems to have lost salience after the last Chinese comfort woman died several years ago. Although several of their descendants are suing the Japanese government, little has been heard of the suit indicating that it lacks active government support. In Korea, by contrast, the issue of the comfort women remains salient.

The pattern of cold politics and warm economic relations continues. Perennial points of friction involve, in alphabetical order, Taiwan, territories, and trade.

Taiwan

Among the many contentious issues between China and Japan, Taiwan has perhaps the greatest potential for imminent escalation into kinetic actions. Chiang Kai-shek's KMT government was fiercely anti-communist, as was the Japanese government, giving the two former enemies common cause. Until 1948, as many as 20,000 Japanese troops, wearing KMT uniforms but under the command of Japanese officers, fought with the KMT against the CCP. In addition, Chiang, who had great respect for the Japanese military, hired several officers as advisers to his own troops (Gillin 1967, 285). After Chiang's death and that of his son and heir, the next Taiwanese president was Lee Teng-hui, who had been born and raised during the time Taiwan was a Japanese colony. Lee spoke better Japanese than mandarin. Like increasing numbers of his countrymen, he had never lived under PRC rule and had no desire to. Beijing, fearing that its desire to incorporate the island into the PRC was slipping away, became more insistent on its right to do so. After Lee, another Taiwanese who courted better relations with Japan was elected: Chen Shui-bian. This was followed by eight years of a China-friendly president, Ma Ying-jeou. To Beijing's annoyance, Ma was succeeded by yet another Taiwanese who opposed being absorbed by China, Tsai Ing-wen. More than just warm Japanese feelings for an ex-colony are involved, since were China to annex Taiwan, its territorial waters would

lie perilously close to Japan.

Abe, in his capacity as LDP chair rather than as prime minister—to skirt charges that he had violated Beijing's understanding of the one China policy—immediately congratulated Tsai on her election (Focus Taiwan 2018). Later, and speaking as prime minister in a Diet meeting, Abe referenced Taiwan three times, the first time in 14 years that a sitting prime minister had mentioned the country's name in the Diet. Diet members reportedly applauded after each mention (Yang 2020). Also in January 2020, immediately after visiting Beijing to point out the importance of "stability" in the East China Sea, Abe's younger brother and Diet member Kishi Nobuo flew to Taipei where he presented Tsai with Japanese newspapers' front-page stories on her re-election, saying "[e]ven the [Japanese] prime minister does not always get front page coverage" (Nagai 2020). The headline of a front-page article in *Yomiuri*, the nation's largest newspaper, described Taiwan as a "nation of immigrants" and "model for democracy in Asia" (Jiji 2020). Referring to Taiwan as a "nation" is anathema to Beijing, which considers the island part of China.

Japanese visits, most of them billed as between private citizens, took place on higher levels. Tokyo announced the change of its embassy-equivalent office in Taipei from the largely meaningless Interchange Organization to the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Organization (Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association 2017), thus implicitly elevating the two countries to equal status. A few months later, Taipei reciprocated by renaming its Taipei Economic Office the Taiwan-Japan Relations Association (Gerber 2017). After leaving office, Abe, making a virtual appearance at a Taiwan think-tank, said that any contingency concerning Taiwan would also be an emergency for Japan and that a Chinese attack on Taiwan could meet the conditions for Tokyo to use military force (Blanchard 2021).

In 2023, former prime minister and then LDP vice-president Aso Taro, his visit marking the first time that an LDP vice-president had visited Taiwan since diplomatic relations were severed in 1972, stated that Japan must be willing to fight to repel a Chinese invasion of the island (Jiji 2023).

To queries about whether this represented official Japanese policy or simply reflected Aso's personal conviction, Suzuki Keisuke, an LDP lawmaker who accompanied Aso to Taiwan, told a talk show that Aso had discussed the issue with Japanese government officials beforehand, indicating that Aso's view was not Aso's personal remark, but a result of arrangements with government insiders, saying that "I think the Japanese government clearly regards this as the official line" (Komiya 2023). Shortly before being elected LDP president, Ishiba Shigeru also visited Taiwan, with Beijing immediately reiterating its strong opposition to any form of official interaction between the Taiwan region and countries having diplomatic ties with China, and lodging "serious protests" with the Japanese side (MFA 2024).

In addition to verbal protests, China responded as it does to all such incidents, by sending warplanes toward Taiwan and ships through the Miyako Strait. Japan then countered by enhancing the defenses of the islands nearest Taiwan and making preparations for a massive influx of Taiwanese to them if a war should begin.

Territories

Closely related to the Taiwan issue are China's claims to areas in the South China and East China Seas. Making the link explicit, a Chinese specialist in Northeast Asian affairs described Tokyo as using Taiwan as a bargaining chip in order to increase its discourse power on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands issue and to contain China's influence in the Asia-Pacific Region as a whole (Da 2021).

As referred to above, in its reaction to Japan's 2012 purchase of three of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, China increased its patrols of the area. Fishing boats and maritime militia, the latter typically armed and referred to by Western media as "little blue men," were reinforced by China Coast Guard (CCG) vessels. Newer CCG ships are much larger than those they replace and also of those of other coast guards, including those of the

Japan Coast Guard (JCG). White-hulled rather than gray, as naval ships are, the CCG presence seemed designed to operate just below the level of dangerous escalation while yet asserting China's claims—so-called "gray zone tactics." Their presence, while gradually increasing overall, waxes and wanes in accordance with perceived provocations from Japan (Erickson and Kennedy 2015).

In a further step in what Japanese refer to as a slow intensity conflict strategy, in 2021 China's National People's Congress passed a coast guard law that authorized maritime law-enforcement fleets to use lethal force on foreign ships operating in China's waters, including the disputed waters. Other claimants to the disputed islands in the South China Sea protested that the legislation was a clear violation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), but to no avail (Nguyen 2021). Although article 7 of Japan's Police Duties Execution Law authorizes the JCG to use weapons on vessels trying to land on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands when the perpetrators committing crimes categorized as violent and dangerous offer "resistance" (Japanese Law Translation 2006), this would be a dangerous escalation and has not thus far been tested.

China has continued to more vigorously enforce its claim of sovereignty over the waters around the islands, warning off Japanese fishing vessels in the area, even identifying some by name. Since October 2023, the CCG has also adopted stronger wording, using "illegal trespassing" rather than "intruding into territorial waters." The Japanese government has stressed that the acts by the CCG are in violation of international law, saying: "[t]he Senkaku Islands are an inherent part of Japan's territory—that is unquestionable both historically and under international law. We will deal with the situation in a firm manner" (Yomiuri Shimbun 2024c). To date there have been no noticeable manifestations of this firm manner, and the Chinese presence continues to grow. In 2023, Japan complained that China had installed a buoy inside what it regards as Japan's EEZ near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, with Chinese sources saying that the buoy had been installed for scientific purposes with which Japan had no right to interfere (Kyodo 2023). A year

later, with the first buoy intact, another buoy was installed off Okinotori (Kyodo 2024c), whose ownership, unlike that of the Diaoyu/Senkakus, is not contested. However, the Chinese government contends, with sound reasons, that Okinotori is not an island but a rock and therefore not entitled to an EEZ.

Japan has sought to counter China through strengthening the US-Japanese alliance and partnerships with other states, such as the Quad grouping with Australia, India, and the United States, and separately with Great Britain. A Chinese commentator ridiculed the latter as an agreement between "two-down-and-out powers in deep decline… one an ex-empire on which the sun has long set, while the rising sun of the other is having difficulty to rise again" (Global Times 2023). France has a strong interest in protecting its territories in the South Pacific. Germany, though having no territorial stake in the region, has acknowledged that conflict in the Asia-Pacific would have adverse effects on its status as a major exporting nation; Germany has taken part in multinational naval exercises in Japanese waters. But, except for the United States, which is treaty-bound to defend Japan, these partnerships are fluid. All states are aware that they have strong economic interests in China, and that Beijing will not hesitate to use economic leverage should they take actions inimical to its interests.

Japan has expressed intermittent interest in participating in the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing arrangement, despite minor concerns that the current members (Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States) are all Anglophone states and a major one about Japan's ability to safeguard classified information (Tsuruoka 2020). Those who wish Japan to join were heartened by the comment of the United Kingdom's Cyber Security Centre head Felicity Oswald in 2024 that "[t]here aren't formal rules about joining the Five Eyes... for me, it doesn't really matter who's in certain clubs and who's out of certain clubs. It's about how we work together… Japan is already such a great partner, such an important partner," adding that Chinese actors' evolving approach in cyberspace over the last 18 months "should worry us all" (Yoshino 2024). There are

similar concerns regarding NATO, since plainly Japan is not a North Atlantic nation and has conceded that its security protections are less than perfect. Though not formally a member due to French concerns about extending the alliance beyond NATO's geographic area, Japan regularly attends its meetings. Adding to Chinese concerns though without acknowledging the role that its actions played in the decision, Japan and NATO in July 2024 set up a dedicated line for sharing highly confidential security information. The line is expected to accelerate the information sharing and promote the Individually Tailored Partnership Program (ITPP) cooperation document that was agreed on in July 2023 for such areas as cybersecurity and disinformation. The agreement covers the period through 2026 (Yomiuri Shimbun 2024b).

Trade

China is Japan's largest trading partner and, despite a trade deficit in recent years, has been a bright spot in Japan's slow recovery from the economic deflation of 1990. Whatever their views of Japan, Chinese consumers prefer many of its products over domestically produced items due to their reputation for higher quality and, in the case of foodstuffs, cleanliness. As relations deteriorated, particularly after the 2010 fishing boat incident, Japan began the securitization of products it considers vital to security and to de-risk supply chains. Rare earths were a priority, since China had threatened to withhold shipments thereof. Within weeks, Japanese business representatives were visiting countries with other significant rare earth resources, such as Mongolia, Vietnam, and Australia, to make inquiries. By November 2010, Japan had reached a tentative long-term supply agreement with Australia's Lynas Group to obtain 30 percent of its rare earths (Smith, Soble and Hook 2010). In 2012, a rich deposit of high-grade rare earth elements, estimated to supply Japan's needs for several centuries, was discovered near Minami Torishima in the country's exclusive economic zone (Takaya et al. 2018), but extracting

them has so far not been commercially feasible. As of 2023, Japan remains highly dependent on China, having managed to only reduce its imports of rare earths from 90 percent to 60 percent (Terazawa 2023).

A related securitization issue has been the chip industry, with Japan having lost its commanding position in the field during the 1990s and, after becoming aware of its vulnerability, trying to redress the imbalance. In 2022, strongly encouraged by the government, eight major companies established the Rapidus corporation for the domestic production of advanced semiconductors. Rapidus' goal is to mass-produce state of the art 2-nanometer chips by the latter half of the 2020s. Japan's industry ministry has approved subsidies up to 590 billion yen ($3.9 billion) for the venture. However, despite the pedigree of its sponsors and generous government support, many in the industry are skeptical about the prospects for success since the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co., the world's largest contract chipmaker, has spent decades honing its processes (Reuters 2024). While TSMC may be a rival for Rapidus, TSMC is nonetheless regarded as a positive for Japanese chip production as a whole due to the two large foundries it has established in the country (TSMC 2024).

Another initiative in de-risking the supply chain has involved nickel, of which the Philippines is the world's second-largest producer, after Indonesia. Manila is involved in a contentious dispute with China over the latter's activities within the Philippines' EEZ, giving Manila and Tokyo common cause. The two, along with the US, have agreed to a framework for a stable supply of nickel under which resource-rich countries and high-consumption countries in Europe, Africa, and other regions work together to share information and invest in developing critical minerals. They also plan to expand the refining process to extract the metal from nickel ore. Still, Indonesia and China have a larger market share of smelted and refined nickel (Tsuzuki and Tanaka 2024). Although Indonesia has banned the export of nickel ore in order to strengthen domestic processing facilities and spur job creation and economic development (IEA 2023), China continues to acquire mining rights and interests in Indonesia and

other Southeast Asian countries, increasing its influence in the international market. China is also acquiring concessions in Africa and other regions and continues to hold a substantial share of the refined products of critical minerals such as lithium and cobalt (Tsuzuki and Tanaka 2024). Beijing denounces efforts to make supply chains less reliant on the PRC as violations of the principles of fair competition that have the potential to fragment markets to the detriment of all parties.

Cyber Concerns

In May 2021 the Japanese government for first time publicly identified China as responsible for a cyberattack, revealing that People's Liberation Army Unit 61419 had targeted the Japanese Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) and 200 other Japanese companies and research institutions in 2016 and 2017 (Sakaguchi 2021). A 2021 report by London's International Institute for Strategic Studies (2021) that ranked 15 global cyberpowers placed Japan in the bottom of the report's three tiers, with cyberattacks even including Japan's weapons industry producers. After a leak revealed that a Chinese cyberattack had penetrated Japan's foreign ministry telecommunications network, then-foreign minister Kamikawa Yoko told the Budget Committee of the House of Representatives that the government must deepen relations with allies and friendly nations to expedite measures against future cyber-attacks (Yomiuri Shimbun 2024d). The United States has been concerned about Japan's vulnerability to cyber penetration for some time, making Washington reluctant to share intelligence with Tokyo. Improving cyber defenses will, however, entail revision of a wide range of laws, thereby prolonging the period of vulnerability (Yomiuri Shimbun 2024e). An expert panel on cyber defense has proposed that the Japanese government be able to break into and neutralize the sources of cyberattacks without a warrant, analyze communications information in peacetime, and take measures to hack into an attacker's server and neutralize it based on the Police Duties Execution

Law. Sensitive to privacy concerns, the panel recommended that access should be limited in principle to items such as IP addresses and malware, rather than the text of emails, for example, and that an independent body be established to monitor the process (Yomiuri Shimbun 2024a). Ongoing concerns with protecting civil liberties are likely to slow the process of revision.[3]

Japan is concerned not only with cyber espionage but espionage involving human agents as well. According to a Tokyo-based expert, Japan became aware of extraterritorial police stations last year when two Chinese men were arrested in New York on suspicion of intelligence activities including intimidation of Chinese compatriots. Nearly one million Chinese have long stay permits in Japan and there are reports of similar suspicious Chinese stations in Akihabara in central Tokyo, Fukuoka, and other cities. Personnel deny any connection with the CCP or Chinese public security, claiming they exist merely to help people from their hometowns in the coastal areas of Zhejiang, Fujian, and Jiangsu provinces to get visas, drivers' licenses and so on. Although an investigation by free-lance writer Yasuda Minetoshi has shown no definitive proof of party or public security links, the stations continue to be carefully watched.

Other targets of interest for Chinese authorities are the thriving community of Chinese intellectuals that has grown up in Tokyo (Chang 2024). Describing themselves as the successors of China's forty years of reform and opening up, they express gratitude for the ability to escape the PRC's constant surveillance and censorship and would be prime targets for Chinese government monitoring of their activities. A bookseller in Tokyo reports that many of his customers are Chinese tourists seeking to buy books that have been banned in the PRC. Another potentially worrisome problem for Beijing is the sharp increase in interest from Chinese people, both high net worth and middle class, seeking to move to Japan. People who invest the equivalent of at least $32,000 in a Japanese business that has a permanent office and two or more employees

3 Ishikawa Hironobu, private communication with author, August 22, 2024.

can get a business-management visa. Beijing restricts how much residents can take out of the country, but many Chinese buyers own companies with international operations or have overseas investments. Many also have bank accounts in Hong Kong or Singapore from which they can wire money or can mobilize friends and relatives to carry cash little by little over a few months (Pak 2024). The colony in Japan evokes memories of the early 20th century Tokyo community that included Sun Yat-sen and plotted to overthrow the Qing dynasty. Although there is no evidence of such aspirations in this group, who seem to simply want more intellectual freedom, the Chinese government may not view their presence benignly.

Japanese businesses were further alarmed by the passage of China's revised, more stringent espionage law in 2023 that expanded the definition of acts of espionage to include the theft or provision of not only state secrets but also "documents and data related to national security and interests," but ambiguous on what constituted national security and interest. An additional provision allowed state security agencies to inspect electronic devices, causing concern that business people's computers and smartphones could be searched (Chen 2023).

Japanese investment in China is down, with a delegation led by former speaker of the House of Representatives Kono Yohei to promote economic relations with Japan expressing concerns about the safety of Japanese nationals engaged in bilateral economic interactions, saying the issue "will be a major reason for Japanese people to hesitate about investing in China." (Jiji/Reuters, 2024). The Chinese government's assurances that those engaged in normal business activities need not worry seemed disproven by the arrest of an employee of Japanese drug company Astellas in March 2023, but only indicted in mid-August 2024, "suspected of engaging in espionage activities" without providing detailed explanations of the specific legal issues involved (Asahi 2024).

However, for better or worse, many Japanese businesses consider China worth investing in and the Chinese government clearly wants them to. In May 2024, Liu Jianchao, minister of the International Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, went to Tokyo with

the aim of stabilizing relations and agreed to restart a forum for exchange between the Japanese and Chinese ruling parties that was suspended after 2018 due to the pandemic (Asahi 2024). It is worth noting, however, that this is a party-to-party channel rather than an official state contact. Asahi, quoting unnamed sources, interpreted Liu's visit as aimed at attracting investment to his country as the Chinese economy continues to slow (Asahi 2024). In another hopeful sign, Jiji (2024) reported that while state-level exchanges between the two Asian countries remain almost halted, local government leaders of Japan and China are interacting with each other actively.

Competition continues, with China's rapidly growing EV production threatening the Japanese auto industry, which was slow to transition from gas-powered vehicle production. Mitsubishi Motors decided to withdraw from production in China in 2023, and when in May 2024 Honda called for volunteer redundancies among local employees at joint venture GAC Honda Automobile, around 1,700 people applied (Tanabe 2024). Chinese exports of EVs to Japan grew from 2.2 percent in 2019 to 22 percent in 2023, and exports may soon become more important than domestic demand. Yet there are risks from protectionism in the importing countries as well as a recent weakening of interest in their decarbonization plans (Garcia-Herrero 2024). And Japanese automakers are making efforts to catch up, with, for example, Honda and Nissan agreeing to jointly develop software-related technologies for EVs (Matsuoka 2024).

Although the US overtook China as the recipient of most Japanese exports by value for the first time in four years, the PRC is Japan's second largest export market, with China absorbing 17.6 percent of total exports in 2023. Japan ran a trade deficit with China, though its overall trade balance was positive. There are questions about how sustainable the current situation is. The PRC's economic slowdown is expected to continue. Demand will likely weaken in the United States and Europe. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt of the centrality of Sino-Japanese trade to the prosperity of both.

Conclusions

There have been no violent demonstrations since 2012, nor seemingly deliberately provocative behavior such as Abe being photographed in a plane marked "731" or dueling references to the dark forces in children's novels. Although Japanese culture such as anime and manga are widely popular, anti-Japanese feelings persist in China and derisive taunts are not uncommon. The Chinese government tries to keep these under control: a Hainan television station suspended an anchor after he suggested that a deadly earthquake in Japan was punishment for its discharge of wastewater (Wong 2024) and a local government in another area honored a Chinese woman who died trying to shield a Japanese woman and her child from a knife attack (Ng 2024).

Although Ishiba, considered a hardliner, has succeeded the relatively moderate Kishida, there are hopes for a moderation of tensions. There has been some softening of Chinese positions: saying that an unexpected obstruction had accidentally pushed its spy plane into Japanese airspace (Kyodo 2024b), allowing the resumption of ornamental nishikigoi carp that had been suspended since November 2023 (Yamashita and Sasaki 2024), and reinstating visa-free entry that had been halted in the wake of Covid (Bloomberg News 2024). The government also indicated that it will gradually resume imports of Japanese seafood (Wakabayashi, Notoya and Fu 2024) and remove a buoy in what Japan considers its exclusive economic zone (Kyodo 2024a). In November 2024, Japanese national security adviser Akiba Takeo visited Beijing to lay the groundwork for a state visit by Xi Jinping (Tajima 2024) that the Japanese side has long coveted. The last time a Japanese prime minister visited China was in October 2018, and that in itself had been the first such visit in nearly seven years (Government of Japan 2018). According to protocol, a reciprocal visit should have followed within a year, though this did not happen, with the Covid pandemic being an increasingly weak explanation.

However, the Chinese foreign ministry's account of Xi speaking with Ishiba on the sidelines of the APEC Economic Leaders' meeting in Lima

in November 2024 gave little indication of the kind of future amity that will reduce tensions. Xi repeated the standard mantra on Japan's responsibility to "face history squarely" if it is to establish win-win cooperation with China (MFA 2024). Ishiba told reporters that he was pleased with the meeting, but also that he had raised the ongoing issues of detained Japanese nationals, resumption of seafood imports, and the buoys in contested waters (Karube 2024). In essence the two were talking past each other, just as had several of Ishiba's predecessors. And polls continue to show that the citizenry of both sides have low regard for the other (The Genron NPO 2024). Chinese state-controlled media present a picture of a declining Japan that nonetheless cherishes hope for the revival of militarism and regional domination, either alone or in tandem with American encouragement. Previous self-reinforcing cycles of aggression have been replaced by a sullen, protracted atmosphere of hostilities tempered by the realization on both sides that they need each other.

Conservative daily *Sankei Shimbun* (2024) took issue with Ishiba telling reporters that he and Xi Jinping were "on the same page" and would communicate freely. The paper pointed out that Xi's responses to concerns raised by Ishiba were noncommittal, and if frequent communication includes a state visit by Xi, that would be unacceptable. Although one of the two buoys was removed in early 2025, the other remains. Nor did Xi shed any light on the murder of a Japanese child in Shenzhen or give a timeline for the resumption of seafood imports. Neither did he provide information on the detention of Japanese citizens. Xi, opined the paper's editorial board, likely aims to recalibrate his stance on Japan temporarily in anticipation of the Trump administration: the apparent softening is actually a calculated move to prevent Japan and the US from jointly adopting a tougher stance toward China. Ishiba would do well to remember that diplomatic engagements and handshakes alone will not safeguard Japan's peace, security, and national interests.

How sustainable the current situation is can be debated. The power imbalance between China and Japan is not static. Both sides are experiencing population declines, China's even faster than Japan's,

and while the rate of China's economic growth has declined, the economy continues to grow and has proved resilient in the past. Xi Jinping hopes to compensate for the declining population by transitioning the country from reliance on manufacturing to one based on high tech. Despite some impressive progress, however, this has not happened (USCC 2024, 169). Meanwhile, Japan's economy makes slow but fairly steady progress.

So far, despite its own internal problems, China continues to advance its view that Japan is a small nation in decline whose best option would be to dissociate itself from the United States and join with China for the benefit of both as well as worldwide common prosperity. The PRC spent at least $15.4 billion, or about 7 percent of its defense budget, on exercises in the western Pacific last year, underscoring its determination to back up its claims in these disputed areas (Lee/Reuters 2024). It has three aircraft carriers, hypersonic missiles, and one of the world's largest military forces. Rather than take Chinese advice to forswear its alliance with the United States, Japan has sought to tighten it. At the end of July 2024, warning that China's aggressive posture posed the "greatest strategic challenge" in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, the United States and Japan outlined the most significant upgrade to their joint military alliance since 1960 (Lewis and Kana 2024).

While the Japanese military budget has risen in recent years, the country's defense force is in no way comparable to that of China. The SDF are well trained and equipped, but woefully short of manpower, with recruitment levels regularly falling below already modest targets and resisting efforts at improvement. The ASDF scrambles planes and the Japan Coast Guard chases away the Chinese vessels, but is unwilling to risk escalation even as China gradually solidifies its claims. Due to these factors as well as to the decline of his party's representation in the legislature, Ishiba is in a weak negotiating position. It seems unlikely that the disparity in power in favor of China and its claims can be reversed.

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What Drives Maritime Piracy in Southeast Asia? A Regional- and Country-Specific Analysis[1]

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Abstract

Maritime piracy poses a significant threat to international trade and regional security. This study evaluates the impact of socioeconomic and political factors on maritime piracy in the waters of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia from 2006 to 2021. Using negative binomial regression, this study examines the relationship between piracy incidents and various socioeconomic and political variables. The findings highlight both regional and country-specific dynamics that shape maritime piracy. At the regional level, state fragility, fisheries production, and mobile subscriptions emerge as significant predictors of piracy incidents, whereas trade value and unemployment rates show no significant relationship. Notably, the positive correlation between fisheries production and piracy incidents challenges existing literature, indicating that increased fisheries production at the regional level does not deter piracy. At the country level, state fragility and mobile subscriptions are key drivers of piracy in Indonesia, while in Malaysia, fisheries production and mobile cellular subscriptions exhibit significant yet contrasting effects. In Singapore, no predictors prove significant. This study highlights the need for country-specific policies addressing fisheries management and maritime security, and it calls for further qualitative research to explore underlying causal mechanisms.

Keywords: Maritime piracy, State fragility, Southeast Asia, Fisheries production, Mobile connectivity

1 The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/OU2KZ8.

Introduction

Maritime piracy remains a persistent threat to security and economic stability in Southeast Asia, particularly in the critical sea lanes surrounding Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The region, home to the Straits of Malacca and Singapore (SOMS), is one of the busiest and most strategically significant waterways in global trade. Given the dynamic nature of piracy incidents and evolving counter-piracy measures, this study focuses on the period from 2006 to 2021, enabling an assessment of both long-term trends and more recent developments in piracy patterns.

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) defines maritime piracy as the "act of boarding or attempting to board any ship with the apparent intent to commit theft or any other crime and with the apparent intent or capability to use force in furtherance of that act" (Morabito and Sergi 2018). This research adopts that definition because the one provided by Article 101 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is narrower, restricting piracy to the high seas. The UNCLOS definition would limit this study's scope since, in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, most piracy incidents occur in territorial waters or Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).

Despite regional efforts to combat piracy, Southeast Asia continues to experience significant maritime security challenges, with incidents ranging from petty theft to violent hijackings. One particularly alarming case was the 2015 hijacking of the Orkim Harmony, a Malaysian oil tanker seized by armed pirates who repainted the vessel and altered its identification markings to evade capture (Hastings 2020). This incident underscored the increasing sophistication of maritime criminals and the transnational nature of piracy networks. Similarly, the surge in piracy in Indonesian waters—especially around the Natuna and Anambas Islands—highlights persistent vulnerabilities in maritime governance. These examples demonstrate that piracy remains an ongoing security concern, carrying substantial economic and human costs.

Although numerous studies have examined maritime piracy in

Southeast Asia, much of this scholarship treats the region as a monolithic entity, overlooking country-specific variations in piracy dynamics, enforcement measures, and state responses. This study contributes by disaggregating piracy trends at the national level, offering a comparative analysis of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. A country-specific approach provides a more nuanced understanding of why certain waters remain more susceptible to piracy than others.

Most analyses of Southeast Asian piracy either focus on regional security frameworks or aggregate trends, often failing to account for the distinct socio-political and economic conditions that shape piracy patterns. This study addresses this gap by conducting a country-level analysis of piracy in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, examining how each state's unemployment, fragility, fisheries dependence, mobile phone use, and trade relate to piracy. Understanding these country-specific variations is crucial for developing more targeted and effective counter-piracy strategies. By moving beyond broad regional generalizations, this research deepens scholarly understanding of maritime security governance in Southeast Asia and provides policy-relevant insights for both national governments and international maritime security actors.

The main goal of this study is to evaluate the relationship between the number of piracy incidents and key socio-economic and political variables in the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and territorial waters of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. This research employs negative binomial regression to model piracy incidents relative to potentially explanatory factors. At the regional level, the findings show that state fragility, fisheries production, and mobile cellular subscriptions are correlated with piracy, whereas trade value and unemployment are not. At the country level, the results are mixed, indicating unique national-level considerations.

This paper is structured into seven sections. Following this introduction, the next section reviews the literature and develops the hypotheses. The third section presents the theoretical framework. The fourth section describes the data and methodology. The fifth section presents the results,

while the sixth section offers a discussion of the findings. Finally, there are concluding remarks and policy recommendations.

Related Works and Hypotheses

The literature reveals that fisheries production and state fragility are among the most frequently discussed factors influencing piracy. Accordingly, examining these variables is essential to validate or challenge the findings of earlier research. Additional variables—unemployment rate, trade value, and mobile cellular subscriptions—also warrant investigation to determine whether they serve as statistically significant predictors of maritime piracy.

State Fragility and Piracy

Daxecker and Prins (2013) explored the institutional and economic determinants of piracy, noting that weak institutional environments provide safe havens for pirates. When governments cannot effectively control their land and maritime territories, their capacity to combat piracy diminishes (Daxecker and Prins 2013). Because piracy largely occurs within territorial seas, state weakness hinders law enforcement at sea. Their findings demonstrate that an increase in state fragility is correlated with higher piracy incidents.

Moreover, Daxecker and Prins (2013) build on the work of de Groot, Rablen, and Shortland (2011), suggesting that this relationship is not strictly linear but follows an inverted U-shape. Specifically, piracy tends to rise with increasing fragility but drops after a certain fragility threshold. This pattern may occur because a baseline level of infrastructure is necessary for piracy to flourish, which is often absent in extremely fragile states (Daxecker and Prins 2021). Similarly, Sumaila and Bawumia (2014) posit that weak governance is conducive to piracy but by itself is insufficient for piracy to thrive, emphasizing that such conditions threaten the economic sustainability of coastal fishing communities.

Based on this theoretical and empirical background, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Increased state fragility is positively associated with piracy.

Employment, Fisheries Production, and Piracy

Several studies examine the relationships among employment, fisheries production, and piracy. Daxecker and Prins (2013) found that a decline in fisheries sector employment can lead to a rise in piracy, as individuals with maritime skill sets—such as fishermen, unemployed sailors, and taxi-boat captains—are more prone to engage in piracy when legitimate opportunities diminish. They also observe that a decline in fisheries stocks off the coast of Somalia contributed to higher piracy levels. In their analysis, increased fisheries production value tends to lower piracy, whereas a decrease in fisheries production value fosters conditions that may drive fishermen toward piracy. Weak state capacity can compound these challenges by failing to prevent illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which displaces local fishers and reduces legal fishing employment (Sumaila and Bawumia 2014).

Flückiger and Ludwig (2015) similarly conclude that economic shocks in the fisheries sector correlate with elevated piracy risks, underscoring that strong employment prospects in fisheries can reduce the appeal of piracy. Recent research focusing on the South China Sea also indicates that higher fish production reduces piracy (Jiang and LaFree 2023).

Field studies further show that some individuals who engage in piracy at night maintain daytime jobs, such as taxi-boat driving, complicating any direct link between unemployment and piracy (Frécon 2005). For this reason, two possibilities arise: either unemployment is associated with piracy, or there is no significant relationship. Therefore, we propose:

H2: Higher unemployment is associated with an increase in piracy.

$H2_0$ (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant relationship between unemployment and piracy.

H3: Declining fisheries production is positively associated with piracy.

Mobile Connectivity

Research on mobile connectivity as it pertains to piracy is limited. Galgano (2024) discusses Somali pirates' use of satellite phones and GPS to expand their reach, a phenomenon also noted in media coverage (Gayomali 2011; Ungerleider 2011). Nowakowska-Krystman (2016) classifies maritime piracy as a form of organized crime, partly because pirates increasingly use advanced information and communication technologies.

More broadly, studies on mobile phone use and crime suggest a complex relationship. For some crimes, increased mobile phone use acts as a deterrent (Felka, Mihale-Wilson, and Hinz 2020), but in the maritime context, the vastness of the sea reduces the likelihood that incidents will be witnessed and reported in real time. Additionally, research on organized crime highlights the facilitative role of encrypted communication and messaging apps (Moyle et al. 2019; Sullivan and Voce 2020). Criminals can evade law enforcement by hiding or encrypting their activities, coordinating operations remotely, and expanding their networks through digital platforms.

In the context of piracy, these digital tools may similarly enhance logistical coordination—such as planning attacks and disposing of stolen goods. Consequently, this study posits that increased mobile connectivity could lead to higher piracy rates, as it enables pirates to communicate and operate more effectively:

H4: Mobile connectivity and piracy are positively related.

International Trade and Piracy

Several studies investigate the interplay between trade volume and piracy. Bensassi and Martínez-Zarzoso (2010) found that higher piracy rates negatively impact maritime trade. In contrast, Daxecker and Prins (2013) indicate that regional trade volume is positively correlated with

hijackings but not with other forms of piracy.

Drawing from crime theories that link larger populations to more criminal opportunities, higher trade volumes can be analogized to increased potential targets or opportunities at sea. As trade rises, the potential payoff for pirates may also grow, suggesting a positive association between trade and piracy. Hence, we hypothesize:

H5: There is a positive relationship between international trade and piracy.

Despite extensive piracy research, significant gaps remain concerning the Straits of Malacca and Singapore as a focused area of study. Many analyses take a regional or global perspective, often overlooking the specific dynamics within Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Given that these states differ in maritime governance capacities, economic conditions, and security challenges, a country-level examination is crucial for understanding how piracy evolves in distinct jurisdictions.

Additionally, the influence of mobile connectivity on piracy operations remains understudied. While prior research acknowledges the use of digital communication in organized crime, few studies explicitly link mobile phone access to maritime piracy. Given the growing reliance on mobile networks and digital tools, examining how connectivity facilitates piracy—from coordination and target identification to fencing stolen goods—is essential. This study aims to fill these gaps by providing a country-specific analysis of piracy in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore and by examining the role of mobile connectivity as a facilitator of piracy.

Theoretical Framework

Criminal activity is often analyzed through Routine Activity Theory (RAT), which posits that three core elements must converge in the same space and time for a crime to occur: a motivated offender, a suitable target,

and the absence of a capable guardian (Bichler and Malm 2015; Cohen and Felson 1979).

A motivated offender refers to an individual or group with the intent and willingness to commit a crime—in this case, pirates. Suitable targets are entities that are vulnerable or accessible; here, commercial vessels serve as prime targets due to the valuable cargo they carry. The absence of a capable guardian signifies ineffective or insufficient protective measures, such as maritime law enforcement and security infrastructure. Capable guardians vary in their capacity and willingness to monitor potential offenders and intervene (Bichler and Malm 2015). In the context of this study, a state's role as guardian depends on its ability to oversee vessel transit, distinguish potential pirates from legitimate maritime actors, and mobilize resources to respond effectively when threats arise.

In the Neo-RAT framework, scholars emphasize target suitability, shaped by systemic asymmetries that render certain targets more vulnerable (Bichler and Malm 2015). For example, maritime regions with higher trade volumes present more lucrative targets for piracy due to the increased likelihood of high-value goods passing through. RAT is especially relevant for understanding piracy in the waters of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, where complex socioeconomic and political dynamics foster an environment conducive to piracy. Economic disparities, political instability, and inadequate maritime law enforcement can produce motivated offenders, while the region's heavy commercial shipping traffic offers abundant targets. Simultaneously, shortcomings in maritime security infrastructure reflect the absence of capable guardians, allowing piracy to persist.

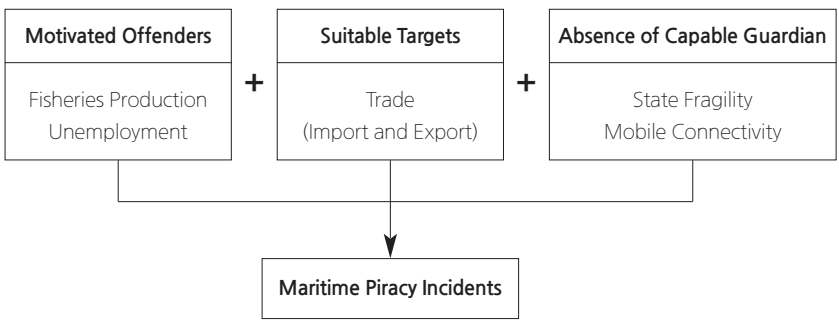
In this study, the variables are grouped and contextualized according to RAT's main components. **Motivated offenders** are captured through indicators of economic strain, such as fisheries production and unemployment. Declining fisheries production may push fishers toward illicit activities, while high unemployment can expand the pool of individuals susceptible to engaging in piracy. **Suitable targets** are

represented by factors that increase vessel vulnerability, primarily the volume of international trade, which raises the potential number of targets passing through regional waters. **The absence of a capable guardian** is operationalized through measures of state capacity, with **state fragility** indicating weaker governance, limited law enforcement, and gaps in security infrastructure. Finally, **mobile connectivity** is included as it can facilitate offender coordination and post-attack transactions, potentially circumventing traditional law enforcement mechanisms.

By structuring these variables according to RAT, the study provides a systematic framework for examining how economic conditions, target availability, and state capacity jointly shape piracy patterns in Southeast Asia. Figure 1 illustrates how the theory is applied to the variables, and Table 1 outlines each variable's description and data source.

Figure 1

VARIABLES CONTEXTUALIZED ACCORDING TO ROUTINE ACTIVITY THEORY



Data and Methodology

This study examines piracy incidents in the countries adjacent to the Straits of Malacca and Singapore—specifically, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia—over the period from 2006 to 2021. Data were obtained from various authoritative sources, including the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO),

the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Fund for Peace, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Each dataset aligns with key variables relevant to piracy, governance, economic conditions, mobile technological capacity, and international trade activity. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the variables used in this research.

Table 1

CONCEPTS AND VARIABLES

Concept Label	Variable	Description	Data Source
Piracy	Number of Pirate Attacks	Number of pirate attacks	International Maritime Organization
Fisheries Production	Capture Fisheries Production	Volume of capture fisheries production	Food and Agriculture Organization
Unemployment	Unemployment Rate	Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate)	International Labour Organization
(State) Fragility	State Fragility	The fragility and stability of social, political, and economic institutions; higher scores indicate greater fragility	Fund for Peace
Mobile Connectivity	Mobile Cellular Subscriptions	Number of mobile cellular subscriptions divided by the country's population and multiplied by 100.	International Telecommunication Union
International Trade	Total Merchandise Imports-Exports	The sum of merchandise imports and exports (Current USD in millions).	World Trade Organization

Figure 2

SCHEMA OF THE PREDICTOR AND RESPONSE VARIABLES

Figure 2 illustrates the independent and dependent variables. The dependent variable—number of pirate attacks—takes the form of count data, rendering Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression unsuitable because OLS assumes that residuals are normally distributed and homoscedastic. Violations of these assumptions lead to inefficient and potentially biased estimates.

While Poisson regression is a common approach for modeling count data, it assumes that the mean and variance of the dependent variable are equal. Diagnostic tests revealed overdispersion in this dataset, meaning the variance exceeded the mean, which biases Poisson regression estimates. To address overdispersion while retaining the count-based nature of the dependent variable, a negative binomial regression model was employed. This approach provides more reliable estimates and robust inferences in the presence of overdispersed count data.

Results

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 reveal significant variation in both piracy incidents and their potential drivers. Pirate attacks ranged from 0 to 135, with a mean of 27.46, indicating that some areas experienced substantially more piracy than others. Capture fisheries production also varied widely, with a mean of 2.53 million metric tons compared to a median of 1.45 million metric tons, suggesting uneven levels of fishing activity. Unemployment rates remained relatively stable across the dataset, while state fragility scores (ranging from 26.3 to 89.2) highlight governance challenges. Mobile cellular subscriptions and trade volume showed large disparities, reflecting differences in technological access and economic conditions.

Table 2
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variable	n	Min	Max	Median	Mean	SD
Pirate Attacks	48	0	135	16	27.458	30.767
Capture Fisheries Production	48	306.3	7,206,879.2	1,450,243.7	2,528,913.1	2,700,065.2
Unemployment Rate	48	2.88	8.06	3.895	4.177	1.142
State Fragility	48	26.3	89.2	66.1	58.385	19.838
Mobile Cellular Subscriptions	48	27.5	164.5	132.5	124.2	30.1
Total Value of Imports & Exports	48	184,177	863,583	419,745	467,647.1	184,073.3

Negative Binomial Regression Model

Regression models were constructed to capture both regional dynamics and country-specific variations. Across all regional models, changes in state fragility were significantly associated with fluctuations in piracy incidents. Moreover, at the regional level, fisheries production and mobile subscriptions emerged as significant predictors in certain models. At the national level, state fragility and mobile cellular subscriptions showed a strong correlation with piracy in Indonesia. In Malaysia, fisheries production and mobile cellular subscriptions exerted significant but opposing effects. In Singapore, no significant predictors were identified—likely reflecting the country's robust maritime security infrastructure and low incidence of piracy. Unemployment and total trade volume were not correlated with piracy in any model.

Table 3 compares the statistical values of each model. Models 1 to 4 are regional-level analyses. Models 1 and 2 are negative binomial regressions: Model 1 excludes the total value of imports and exports, while Model 2 omits state fragility due to high collinearity. Model 3 is a hierarchical (random-effects) negative binomial model, and Model 4 is a panel negative binomial model. Models 5 to 8 focus on the country level, with Models 7 and 8 similarly excluding specific variables to address collinearity.

Table 3

COMPARISON OF REGRESSION MODELS

Independent Variables	Region				Singapore	Malaysia	Indonesia	Indonesia
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(Intercept)	-1.2395	2.9502**	-3.9384	-4.0585	-2.8174	5.5920	-2.8315	6.2259*
	(1.4978)	(0.9854)	(2.3601)	(2.0770)	(6.1933)	(5.1645)	(2.6696)	(3.0176)
Capture_fisheries_production	0.0000002***	0.0000004***	—	—	-0.0005	-0.000005*	—	-0.0000002
	(0.0000001)	(0.0000001)	—	—	(0.0005)	(0.000002)	—	(0.0000003)
unemployment_rate	0.0924347	-0.1780	-0.0274599	-0.0359284	0.1500	-0.5295	—	-0.2406
	(0.1256516)	(0.1349)	(0.1585143)	(0.1482034)	(0.4906)	(0.3137)	—	(0.2091)
state_fragility	0.0297**	—	0.0849188***	0.0923***	0.0437	0.0475	0.0627*	—
	(0.0098)	—	(0.0226853)	(0.0261)	(0.0946)	(0.0401)	(0.0281)	—
mobile_cellular_subscriptions	0.0120*	-0.0038	0.0125733*	0.0121718	-0.0026	0.0238*	0.0126*	—
	(0.0057)	(0.0062)	(0.0062)	(0.0068)	(0.0391)	(0.0100)	(0.0049)	—
total_merchandise_imports_exports	—	0.0000005	0.0000028	0.0000029	0.000005	-0.000002	0.000002	0.000002
	—	(0.000001)	(0.0000015)	(0.000002)	(0.000004)	(0.000003)	(0.000002)	(0.000003)
log(Capture_fisheries_production)			-0.0765056	-0.1005014				
			(0.1409014)	(0.1436751)				
AIC	367.7467	374.6753	370.0561	370.4220	101.7261	104.7829	152.3998	156.41121
Log Likelihood	-177.8734	-181.3376	-177.0281	-176.2110	-43.8630	-45.3915	-71.1999	-73.2056
Num. obs.	48	48	48	48	16	16	16	16
Num. groups: country			3	3				
Num. groups: Year				16				

Note: ***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05.

Model Performance and Predictive Accuracy

Table 4 showcases each model's performance in predicting piracy incidents, comparing observed and predicted values. Among the regional models, Model 4 (panel negative binomial) exhibited the strongest predictive accuracy ($r = 0.91$, $r^2 = 0.83$), coupled with the lowest error measures (MSE = 166.99, RMSE = 12.92, MAE = 7.27). This suggests that time-variant factors are critical for understanding piracy dynamics. Model 3 (hierarchical negative binomial) also performed well ($r = 0.85$, $r^2 = 0.72$), emphasizing the value of accounting for nested data structures. By contrast, Model 2, which excludes state fragility, showed the weakest predictive accuracy ($r = 0.73$, $r^2 = 0.53$) and the highest error rates among regional models, underscoring the importance of governance-related factors in explaining piracy.

At the country level, model performance varied. The Malaysia-specific model demonstrated strong predictive capability ($r = 0.77$, $r^2 = 0.60$) and low error values, indicating that the included variables effectively capture piracy trends in Malaysian waters. In contrast, the Singapore model performed poorly ($r = 0.37$, $r^2 = 0.14$), likely reflecting the low incidence of piracy near Singapore and challenges in modeling infrequent events. Indonesia's models showed moderate-to-weak performance, with Indonesia Model 1 reaching $r^2 = 0.34$ and Model 2 performing the worst ($r^2 = 0.24$) alongside the highest error measures (MSE = 770.96, RMSE = 27.77). These results suggest that removing highly collinear variables adversely affects model accuracy and predictive power for Indonesia.

Table 4

COMPARISON OF OBSERVED VS. PREDICTED PERFORMANCE METRICS

Models	Correlation (r)	R-squared (r^2)	Mean Squared Error (MSE)	Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE)	Mean Absolute Error (MAE)
Region (1)	0.80	0.64	332.7	18.2	11.7
Region (2)	0.73	0.53	503.8	22.4	14.1
Region (3)	0.85	0.72	255.7	15.9	9.4
Region (4)	0.91	0.83	166.9	12.9	7.3
Singapore	0.37	0.14	53.1	7.3	5.2
Malaysia	0.77	0.60	19.6	4.4	3.3
Indonesia (1)	0.58	0.34	672.6	25.9	18.6
Indonesia (2)	0.4	0.24	770.9	27.8	21.3

One-Year Forecast Validation

Table 5 presents the actual and predicted piracy incidents by country for 2022. An error ratio is computed by dividing the predicted value by the actual value; a ratio of 1 indicates a perfect prediction, values above 1 represent overestimations, and values below 1 indicate underestimations. Model 4 at the regional level yielded the most accurate forecasts for Indonesia and Singapore, while the Malaysia-specific model performed best for Malaysia. These findings should be interpreted cautiously, however, as the analysis covers only a single year, limiting insights into longer-term predictive performance.

Table 5

COMPARISON OF ACTUAL AND PREDICTED VALUES FOR 2022 BASED ON EACH MODEL

Models	Country	Actual No. of Incidents	Prediction	Error Ratio
Region (1)	Indonesia	42	49.9	1.19
	Malaysia	10	15.8	1.58
	Singapore	13	5.7	0.44
Region (2)	Indonesia	42	137.4	3.27
	Malaysia	10	12.6	1.26
	Singapore	13	9.1	0.70
Region (3)	Indonesia	42	45.5	1.08
	Malaysia	10	17.9	1.79
	Singapore	13	11.2	0.86
Region (4)	Indonesia	42	42.3	1.01
	Malaysia	10	16.8	1.68
	Singapore	13	10.8	0.83
Singapore	Singapore	13	36.7	2.83
Malaysia	Malaysia	10	11.3	1.13
Indonesia (1)	Indonesia	42	50.8	1.21
Indonesia (2)	Indonesia	42	89.5	2.13

Overall, these results emphasize the importance of including governance-related variables and time-varying factors in statistical models of piracy. Robust panel or hierarchical approaches that account for

overdispersion and nested data structures appear best suited to capture the dynamics driving maritime piracy in Southeast Asia.

Discussion

The results of this study underscore several key insights into maritime piracy in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Across the region, capture fisheries production, state fragility, and mobile cellular subscriptions emerged as significant predictors of piracy, whereas the unemployment rate and total import-export value were not significant in any model.

A particularly surprising finding is the positive relationship between capture fisheries production and piracy at the regional level. This highlights that at the regional level little is known about the relationship between fisheries production and maritime piracy in Southeast Asia. The literature shows that at the global level, an increase in fisheries production leads to a decrease in maritime piracy but the findings of this paper do not corroborate those findings (Daxecker and Prins 2013; Flückiger and Ludwig 2015). This result also contradicts previous research conducted at the regional level in Southeast Asia, as Jiang and LaFree (2023) demonstrate that an increase in fisheries production reduces maritime piracy. This study differs from Jiang and LaFree's (2023) research by specifically examining fish caught at sea, whereas Jiang and LaFree measure fish production more broadly, including both wild-caught fish and aquaculture. The inclusion of aquaculture in their study may have influenced their findings, as it accounts for fish production in controlled environments rather than fishing activity at sea, which is the focus of this analysis. This difference in variable selection could explain the variation in results between the two studies. Additionally, the study period in Jiang and LaFree (2023) spans from 2000 to 2014. However, there was a significant spike in piracy incidents in 2014 and 2015, which their study does not capture. This discrepancy in the time frame could also contribute to differences in findings, as the omission of these high-incident years may

affect the overall patterns observed in piracy trends. Additionally, their study covers a larger geographic area, which may obscure the overall effects of their regression model. This is particularly relevant for countries like China, where total fisheries production—heavily influenced by aquaculture—is significantly larger than the amount of fish caught at sea. This broader scope may contribute to the negative relationship observed in their findings, whereas this study, by focusing solely on fish caught at sea and a smaller geographic area, identifies a positive relationship.

Therefore, for the region on the whole, this study does not support the hypothesis that declining fisheries production is positively associated with increased piracy. However, this hypothesis is supported for Malaysia, where an increase in capture fisheries production is correlated with a decrease in piratical activities. This quantitative research does not explain why at the regional level an increase in fisheries production is correlated with piracy incidents, but two hypotheses can be drawn for a region-level explanation. A possible explanation is that the fishers in the region are engaging in piracy activities to supplement their income. Because fishers have the resources to go out to sea and the savoir-faire for maritime activities, they can use their resources and skills to supplement their income by attacking ships transiting the region. This explanation can be corroborated with previous findings suggesting that individuals who engage in piracy work legally in the maritime sector as taxi-boat drivers or fishers (Daxecker and Prins 2013; Frécon 2005). Another possible interpretation is that larger businesses in the fishing sector are driving an increase in fisheries production, leaving small-scale fishers to turn to other illicit activities, such as piracy. This is a plausible explanation as research has proved that industrial fishing has significantly increased in comparison to small-scale fishing (Teh and Pauly 2018). As for Malaysia, fishers might not be engaging in pirate activities when fishing production increases as the findings show that higher fisheries production is associated with fewer pirate attacks in Malaysia, suggesting that fisherfolk might be less likely to turn to piracy when fishing production is higher. This supports the hypothesis that a

decline in fisheries production increases piracy.

In the case of Malaysia, the significant negative relationship between piracy and fisheries production may be linked to the high market value of fishery products in the country due to high demand. Fish prices in Malaysia are sufficiently high to attract supplies from neighboring countries, making fishing a more profitable livelihood (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2019). Additionally, Malaysia exports high-value fishery products, including shrimp and sashimi-grade tuna (Food and Agriculture Organization 2019). Compared to Indonesia and Singapore, Malaysia has the highest per capita consumption of aquatic food reflecting its demand by the local population (Food and Agriculture Organization 2024). As a result, Malaysian fishers may have a stronger financial incentive to focus on fishing rather than turning to piracy. In Malaysia, from 2015 to 2021 the number of fishers fluctuates from approximately 122,000 to 145,000. The numbers suggest that there are significantly more fishers in Indonesia than Malaysia competing for the limited resources that often lead to overfishing. However, for Indonesia the number of fishers during the same period is 2.6 to 2.9 million (Food and Agriculture Organization 2024).

The report from Food and Agriculture Organization (2024) also points to differences between Indonesia and Malaysia. Malaysia demonstrates a higher demand for fish compared to Indonesia, as reflected in its higher per capita annual aquatic consumption (54 kg vs. 45.1 kg) and significantly greater per fisher production (10.29 tons vs. 2.44 tons). While Indonesia produces a much larger total volume of fish, its vast fishing workforce and lower per fisher production suggest a more labor-intensive and less industrialized sector. In contrast, Malaysia's fisheries sector appears more efficient, suggesting that it is well managed and capable of meeting higher domestic demand. This higher demand for aquatic products in Malaysia also supports the findings of the regression model, which indicates that an increase in fisheries production is negatively associated with piracy. The strong fisheries sector in Malaysia may provide fishers with better economic opportunities, reducing the incentive to engage in illicit activities

such as piracy. These findings on the relationship between fisheries production and maritime piracy are crucial for understanding other dynamics and factors at the micro level that influence the decision of fishers to participate in piracy.

Regionally and specific to Indonesia, an increase in state fragility is positively correlated with an increase in the number of maritime piracy incidents. Consequently, based on our findings, this study fails to reject the hypothesis that an increase in state fragility is positively associated with the number of pirate attacks. Previous studies on state fragility and piracy have demonstrated this relationship, and the findings in this paper corroborate those previous studies (Daxecker and Prins 2013; Sumaila and Bawumia 2014). This suggests that regionally, and specific to Indonesia, governance stability directly contributes to anti-piracy. There are several mechanisms for the correlation of state fragility and piracy. For example, this may be explained by the inability of the state to project its monopoly on the use of force on the seas, as its fragility increases. Or, the state may divert resources to increase its capabilities on land while decreasing those at sea. In either case, naval and coast guard forces are not prioritized as much when state fragility increases.

The model for Indonesia identified state fragility as a significant predictor, which can be linked to Indonesia's reluctance to join multilateral security arrangements like the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) due to sovereignty concerns (Cline 2016; Liss 2013). This refusal to engage in regional cooperation exacerbates governance gaps as Indonesia may have reduced access to shared intelligence on piracy from neighboring states, making coordinated surveillance more challenging (Menzel 2020). Given Indonesia's geographical position and the interconnected nature of the region, state fragility in a major maritime nation like Indonesia is likely to have broader regional implications. The absence of cooperation through regional security frameworks limits governance capacity, and this is reflected in the significance and coefficient value in the regression models for the region and Indonesia. Furthermore, Indonesia's state fragility

is also reflected in its management of the fisheries sector, where weak monitoring, surveillance, and enforcement, along with widespread illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, continue to undermine effective governance (Food and Agriculture Organization 2015). Additionally, the underdevelopment of the fisheries sector in Indonesia is further exacerbated by overfishing, low incomes and living standards for fishers and fish farmers, and a lack of financial support, including limited access to credit schemes (Food and Agriculture Organization 2015).

Consistent with our hypothesis, the findings of this research show that mobile cellular subscription is positively correlated with maritime piracy in the region and for Indonesia and Malaysia. This relationship remains robust even after controlling for other key socio-economic and structural factors, including state fragility, unemployment rate, capture fisheries production, and total merchandise trade value, suggesting that the association is not merely a byproduct of increasing mobile penetration across all sectors. This suggests that there is possibly a greater use of mobile technology for pirate activities. Malaysia's and Indonesia's mobile connectivity has been gradually increasing over the past decade (GSMA 2024). One plausible explanation is that greater mobile connectivity facilitates pirate activities by enhancing their ability to communicate, coordinate attacks, and negotiate ransoms. Research and news articles on piracy incidents indicate that mobile phones are used in operational planning and intelligence gathering, which supports this interpretation (Galgano 2024; Gayomali 2011; Ungerleider 2011). Maritime piracy is often described as an organized crime, this thus necessitates the use of communication technology to conduct these illicit activities efficiently. The finding in this paper concurs with the literature on organized crime and mobile use. The use of mobile technology has facilitated maritime piracy, as demonstrated by Moyle et al. (2019) and Sullivan and Voce (2020), whose work highlights how mobile connectivity enables more efficient communication within illicit drug markets. Pirates are thus turning to new technologies of information and communication to conduct their illicit activities. However, it is important to note that while the relationship

remains statistically significant, the p-value for mobile subscriptions is consistently close to the 0.05 threshold, indicating that the strength of this association may not be as robust as other variables in the model. This suggests that the effect of mobile connectivity on piracy may be context-dependent or influenced by other underlying socio-economic factors.

For Singapore, it is important to understand why mobile subscriptions are not significant despite its advanced technological infrastructure. Piracy levels in Singaporean waters are minimal due to robust maritime security and strong counter-piracy measures. The low incidence of piracy, reflected in the dependent variable, limits any observable relationship between mobile connectivity and piracy, as well as piracy and all other independent variables in the Singapore model, rendering these independent variables insignificant and irrelevant. Thus, while Malaysia's and Indonesia's higher mobile connectivity correlates with piracy, the absence of such significance in Singapore reflects maritime security contexts. Mobile connectivity may widen the gap in capable guardianship within maritime security, potentially facilitating illicit activities. The positive and significant relationship observed in the Models 1 and 3, and the Models for Malaysia and Indonesia supports this interpretation.

A surprising finding from this research is that total merchandise value of imports and exports is not a significant predictor of the number of maritime piracy incidents. One possible explanation for this result is that our measure, national-level import/export trade value, may not fully capture the specific economic incentives for piracy. Additionally, given the transnational nature of piracy, country-specific measure may also not be an appropriate measure. While Daxecker and Prins (2013) findings demonstrated a correlation between maritime piracy hijackings and regional trade volume, their research incorporates trade volume at the regional level on maritime trade routes, while our analysis used national trade statistics and did not support their findings. Unlike Daxecker and Prins (2013), our research did not differentiate between maritime hijacking and maritime piracy. These are possible reasons for the difference in

findings. However, their findings on piracy excluding hijackings was consistent with our findings showing no significant relationship with trade (Daxecker and Prins 2013). Nevertheless, the results are still surprising, because more trade is expected to incentivize maritime piracy. This is because an increase in trade would mean more vessels traversing the waters of the region.

Finally, unemployment proved insignificant in every model, supporting the null hypothesis that unemployment does not correlate with piracy. Various factors may obscure this relationship, including the formal definitions of employment that exclude fishers operating outside traditional labor structures. Furthermore, some pirates have legitimate day jobs, such as taxi-boat drivers, suggesting that piracy is often a secondary or supplementary activity rather than a last resort for the unemployed (Daxecker and Prins 2013; Frécon 2005).

By applying Routine Activity Theory, this research situates piracy within three core elements: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians (Bichler and Malm 2015; Cohen and Felson 1979). Contrary to initial assumptions, low fisheries production is not the prime motivator regionally; rather, the findings suggest that higher production may also align with piracy under certain conditions. Trade volume did not emerge as a key driver of target suitability, implying that additional factors—such as onboard security (Liss 2013, 2014) and regional maritime patrols—may influence whether ships become practical targets. Meanwhile, state fragility and mobile connectivity align with the "absence of capable guardians" component, indicating that weak governance and enhanced communications technology collectively facilitate piracy. Indeed, super controllers—actors who incentivize or coordinate guardians (Bichler and Malm 2015)—could potentially mitigate piracy if Indonesia and Malaysia were more deeply integrated into multilateral agreements. Yet sovereignty concerns impede such coordination, reducing the broader deterrent effect. Currently, while Indonesia and Malaysia agree to cooperate with the Information Sharing Centre (ISC), they have neither signed nor ratified the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating

Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) citing issues of sovereignty (Raymond 2009). They agree that the issues affecting each country should be solved by the respective states and not an external actor (Raymond 2009).

During the period covered in this study, all three countries implemented initiatives to combat piracy. The Malacca Straits Patrol, launched in 2006, integrated earlier efforts such as MALSINDO patrols, Eyes-in-the-Sky, and the Intelligence Exchange Group (Collin 2016). The primary anti-piracy measure undertaken by these states has been joint maritime patrols (Poonnawatt 2023), aimed at deterring and intercepting pirate activities. However, these initiatives focus primarily on enforcement and do not address the systemic issues driving piracy. One major challenge is the sheer size of the maritime territory under each country's jurisdiction. Despite coordinated patrols, limited resources make it difficult to fully deter piracy across such vast waters. Singapore, with its smaller maritime territory and stronger security presence, is better equipped to monitor and control piracy compared to Indonesia and Malaysia. While current efforts emphasize traditional security measures (Poonnawatt 2023), reports suggest that most piracy incidents in the region involve petty theft and opportunistic, non-confrontational attacks, often occurring when fisheries yields are low (IFC 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024; 2025). This pattern indicates that piracy in the region is driven by underlying socio-economic factors, as individuals turn to theft to meet their basic survival needs.

This opens avenues for future research, particularly qualitative research, that can show causal pathways between statistically significant variables and the number of maritime piracy incidents. The findings of this research provide a background for new hypotheses. The first connects fishers in a system involving both the need and desire for additional income with industrial-scale fishing. That is, fishers in the region use their knowledge of the sea to supplement their income from the fishing sector, and larger fishing production companies may overexploit fisheries stocks, driving smaller fishers to engage in piracy. This push factor is supported by a second, permissive condition. That is increased state fragility diverts

state resources from maritime security to land-based security measures. In other words, an increase in state fragility leads to less prioritization of maritime based security agents of the state, thus making piracy less risky and thus more attractive.

Conclusion

This study set out to identify the factors influencing maritime piracy in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore—both individually and at the regional level. The findings highlight that state governance, fisheries production, and mobile cellular subscriptions are key drivers of piracy across the region. However, the analysis also reveals distinct country-specific variations, with each nation displaying unique factors shaped by its governance, economic structure, and maritime security context. This research shows that at the regional level fisheries production, state fragility, and mobile cellular subscriptions are statistically significant predictors of the number of maritime piracy incidents. Trade value of imports and exports and unemployment rates require closer examination as they were insignificant in all models even though previous literature points to their association with maritime piracy.

The most intriguing finding to emerge from this study is that when the other predictor variables are considered, at the regional level, an increase in fisheries production correlates with an increase in the number of maritime piracy incidents. That is, when factoring in other predictor variables, an increase in fishing yield does not deter pirate activities in the region. An implication of this is that, at the regional level, increases in fisheries production yield may not deter fishermen from engaging in pirate activities. However, for Malaysia, an increase in fisheries production is correlated with a decrease in piracy, perhaps reflecting effective management of its fisheries sector. The empirical findings of this study provide a new understanding of the relationship between fisheries production and maritime piracy at the regional level. Furthermore, this

study confirms previous research by showing that state fragility and mobile cellular subscriptions are positively correlated with maritime piracy.

One limitation of this study is that although it demonstrates correlations among some predictor variables, it does not establish a causal relationship. Additionally, the sample size might be too small to detect meaningful effects. Another limitation is that piracy data from the International Maritime Bureau relies on self-reports, meaning some incidents may go unreported. Shipowners may choose not to report attacks to avoid higher insurance premiums or delays at ports due to investigations. This underreporting introduces potential bias in the data, which may affect the accuracy of our analysis. Despite these limitations, this study still offers an understanding into the relationship between socio-economic and political factors in the context of international piracy. Considerably more work is needed to determine whether a causal relationship between predictor variables and maritime piracy exists at the regional level. Furthermore, qualitative research is needed to determine the relationship between piracy and trade value of imports and exports and between piracy and unemployment. Also, maritime law enforcement metrics are needed to fully capture the dynamics of piracy in the region. Additionally, cultural factors were not assessed at all. Thus, one natural direction for future research would be to determine whether piracy in this region faces obstacles due to cultural norms and values, or whether those factors might be permissive conditions for piracy.

Finally, based on the findings above, several policy actions are recommended. While a regional approach to maritime piracy is advisable, special attention must be given to country specific particularities, such as the role of mobile connectivity and fisheries management, to ensure meaningful collaboration. While regionally states may want to focus solely on governance issues affecting state fragility, there must also be focus on the role of mobile connectivity and the management of the fisheries sector. Policymakers should ensure that fisheries management is coupled with anti-piracy policies in the region, and state capacity should be strengthened. Our findings indicate that in Malaysia, higher fisheries

production is associated with lower levels of maritime piracy. A closer examination of the fisheries sectors in Malaysia and Indonesia reveals that Malaysia's fishing industry receives stronger government support. This suggests that effective management and financial assistance in Malaysia have helped fishers remain in the industry rather than resorting to piracy. Furthermore, reports on maritime piracy suggest that attacks are often opportunistic and tend to increase when fisheries' yields are low. To address this, states should focus on strengthening the resilience of the fisheries sector to provide stable livelihoods and reduce the economic incentives for piracy. In other words, for countries struggling with piracy, greater attention should be given to the governance and financial support of local fisheries. Strengthening this sector could provide sustainable livelihoods for fishers and reduce the economic incentives for turning to piracy.

Furthermore, maritime security cooperation through joint patrols and information sharing should be enhanced. Our findings reveal that state fragility is a determining factor influencing piracy in the region. Consequently, to enhance state capacity based on the Routine Activity Theory, the capable guardian must be enhanced. This can be done by engaging in more maritime security agreements and patrols to deter piracy. Finally, to ensure continuous and relevant policies to counter piracy, governments should prioritize further research on the development of anti-piracy/counter-piracy strategies for the region in areas identified by this study's limitations. This includes qualitative research to explore the casual motivations behind maritime piracy, including the role of mobile phone use and unemployment, as well as the influence of cultural factors.

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Economic Integration and Disintegration in East Asia and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Over the last decade, East Asia has seen centrifugal and centripetal forces shaping integration initiatives. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was foremost among them. Simultaneously, economic and political disintegration took place, including through curbs on Chinese investment, and support for the relocation of foreign companies from China. Also, among Japan and South Korea, political conflicts have affected economic integration and limited further cooperation. Concepts of integration like ASEAN Plus Three became less attractive. COVID-19 again brought new challenges, deepening trends of (dis-)integration in the region. Answers to the pandemic were strongly national, with trade and travel restrictions. The need for cooperation in the health sector was huge, and partly aid was granted regionally, but mostly bilaterally. Where the institutionalization of cooperation was stronger, as in ASEAN, there was at least an existing forum fostering such views. Will these challenges and their aftermath lead to a new paradigm of integration in East Asia, as some assert, and how will institutions develop in light of the pandemic and its aftereffects? Can East Asia act on this, thus emerging stronger from the pandemic and more capable of tackling unresolved intraregional conflicts? Or will, as in the current trajectory, intra-regional bloc-building win out over region-wide cooperation.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, East Asia, Economic integration, Institutions, Disintegration

Introduction: Integration and Disintegration Among East Asian Economies During COVID-19

The global COVID-19 pandemic not only led to global economic recession and turmoil, but also to a range of diverse, often contradictory policy measures. While countries intensified aid and medical cooperation, they simultaneously closed their borders, isolating themselves and disintegrating regionalism. As a result, many regular interactions in the field of economic and civilian exchanges, as well as diplomacy, came to a standstill. The East Asian region already faced uncertainty in international relations before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring a new integration model that could have overcome the limitations of "blinkered" integration and effectively addressed the challenges of globalization (Oba 2020). This was not peculiar to the East Asia region, given that we were living in an "era of disintegration" (Montanaro and Violi 2020). It is even more true now, post-COVID.

The future dynamics of integrating and disintegrating forces remain ambiguous. For some countries, notably Japan and South Korea, there are emerging avenues for closer cooperation. However, broader integration at a regional or global level appears to be improbable at this juncture. How much of a role has COVID-19 and the response to it played in this regard?

Until the outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020, there were rising contradictions between a progressing integration of supply chains and political conflict lines and disintegration. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), thought to be the economic underpinning of China's global ascendancy, was still progressing. Particularly in Africa there were growing worries of unsustainable debt burdens and asset seizures, as also seen in Sri Lanka.[1] Some countries responded to the new Chinese assertiveness in foreign and economic policy with curbs on Chinese investment in strategic areas like

1 There is an ongoing and unresolved debate about the real impact of the Chinese "debt trap." See for example Ferchen and Perera (2019) and Hundlari and Kannangara (2020). But it is undeniable that this debate in the political arena shaped the attitude of countries toward the BRI, which became much less enthusiastic than before.

telecommunication or support for the relocation of foreign companies from China, e.g. in Japan (Nikkei 2020). Decoupling from China became hotly debated in the US, but also among other countries, like Japan and Australia. It is sometimes seen as unrealistic (Lardy and Hwang 2020), but also feared to potentially trigger another great depression (Johnson and Gramer 2020). The political landscape in the South China Sea has increasingly polarized China from its Southeast Asian neighbors (Corr 2017), and some of that process accelerated under COVID-19. Furthermore, geopolitical tensions involving other regional players, such as Japan and South Korea, have at points significantly hampered economic integration and restricted prospects for deeper cooperation (Sakaki 2019). Asia-wide concepts of integration like ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan, Korea) have become less attractive. These dynamics have implications for these nations' political cooperation with the US, which remains a crucial ally (Park 2019).

Already by the mid-2010s the concept of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was seen as an attempt to organize an economic integration bloc excluding China (Palit 2014). Ironically, the withdrawal of the US from the TPP in early 2017 seemed to ease the juxtaposition of China and the US in East Asia. But countries still in many cases could not escape from choosing a side in the conflict. For example, South Korea experienced this when it installed the US-built anti-ballistic missile defense system THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) on its territory and was punished by undeclared, but painful Chinese economic countermeasures (Miura 2019). And by 2020, the geo-political conflict between China and the US was stronger than ever (Scobell et al. 2020). The hope of a slow transformation of comprehensive but loose groups like TPP or ASEAN Plus Three into more formal bodies was failing. Also, trilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia (China, Japan, Republic of Korea) was difficult under these circumstances. While existing institutions like the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat did provide a certain space for experts to meet in many different formats, diverging interests often prevented closer cooperation.

Enter the coronavirus. From the beginning, the spread of the virus led to a massive disruption of trade, investment, and travel in the region (and globally). Early on it was clear that the pandemic would come at a huge economic cost (Malizewska et al. 2020), particularly in the form of increased trade disruption (World Trade Organization 2020c). Tourism was perhaps most heavily affected, a sector accounting for up to 80 percent of GDP in Macao, 20 percent in Cambodia, and 15 percent in Thailand. In Thailand alone, overall exports in 2020 went down by eight percentage points of GDP and had a direct net impact of about six percentage points of GDP on its current account balance, as Rebillard (2020) estimates. Besides that, structural change in industries and trade accelerated, including national sourcing and inventory increases, plus international decoupling, in particular from China.

In what follows, this paper will discuss these developments focusing on East Asia and its subregions, with the overall conclusion being that some bilateral relations, and to some extent also ASEAN, showed resilience, and that global approaches to the pandemic and beyond were welcomed in the region with very few exceptions, while the previous idea of Asia-wide approaches (like ASEAN Plus Three) did not show any strength. After the pandemic, bloc-building and the scenario of a "Cold War 2.0" won clearly over Asian approaches to economic re-building.

After this introductory section, the second section looks into the Southeast Asian region and the ASEAN answer to COVID-19. Section three deals with China, where the COVID-19 pandemic originated, and its increasingly complicated relations with Southeast and Northeast Asia. In particular, the policies regarding the "Greater China" region and the BRI came under scrutiny during the pandemic. The fourth section examines Northeast Asia, in particular Japan and the Korean Peninsula, as well as trilateral (China, Japan, Korea) cooperation. Here, the disadvantages of weak institutional structures become obvious. Section five investigates institutional answers to the crisis, through specialized institutions like development banks, but also emerging structures of East Asia-wide integration. The conclusion broaches answers to forward-looking

questions. Will there be less integration, and welfare losses from rising trade costs and less cooperation? Or can there be some "collateral benefit" (Högner 2020) from the COVID-19 pandemic? The answer will be, foremost, the question of institutional design.

Southeast Asia—Closer Intraregional Integration, Less International Integration?

Southeast Asian countries were particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic from the beginning, primarily due to their geographic proximity to the outbreak's epicenter in China. Additionally, the interconnectivity of borders exacerbated the risk of viral transmission and posed challenges to the economic relationships with China, heightening the potential for both public health crises and economic disruption within the region. Even early in 2020 the impact of the pandemic was felt profoundly across ASEAN nations, which relied heavily on trade and tourism. China had emerged as a significant partner of ASEAN (17.1 percent of total trade), accounting for a substantial portion of both trade and foreign direct investment in the region (6.5 percent of total FDI inflows) (ASEAN 2020, 3). However, the interwoven nature of these economies meant that disruptions in China had immediate and far-reaching effects throughout Southeast Asia.

Moreover, many countries within ASEAN faced compounded vulnerabilities due to the structure of their economies. A large informal sector, insufficient safety nets, and a reliance on tourism placed countless individuals at risk, particularly those working in precarious jobs, e.g., small businesses or gig economy workers. (OECD 2020b, 10-11; ASEAN 2020, 10). With national health systems often unprepared for the pandemic (United Nations 2020, 5), the pandemic laid bare their weaknesses, exacerbating the difficulties faced by the most at-risk populations. One country, Myanmar, had a long-lasting and devastating civil war with thousands of refugees and elevated levels of violence (United Nations 2020, 9). Given the urgent challenges posed by the pandemic, Southeast

Asian countries quickly prioritized the need for essential health products. In this context, governments focused on securing necessary health products like Personal Protective Equipment, masks, testing equipment for COVID-19, etc. in the face of spiking demand. At this time, exports were restricted and tariffs on imports were removed to ensure meeting domestic demand (Chandra et al. 2020, 1). While there was a danger that certain trade restrictions remain permanently in place, ASEAN remained committed to sharing information promptly, keeping markets open, and ensuring supply chain connectivity, in particular for essential products. According to Chandra et al. (2020, 5, figure 1), in Lao DPR and Singapore liberalizing policies were privileged, while in Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam liberalizing policies were mixed with a number of restrictive policies. However, compared with important trade and dialogue partners like Russia, India, China, and the United States the number of restrictive measures was not particularly high.

As the crisis was ongoing, joint consultations and the formulation of joint strategies on the ASEAN level were introduced. On February 13, 2020, the ASEAN National Tourism Organizations collectively issued a statement outlining precautionary measures in response to the prevailing situation across all member states. On March 10, ASEAN economic ministers issued a statement on "Strengthening ASEAN's Resilience in Response to the Outbreak of COVID-19," which included a commitment to open economic and integration policies and vowed collective action to mitigate the impact of the outbreak on markets, more information sharing, and coordination. Coordination also included a discussion with the ASEAN Dialogue partners, like in the Chiang Mai initiative for a multilateral swap initiative including ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan, Korea), or the Special ASEAN Finance and Central Bank Deputies Meeting+3 (AFCDM+3) held through videoconferencing on 3 April, 2020 (ASEAN 2020, 12). According to Indonesia's Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, the need for greater connectivity, trade, and investment facilitation was among the challenges for ASEAN members in answering COVID-19 (ERIA 2020, 5).

These supply-side challenges were recognized by the 26th ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) retreat on 10 March 2020, which issued a statement calling for collective action to mitigate the impact of the virus, with a particular focus on leveraging technology and digital trade, as well as trade facilitation platforms to foster supply chain connectivity and sustainability. On 14 April 2020, the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 was held, where the impact of the pandemic on growth became more visible. Leaders of the ASEAN member states looked explicitly at the demand side and issued a statement calling for a post-pandemic recovery plan and proposed the establishment of the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund (OECD, 2020, 2). In a time when other countries were barely able to fight for themselves, the existence of a community, with established channels of dialogue with regular dialogue partners (these are for ASEAN, the US, China, Japan, the European Union, and other important economies) made ASEAN a prime actor in countering the challenges of COVID-19 in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond (Eria, 2020, 6). As Kliem (2021) points out, states working with integration partners like the EU and ASEAN were able to overcome the "self-fulfilling prophecy of realism," that countries would rather focus on national interest only.

In the post-pandemic emergency response period, "normal" ASEAN relations were largely restored, although the move toward illiberalism in particular in Myanmar (Wicaksana et al. 2023), and to a lesser extent also Vietnam and Cambodia, made bolder initiatives difficult. ASEAN states reacted in three ways. First, they once again put a focus on sub-regional integration, potentially a very good move to overcome practical hurdles, in particular regarding direct cross-border cooperation. Second, they restarted their dialogue with important partners in the region, among them China (Yaxuan and Siqi 2024 with special reference to the integration of the "blue economy") and Korea (Kim 2024a). Third, the focus on new forms of cooperation learned during the pandemic, in particular cooperation in digitalization, became equally important as macro-economic and institutional cooperation. Digitalization has been an

important topic in ASEAN for more than a decade, but through the pandemic it came to the forefront of integration efforts (Kim 2024b). Currently, the strategies employed during the pandemic are being evaluated with a cross-regional perspective (Nguyen and Le 2023, Spandler et al. 2023). Also, there are calls for stronger integration as a result of the pandemic (Baek et al. 2023; Suyastri et al. 2023). In particular, the position of ASEAN between China and India is scrutinized and the necessity to integrate into the Global Value Chain (GVC) to mitigate the negative shocks on exports of medium-skill and technology-intensive products, and exports of high-skill and technology-intensive parts and components, has been highlighted (Kato 2022).

China in East Asia and the World—No Humility, Greater Assertiveness

In China, where the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic began, it had a much stronger original impact than comparable crises like SARS or the global financial crisis of 2009. In these challenging times, output was still positive, though diminished, while now negative growth rates of industrial production, fixed asset growth, retail sales, and exports prevailed (see the table in Chin et al. 2020, 3, with figures from the National Bureau of Statistics of China). Worldwide supply chain disruptions were as devastating for China as plummeting domestic demand, for example in tourism, the retail sector, the movie industry, transportation, and real estate; positive effects prevailed in the fields of medical supplies, teleworking, online entertainment, and insurance (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2020, 7-13). The impossibility of inter-regional travel in China left many companies without the necessary workers (for weeks and months). Furthermore, the pandemic posed significant threats to international supply chains and shipping dynamics. For instance, the United States faced challenges stemming from reduced inventory levels, as companies sought to cut costs. Wuhan, which was recognized as the initial epicenter of the

outbreak, is also a key hub for industries such as computers, electronics, pharmaceuticals, and the automotive sector. While China was able to largely contain the coronavirus in a short time by implementing draconian measures, like sealing off huge areas, the virus continued to spread at an ever-faster pace outside China (Chin et al. 2020, 5).

Initially, the regional response to the emerging threat was characterized by the suppression of voices alerting the public to the potential dangers posed by the new pathogen and, in some cases, arrests, leading to a delay in actionable measures. Soon, the World Health Organization (WHO) and its response, which included praise for the Chinese anti-virus measures, was embroiled in this dispute. Criticism focused on WHO Director-General (DG) Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who at the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic condemned countries for restricting travel to and from China while praising China's anti-epidemic policy (Collins 2020). Indeed, while a travel ban would have come too late already, traveling spread the virus worldwide. China's influence in the WHO was also strongly criticized when it prevented the participation of Taiwan in a key meeting of the WHO on the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2020. Taiwan has faced significant challenges in maintaining its diplomatic presence, experiencing a gradual decline in diplomatic representations over the years (see Tan, Ho, and Clark 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan effectively controlled the outbreak through prompt governmental responses, centralized management of disease control, and the rapid implementation of recent technologies for virus tracing. These strategies enabled the country to rapidly regain control over the situation and mitigate the impact of the virus. Despite securing backing from the US, the EU, Japan, and other nations at the WHO's decision-making body meeting on May 18, 2020, Taiwan was blocked from participation due to intervention from China (Asher 2020). This incident represented a significant breach of the transparency principle essential for effective pandemic response and viral containment.

Following the successful containment of the COVID-19 virus, Taiwan started its aid diplomacy, in particular among small Pacific island states,

where it continues to maintain diplomatic representation (Tseng et al. 2020). This effort mirrors Australia's aid initiatives to the Pacific island states, characterized not only as a gesture of regional solidarity but also as a strategic maneuver to enhance influence in competition with China, which is the second-largest aid donor in this area (Wood 2020). According to Liu (2020), the post-pandemic economic landscape may provide Taiwan with enhanced opportunities to integrate into both regional and global production networks. Despite its limited proper diplomatic representation, Taiwan has successfully negotiated free trade agreements with Singapore and New Zealand, and has strengthened its bilateral investment protection agreements with India, Thailand, and the Philippines. Larger gains would follow from the envisioned membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). However, this has been prevented by China and seems not to be likely for now. While Wu (2020) argues that despite diverging political goals China and Taiwan attempted to stay civil in their dispute, at least during the crisis, although the precedence of the coercion of Hong Kong under the newly adopted National Security Law, including the flight of prominent dissidents from Hong Kong to Taiwan, certainly added to the tensions (East Asia Forum Editorial Board 2020b).

The China-led Belt and Road Initiative faced challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the initiative encountered significant disruption due to the suspension of conventional trade and exchange. As a result, there was a greater focus on developing digital infrastructure instead of physical infrastructure projects—such as roads and ports—that were originally central to the initiative's objectives. Second, as a consequence of the pandemic, the global debt landscape worsened, with many countries experiencing substantial increases in their debt burdens. This financial strain was driven by the necessity to finance cash handouts, debt relief for citizens, and companies stabilizing exploding social insurance budgets, etc. Such circumstances pose a bleak outlook for countries grappling with pre-existing debt loads incurred through BRI investments. Vinukurov (2020, 3) argued that the involvement of Chinese contractors abroad with

thousands of Chinese workers would not be possible in the near future. While the pandemic-related restrictions ended, the political opposition to large-scale Chinese involvement in many countries grew, further exacerbated by the antagonistic policies of the new US administrations under President Donald Trump. Furthermore, the envisaged multilateralization of the BRI since 2019, which was intended to incorporate significant funding agencies such as the World Bank, ADB, AIIB, NDB, and others starting in 2020 and 2021, has faced postponement. Indeed, only the AIIB, which is largely financed and supported by China, has engaged in the BRI since then.

Buckley (2020, 313-314) claims the reasons for this are that it would lead to more scrutiny from host countries, and, in case China continues to perceive political benefits from the BRI, to potentially more "fringe benefits" (like handouts, donations, education grants, etc.) for host countries. Indeed, the "health diplomacy" of sending millions of masks, personal protective equipment, gloves, etc. may have been such an approach (Verma 2020). Some analysts see the chance for a more collaborative model of BRI (Baker McKenzie 2020, 4). However, even if the new (post-COVID) BRI is more focused on the "digital silk road" than on iron, steel, and concrete, the way is still not free from challenges. Positive evaluations highlight the potential to increase regional and cross-regional cooperation, available financial resources, and foster regional political stability and multilateralism (Hussain et al. 2024). However, in particular, the US sees the project critically: US-China competition is not only a trade war, but also a war of different technological concepts and companies. There is a worry that the "digital Silk Road," a project first drafted in China, in 2015, will not only provide the latest technologies, but also spread political illiberalism (Cheney, 2019, and, on the post-COVID-19 times, Blanchette and Hillmann 2020). This is less a question of differing technological standards and more of a focus on the application of different technologies in China versus Western countries. Additionally, there are growing concerns that cooperation within the BRI framework may lead to reduced collaboration in other areas of integration,

such as with Cambodia, China, and ASEAN (Upadhyay 2023).

In Central Asia, a region that particularly struggled with COVID-19, the influence of China during the pandemic was seen as largely advantageous (Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting 2020, 3-8). Yet China was able to gain more significance as an importer of energy, an important export good for large parts of the region, and by increasing its involvement in metallurgy and mining.

For Southeast Asia, China as well as the United States are important partners, so most countries try to avoid "choosing" one over the other in disputes (Marston 2020). Nevertheless, this is not always possible. Indonesia and Malaysia joined Australia in the demand for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19, and both Singapore and Vietnam closed their borders to China early on, to the great dismay of their large neighbor, which accused them of racism both diplomatically and through media and back-channels. Cambodia, on the other hand, left the border open at the time and was praised by Chinese leadership. This shows that hedging between both China and the United States had become a prevailing strategy in the COVID-19 pandemic for Southeast Asian states (Kuick 2020).

A similar trend could apply to Northeast Asia. Here, previous experiences with greater Chinese assertiveness, such as in the case of territorial disputes with Japan and the dispute over the THAAD installation in South Korea, have led to tensions that were exacerbated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, China, among others, employed forms of "mask diplomacy" to soften these tensions, for example by donating $200,000 to a South Korean-led vaccine project, despite the domestic competitiveness of Chinese vaccine developers (Korea Times 2020). The challenges of a post-pandemic world for China are both economic and diplomatic. After dealing with the crisis, China has had to cope with the economic, social, and political side effects (Julienne 2020). The jury is still out as to whether this is the "dawn of the Western-dominated world" or whether an aggressive China, as painted in wolf-warrior diplomacy, will become regionally or globally dominant. Beijing's

hypocritical mask diplomacy, weak funding of global public health, controversial Confucius Institutes, and other problematic measures did not put it in a great position as the world emerged from COVID-19. Meanwhile pressure from the Biden administration and Europe to "de-risk" from China has left it more economically fragile than expected pre-COVID. To be sure, China's sheer size as a market and role as a production powerhouse of the world mean that it will always play a central economic role in East Asia. But to be an accepted leader in East Asian integration, other aspects, like trust (rule-based or experience-based), cultural power, and acceptance are equally important. In this regard, the COVID-19 pandemic saw a setback for the role China could play in the economic integration of East Asia. Moreover, while China has made some progress in cooperating with closer allies like Russia and North Korea, its post-pandemic policy is largely inward-oriented and does not aspire to provide leadership for regional integration processes.

Southeast Asian and Northeast Asian National Answers and No Signs of Rapprochement

When China first experienced the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and soon answered with draconian measures, there was a perception that neighboring countries would be hit hard. This was not necessarily the case for Southeast Asian countries, which suffered economic shocks from the pandemic but gained some control over the virus through strict immigration as well as strong public health campaigns and control of public spaces like schools.

It was similarly not true for the two large Northeast Asian economies Japan and South Korea. Both escaped a major outbreak of the virus without complete economic and social lockdown measures by employing slightly different strategies. A unique mixture of factors may have improved the effectiveness of virus-related restrictions. These enhancements, along with the adoption of technical solutions like physical separation of

people, contact tracing, closing public spaces, etc., seem to have made this possible. In both countries, the practice of wearing masks had already become common long before the pandemic, primarily due to concerns about air quality and fine dust pollution. This pre-existing familiarity with mask use facilitated a greater willingness among individuals to adopt masks as a protective measure during the coronavirus crisis. Tashiro and Shaw (2020) suggest that Japan's culture, healthcare system, sanitation, immunity, and food habits, along with citizens' behavior, were reasons for the successful flattening of the infection curve. Furthermore, in Japan, the mega-disaster of Fukushima started an intense debate about "all-hazard resilience" and the integration of policies across functional and political boundaries, e.g., integration of national and sub-national responses (De Wit 2020). The COVID-19 crisis also accelerated automation and AI solutions in Japan. Already beforehand, Japan was at the forefront of the use of robotics, e.g., with receptionist robots in hotels or public places, an adoption which was forced upon the country due to increasing labor shortage in an aging society (Horii and Sakurai 2020).

South Korea was initially hit hard by a cluster of COVID-19 infections in the southern city of Daegu related to missionary activities of a secretive sect (Borowiec 2020). Afterward, South Korea adopted policies advising social distancing while avoiding a complete economic lockdown. Also, South Korea experimented with new forms of contactless or contact-reducing testing like drive-through and walk-through testing stations, which became adopted later by many other countries. Also, mobile applications from the government and private companies helped with contact tracing, identification, and information for the public. The advanced use of these applications proved especially effective in densely populated urban environments, leveraging existing digital infrastructure to optimize public health responses (Seoul, Gyeonggi province, and Incheon), where half of the South Korean population lives (Lee and Lee 2020). With these policies, the outbreak of the pandemic was put under control relatively fast. In the run-up to the South Korean National Assembly election in mid-April 2020, the South Korean government aggressively

promoted its public health response to COVID-19 as a global benchmark. This strategy, as analyzed by Yi and Lee (2020), is characterized as a form of "pandemic nationalism," which is highly politicized and aimed at promoting the policy as the national brand image of Korea. At the peak of this policy, South Korean President Moon Jae-In proposed a G20 teleconference to share the South Korean way of tackling the virus (Lee 2020). The COVID-19 response team at Imperial College of London (2020) highlighted that a key strength of the "Korean model" in mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic was its effective contact tracing. However, it is important to note that most COVID-19 cases in South Korea were centered in a limited number of clusters, rather than being widespread, like in many European countries. The situation in late August 2020, when COVID-19 cases erupted in several places unrelated to such clusters in South Korea might have more accurately evaluated the validity of a "Korean model." Certainly, there was a danger of a "Corona Confucianism" fallacy, as perceived from abroad but utilized for a domestic political agenda, to describe the uniqueness of the Japanese, Korean, or Chinese situation.

While the Korean national answers to the COVID-19 outbreak were swift, strong, and largely successful, there was also the need for international coordination. South Korea, early on, implemented restrictive measures on the export of essential medical goods like masks, and instituted a domestic rationing system to manage their local availability. Similarly, Japan took significant action to intervene in its domestic mask market (Japan Today 2020). At the same time, there were increasing expectations for Japan to utilize its position as a leading global donor of foreign aid to tackle international health challenges. Japan's comprehensive disaster management strategy incorporates multilateral engagement in overseas water systems, public health, and other critical infrastructure development. This approach is facilitated via Japan's various aid agencies alongside key international financial institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank. Japan's well-established history of effective cooperation with these multilateral institutions further enhanced its capacity to address the pressing global issues. Furthermore,

Japan contributed to multilateral aid relief for the poorest countries (De Wit 2020, 3). The well-established network of development organizations, like the Japan International Cooperation Agency, reached out to worldwide partners to support their policies to contain COVID-19 (Kitaoka 2020).

The regional response, however, was underwhelming. Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan and South Korea were already experiencing a deterioration in bilateral relations (Sakaki 2019). This decline was exacerbated by unresolved territorial disputes and lingering historical grievances related to World War II. The escalation of tensions was aggravated further by the seizure of Japanese assets in South Korea, prompting a reciprocal imposition of trade restrictions between the two nations. Japan enacted a series of protective measures, which South Korea promptly mirrored in response. After January 20, relations deteriorated rapidly when South Korea strongly opposed Japan's imposition of a travel ban targeting South Korean citizens. The ensuing back-and-forth of travel restrictions seemed to be influenced more by political factors than medical considerations (Gibson 2020). The early success of South Korea in containing COVID-19 in the first wave, while Japan was still grappling with a response, was seen as an opportunity for bilateral cooperation (Togo 2020), but this never materialized.

Indeed, bilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia in the time of COVID-19 was often dictated by political objectives unrelated to the crisis itself. A notable example is the statement by the Chinese Ambassador to South Korea, Xing Haiming, who lauded Chinese-South Korean cooperation as pivotal to the swift economic recovery of East Asia. Xing Haiming further predicted that both countries would emerge as leaders in East Asia after the end of the crisis (Yi 2020). Concerning Japan, China employed a strategy known as "mask diplomacy," which entailed a political initiative framed around the principle of "neighbor-to-neighbor help." This campaign included the distribution of personal protective equipment, including masks and ventilators, alongside the suspension of local broadcasts of an anti-Japanese war drama in Shanxi. Nevertheless,

deep-rooted mistrust and territorial conflicts raised questions about the effectiveness of this diplomacy, which originated from a desire to drive a wedge between China's foes in the region, particularly the United States, and its allies (Aoyama 2020). In Australia, a nation that drew China's ire for its inquiries into the origin of COVID-19, the Chinese Ambassador found harsh words for the host country, likening it to "Caesar seeing Brutus approaching" (The New Daily 2020). Meanwhile, South Korea, emboldened by early successes in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, sought to engage with the international community, including ASEAN (Choi 2020). However, its diplomacy was hampered by the inward-looking responses of most states and the physical constraints imposed on conventional diplomatic endeavors, including close cooperation with allies and confidential talks with partners and adversaries (Robertson 2020).

This was particularly pronounced for South Korea, as it navigated a precarious diplomatic landscape amid heightened tensions with North Korea. North Korea, which maintains a close economic and political alliance with China, yet is among the least integrated countries in East Asia, significantly escalated its isolation by completely closing its borders for travel, and for some months also for trade, early in the COVID-19 outbreak (Seliger 2020). Consequently, offers for inter-Korean cooperation to address the pandemic were largely ignored by North Korea, deflating South Korean hopes to establish a "healthcare security community" (Cho 2020). Before 2022, North Korea claimed to have had no confirmed case of COVID-19, despite limited testing capabilities. Simultaneously, the regime sought out international aid, without divulging details of the pandemic situation. The imposition of drastic restrictions on the movement of diplomats and aid workers resulted in an unprecedented outflow from foreign missions, with many foreign embassies closing and a significant reduction in the flow of information regarding the situation within the country. When North Korea finally admitted to the outbreak of COVID-19 (referred to as the "new fever"), other countries had already begun recovering from the crisis. Additionally, North Korea was the country that had the longest curbs on traveling, persisting until mid-2024.

While some of these measures can still be attributed to the pandemic, they may also serve the interests of the elites, who benefit from a tightly controlled information environment. Mongolia, for instance, enforced a stringent border lockdown, characterized by close and transparent collaboration with the WHO, which led to effective containment of the COVID-19 virus. However, this strategy incurred significant economic costs in the context of its export-driven economy, resulting in a deep recession and increasing national debt (Krusekopf and Jargalsaikhan 2020). This "success" (as it was perceived in the early times of the pandemic) highlighted the limitations of relying solely on national responses to COVID-19. Even successful interventions can precipitate severe economic repercussions, economic disintegration, and impose burdens on future generations, thereby constraining policy alternatives in both social and health policies. Consequently, the net effect of such policies warrants a critical assessment; a simple reference to "human lives saved" thus fails to encapsulate the broader consequences.

Institutional Answers to the Crisis in East Asia

As we have seen in the previous section, while there was a global pandemic response at the WHO level, predominant responses to the COVID-19 pandemic were largely coordinated at the national or sub-national level. ASEAN, however, emerged as a significant player in regional institutional responses. First, on February 29, 2020, a special ASEAN-China Foreign Minister's Meeting on COVID-19 took place. As the global situation escalated, ASEAN pushed for a special video conference, on April 14, 2020, of ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan, and Korea). This summit meeting declared "war on COVID-19" and supported the proposed COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund for Public Health Emergencies to be newly set up. However, no new money was pledged by the "3" (China, Japan, South Korea), but merely a re-allocation of existing funding pledges, with the hope of further external assistance.

Other supported measures included backing for the ASEAN Emergency Operations Center Network for Public Health Emergencies (ASEAN EOC Network), the ASEAN BioDiaspora Virtual Centre, and the APT Field Epidemiology Training Network (FETN). While the verbal support for these frameworks was certainly welcomed, it highlighted the limitations of a loose integration scheme among member states. The declaration also vowed to keep markets open for trade and investment and enhance cooperation among ASEAN Plus Three countries to ensure food security. The aim was to maintain regional interconnectedness by facilitating, as much as possible, the essential movement of people, including business travel, while safeguarding public health in line with efforts to combat the pandemic. Additionally, it sought to minimize the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and reaffirm commitments to strengthen joint efforts toward post-pandemic recovery and stimulate economic development.

However, the commitments made remained ambiguous and lacked enforceability. In both business travel and macroeconomic coordination, no joint efforts were taken. Nonetheless, ASEAN exemplified how prior integration facilitated the establishment of a cohesive network of related agencies and meeting formats. This includes entities besides the aforementioned (ASEAN EOC Network, ASEAN BioDiaspora Virtual Centre, FETN) such as the ASEAN Plus Three Senior Officials Meeting for Health Development (APT SOMHD), the ASEAN Public Health Emergency Operations Centre (PHEOC) Network, and the ASEAN Risk Assessment and Risk Communication Centre (ARARC). Moreover, it coordinated the Public Health Laboratories Network as part of ASEAN Health Cluster 2 on Responding to All Hazards and Emerging Threats, and included the Regional Public Health Laboratories Network (RPHL) led by Thailand through the Global Health Security Agenda platform.

Another institutional response emerged from various development banks, which are trained to think and act regionally rather than nationally, particularly the Asian Development Bank (ADB). ADB played a crucial role in disseminating regional data on anti-epidemic policies through its

ADB COVID-19 policy tracker, later named the COVID-19 database (https://covid19policy.adb.org). Additionally, a separate website highlighted ADB's research and investment efforts to combat COVID-19 (Asian Development Bank 2020). In April 2020, the ADB announced a substantial allocation of $20 billion to address the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on three priority areas. First, it provided emergency lending and budget support aimed at alleviating the balance of payment crisis, together with other international financial institutions and the IMF. Second, the ADB directed resources towards sectors severely impacted by the pandemic, facilitating efforts to restore and enhance resilience. Lastly, the institution committed to supporting economic recovery initiatives while also providing support for the most vulnerable population groups (Asian Development Bank 2020). Similarly, the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) set up programs in related fields, while the New Development Bank (NDB) contributed through smaller-scale efforts.

Another actor involved in regional efforts to combat COVID-19 was UN-ESCAP. Notably, efforts coordinated from its Songdo office in South Korea focused on Northeast Asia, where a series of virtual seminars were conducted to share best practices in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar activities were implemented across regional offices addressing South and Southwest Asia, North and Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific.

Conclusion—Challenging Times Ahead for Asian Integration

While the total output and trade loss of the COVID-19 pandemic is difficult to measure, it has seemingly led to (or at least accelerated) the worst deglobalization since World War II, with international trade shrinking up to one-third, FDI up to 40 percent and international remittances by 20 percent (Sally 2020; Barai et al. 2024; Naseer et al. 2023; Ghazalian 2025).

Global value chains moved away from China in the quest for greater diversification and resilience (Khor 2020; Basu et al. 2025; Solingen 2025; Khan et al. 2025; Ghazalian 2025; Wang 2024; Moradlou et al. 2024). Recent sources, including Barai et al. (2024), Naseer et al. (2023), Khan et al. (2025), and Solingen (2025), have analyzed further developments in economic trends and the detailed effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, observing a concurrently heightened decoupling of the US and China. Petri and Plummer (2020) have highlighted that the US-China trade war, coupled with the protectionist measures prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergence of two significant all-Asian trade agreements—the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—are likely to lead in the long term to a gradual fragmentation of East Asian economies from both the United States and India. While a strengthening of intra-regional trade, and a shift in global trade patterns and supply chains, appear inevitable, the extent to which new institutional cooperation forms among East Asian nations—particularly among the three big players China, Japan, and South Korea—will evolve remains uncertain. Especially considering the constraints previously discussed. There is a chance that the CPTPP and RECP could function as free trade areas without institutional underpinnings. This scenario would render the principles of free trade and the movement of goods, services, and labor vulnerable to destabilization, particularly if countries choose to pursue nationalist economic policies, as witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The question persists: w ill East Asia be poised to enter a period of "malign mercantilism" (Sally 2020)? Sally defines this as a form of pre-World War II mercantilism, which ultimately destroyed the world economy and led to global war. While admitting that the post-COVID world was far from that, he saw some signs of East Asia moving towards such a spiral of disconnection and shrinking cooperation—this seems even more the case with the US now firmly entrenched in a de-coupling/de-risking mode through the Biden and Trump presidencies. As we saw

above, there was some regional interaction on the crisis, like that mentioned in section 2. However, this was predominantly rhetorical and lacked substantial institutional support. The assumption that trade integration in East Asia would inherently foster stronger political coordination and integration has been increasingly undermined by recent trends. Initial responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, characterized by trade restrictions and the nationalization of supply chains, have had a path dependent effect of hindering regional integration (Asian Development Bank 2020, 3). Conversely, the crisis accelerated the emergence of alternative forms of cooperation, particularly in digital trade and e-commerce (World Trade Organization 2020a).

Thus, rather than indicating a linear trajectory toward deeper disintegration, the pandemic has exposed the underlying fragility of regional cooperation mechanisms. Agreements such as the CPTPP and RCEP, while facilitating intra-regional trade, may ultimately function as primarily economic arrangements devoid of profound institutional commitments, thus rendering them vulnerable to shifts in national policy orientations (Petri & Plummer 2020). Simultaneously, economic repercussions stemming from COVID-19, including escalated unemployment rates and volatility in financial markets, have highlighted the imperative for enhanced regional policy coordination (Kimura et al. 2020). Kimura et al. (2020, 15) conclude "that policy coordination and regional cooperation in the early phase of the pandemic shock were critical to mitigate its effects and to minimize the reinforcement effect on economic shock in domestic economies and the region." This context implies that, although automatic political integration remains improbable, a targeted focus on economic stabilization and the development of digital infrastructure could become pivotal elements of East Asian regionalism. Early interventions in these areas correlate with a reduction in the overall economic impact. In addition to this macroeconomic outlook, there have been calls for increased cooperation on public goods, encompassing safety, environmental preservation, and public hygiene (Oba 2020). This trajectory suggests a movement towards "deeper trade arrangement," an ongoing trend in

global institutional frameworks (Mattoo et al. 2020). However, this development has not yet been fully realized in East Asia, with the possible exception of ASEAN.

The future of East Asian integration is currently shaped by two contrasting paradigms: the potential for increased disintegration fueled by nationalist answers to various problems, a trend that accelerated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the establishment of neo-mercantilist policies characterized by import restrictions, export controls, and selective support for growth industries. Historical evidence—the foremost example being trade contraction in the Great Depression—suggests that reliance on these protectionist approaches has been ineffective and will likely be similarly unproductive moving forward (East Asia Forum Editorial Board 2020a). However, the political fortitude that such policies can garner within both authoritarian and democratic regimes may lead to their continued implementation. In contrast, a more favorable path would entail deepening regional integration, underpinned by a commitment to market openness encompassing goods, services, and labor mobility. This integration necessitates the establishment of new institutional structures designed not only to deliver public goods and enhance regional coordination, but also to safeguard market openness against nationalistic interventions based on short-term political considerations. Such frameworks must be rule-based and include competitive regulations and state-aid provisions, addressing critical threats to market integrity.

In the post-pandemic period, previous coordination mechanisms have experienced a partial revival, demonstrated by renewed in-person meetings and notable high-level meetings, like the China-Japan-South Korea summit held in mid-2024. While this may signal a positive trajectory for regional integration, the aftermath of the Russian-Ukraine war presents a more concerning backdrop. This conflict has reinforced pre-existing alliances, particularly the Russia-China-North Korea axis on the one side and the US, Japan, and South Korea on the other. A significant outcome of this geopolitical shift is the rapprochement between Japan and South Korea, which has the potential to fundamentally transform the security dynamics

and economic relationships within Northeast Asia (Seliger 2024). However, this thawing of relations comes at a cost, particularly in terms of stalling engagement with China and the deepening of the military alliance between Russia and North Korea, which was solidified during the summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un in June 2024. This scenario may further underscore the systemic limitations on integration among states with fundamentally divergent political regimes. This can be seen in Myanmar's isolated position within ASEAN, where the organization has traditionally managed to downplay such conflicts (Türk 2024). Additionally, emerging alliances and cooperative frameworks in the region, such as AUKUS, tend to coalesce around partners with similar political systems, thereby illustrating the complexities of fostering comprehensive regional cooperation. While the aspiration for pan-Asian integration remains, it is imperative to recognize the inherent limits imposed by political disparities among the countries involved.

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Sociocommunity Hardening and Adaptable Resilience in Policymaking: Lessons from Sub-State Crises in South Korea and Taiwan

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Abstract

Contemporary societies increasingly face domestic and sub-state challenges that existing conceptual frameworks fail to address adequately. This trend is reflected in the growing frequency and impact of "Black Swan" events, compounded by misinformation, conspiracy theories, deepfakes, and political polarization. Public policymaking must therefore account for societal vulnerabilities that, if left unchecked, may fester and pose long-term threats. These concerns highlight the need for a "whole-of-society" approach to counter sub-state threats. I propose Sociocommunity Hardening and Adaptable Resilience in Policymaking (SHARP) as a conceptual basis for understanding such a "whole-of-society" strategy, emphasizing trust, transparency, clear communication, professional competence, and enhanced digital literacy. This framework is illustrated through empirical examples drawn from the Republic of Korea and Taiwan, examining their responses to various non-traditional security and governance challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, mass-casualty events, and domestic constitutional controversies.

Keywords: Sociocommunity Hardening, Adaptable Resilience, Risk, Korea, Taiwan

Introduction

The present moment increasingly illustrates the impact of disorder and unpredictability—trends likely to persist due to developments such as artificial intelligence, information disorder, political polarization, and climate change. Reflecting on the implications of a world fraught with chaos, Nassim Nicholas Taleb introduced "Black Swan" theory to describe events with three characteristics:

> [I]t is an *outlier*, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme impact. Third, in spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence *after* the fact, making it explainable and predictable. (emphasis in the original) (Taleb 2007, xvii)

Such uncertainties and sources of disorder—potentially transformative and damaging systemic shocks—are emerging faster than most individuals and institutions can effectively manage (Harari 2014). These shifts raise vital questions about the viability of existing social and political structures to confront future challenges, thereby underscoring the importance of examining how public and private stakeholders in civil society and government can be strengthened and made more adaptable and resilient in the face of systemic shocks.

This analysis proceeds in five sections. First, I outline the conceptual underpinnings upon which I propose the notion of Sociocommunity Hardening and Adaptable Resilience in Policymaking (SHARP) theory, which emphasizes a "whole-of-society" public policy response to sub-state challenges posed by "Black Swan" events—engaging governments, the civil service, informed commentators, the public, and other stakeholders. The second, third, and fourth sections present empirical case studies of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Taiwan, examining their responses to various "Black Swan" events, including COVID-19 and several mass

casualty incidents. The concluding fifth section synthesizes insights from these case studies to consider their implications for future public policy formulation.

"Whole-of-Society" Approaches to Emerging Challenges

"Wicked Problems," "Black Swans," and "Black Elephants"

In 1973, Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber highlighted the difficulties posed by a "wicked problem": "the problems of governmental planning—and especially those of social or policy planning—are ill-defined" (Rittel and Webber 1973), since attempted solutions may inadvertently exacerbate other issues. The absence of "one-size-fits-all" solutions underscores the need for "whole-of-society" approaches. These challenges have become more pressing as the world faces an increased incidence of "Black Swan" events (Taleb 2007). Taleb identified three key characteristics of such events: first, they are high-impact, hard to predict, and statistically rare; second, their rarity leaves few empirical case studies from which policymakers can draw lessons; and third, human and psychological biases often lead both policymakers and the general public to overlook the possibility that such rare events might affect them.

Although it may be tempting for governments and societies to emphasize robustness and strength, such an approach can be counterproductive if it ignores adaptability. A governance model that prizes robustness but lacks agility to respond to rapidly changing conditions and unforeseen threats offers limited effectiveness against Black Swan events. Rather than conceptualizing resilience as an end state, Taleb (2007, 8) emphasized the need for "a mechanism by which the system regenerates itself continuously by using, rather than suffering from, random events, unpredictable shocks, stressors, and volatility."

Philippe Bourbeau similarly highlighted resilience as an ongoing process. Noting that existing research often treats resilience as a fixed set

of attributes, Bourbeau (2018, 21–22) proposed two ideas: first, that resilience is a "social and multifaceted process working at the individual, family, community and societal levels"; second, that it includes "persistence and transformation… ensuring that society can emerge transformed for the better, with greater societal cohesion and strength." Thus, a resilient society can absorb repeated disruptions while retaining key elements of its structure and principles. As Bourbeau (2018, 49–50) observed, "resilience and resistance are engaged in mutual assistance rather than mutual exclusion." Likewise, Peter Ho (2017) advocated a "safe fail, rather than fail safe" approach, arguing that "fail safe means you risk nothing, but you also achieve nothing… if such experiments succeed, then they can be expanded. If they fail, then the damage is contained, and a lesson is learnt."

Ho (2018, 12-13) further challenged the notion that "Black Swan" events are entirely unforeseeable by using the term "Black Elephant":

> a cross between a black swan and the proverbial elephant in the room. The black elephant is a problem that is actually visible to everyone, but no one wants to deal with it, and so they pretend it is not there. When it blows up as a problem, we all feign surprise and shock, behaving as if it were a black swan.

By implication, while it may be impossible to predict every potential scenario precisely, well-conceived pre-crisis planning and foresight can help stakeholders respond rapidly to "Black Swan/Elephant" events. Such contingency planning may involve government agencies adopting a "Devil's Advocate" approach—continuously identifying plausible future threats and challenging existing assumptions to minimize blind spots. This includes addressing long-term challenges that are not immediate threats but could have a significant impact if left unchecked.

A similar outlook is found in John Robinson's (1990) notion of "backcasting," which entails envisioning both best- and worst-case long-term scenarios and then working backward to guide present policy

decisions. Because policymakers must balance an array of possible scenarios against finite resources—as well as their own physical and psychological capacity—governments must not only plan for plausible scenarios but also ensure that contingency plans, together with key governmental bodies, the media, civil society, and other stakeholders, can be adapted swiftly in response to evolving circumstances. In a "whole-of-society" approach, it is equally crucial that a competent civil service and an engaged public sustain vigilance and situational awareness, avoiding apathy in the face of online misinformation, public safety hazards, or controversial governmental actions.

Conceptualizing SHARP

Recent challenges highlight the need for public policy responses that not only foster a more robust civil society but can also be quickly adapted to emerging, unforeseen threats. As Bourbeau notes, a truly effective "whole-of-society" governance model requires a multidisciplinary approach. In this context, the present study introduces Sociocommunity Hardening and Adaptable Resilience in Policymaking (SHARP) as a broad conceptual framework. SHARP integrates varied approaches from multiple disciplines to show how different levels of societal strengthening and resilience can be implemented. The term "SHARP" underscores key aspects of public policy summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

CONCEPTUALIZING SHARP

Component	Rationale	Objective
Sociocommunity	Need for a "whole-of-society" approach (i.e., broad public "buy-in")	Public support and cooperation based on shared values and solidarity against societal threats
Hardening Adaptable Resilience	Resilient society fortified against sub-state threats, adaptable to change	Strengthen core civic values and identity within community solidarity; remain responsive to new or unforeseen challenges
Policymaking	Political leadership and civil service staffed by competent technocrats	Ensure effective policy implementation through government and civil service expertise, sensitive to public needs

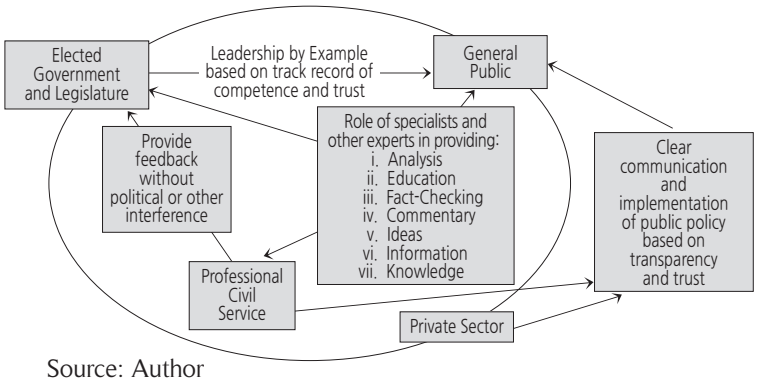
This conceptualization of SHARP rests on four main considerations:

1. Backcasting: A "backcasting" mindset helps identify plausible future contingencies before they arise, facilitating planning for multiple scenarios. Because crises seldom replicate previous patterns exactly, first responders must be trained to adapt to unexpected developments quickly.
2. Solidarity and Values: Strengthening the values that unify civil society fosters solidarity against sub-state threats and challenges.
3. Policy Implementation:
   A. Adaptability, enabling swift responses to rapidly changing "Black Swan/Elephant" events.
   B. Resilience, affirming core societal values despite the challenges encountered.
4. Communication: Government officials, professional civil servants, and experts—including media, academics, educators, NGOs, and other stakeholders—must convey policy initiatives clearly and effectively to the general public.

These principles relate to key societal stakeholders in six ways, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS



Source: Author

1. The role of knowledge generators—educators, academia, mainstream media, NGOs, and civil society activists—who analyze issues affecting the body politic;
2. Trust between civil society and the public sector (government leaders and the civil service);
3. A competent, experienced, and professional civil service, free from undue political interference;
4. Clear, open communication between elected officials, the professional civil service, and civil society;
5. Mobilizing the private sector and other stakeholders as needed;
6. Fostering a culture of public engagement, digital literacy, and vigilance regarding civic governance, public safety, and misinformation.

To illustrate how SHARP may function in practice, this article examines the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Taiwan in their public policy responses to the implications of cyberspace, digital technology, and the threat of information disorder—particularly in relation to COVID-19, various mass casualty events, and political or constitutional crises. These two countries were chosen based on four considerations. First, over several decades, both governments have invested heavily in "whole-of-society" response frameworks that can be rapidly activated to address non-traditional security challenges. Second, both countries were commended internationally for their public policy strategies, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, both are highly reliant on information technology and cyberspace for economic and societal functions. Fourth, each transitioned from authoritarian rule through "people's power" movements that led to democratic governance.

Case Study: The ROK

Dealing With COVID-19

Ensuring that public governance incorporates foresight and

contingency planning—while permitting relevant civil service agencies to adapt quickly to new circumstances—is exemplified by the "Quadruple Loop Learning" model outlined by Lee, Hwang, and Moon (2020, 367-69) in their analysis of the ROK's response to COVID-19. Under this model, public policy organizations operate with minimal political interference and continuously reflect on emerging challenges, the contexts in which those challenges arise, and lessons from past crises. Such an iterative process requires agencies to avoid complacency or reliance on a "one-size-fits-all" solution, instead engaging in a continuous "learning process [that] repeats until the problem is resolved."

Quadruple Loop Learning was evident in the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC), which reformed its protocols after a slow response to the 2015 Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). This included:

1. Amending the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act (IDCPA) through Article 76–2(2) to allow government agencies to use citizens' private information for digital contact tracing (Kim 2020);
2. Devising a broad-based testing strategy to mitigate outbreaks before they overwhelmed the healthcare system;
3. Partnering with information technology (IT) stakeholders, enabling authorities to engage startups in the public healthcare response.

These measures proved highly effective in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, notably with the rapid establishment of extensive testing sites that identified cases before patients required intensive care. Such efforts also prevented the healthcare system from being inundated with those seeking testing. Moreover, the KCDC's cooperation with the IT sector facilitated the swift introduction of mobile applications such as Corona100m, which updated the public on essential supplies and potential exposure hotspots.

Despite these successes, gaps remained in other areas of governance, underscoring the necessity for further institutional learning. One such blind spot was the government's reluctance to impose strict measures against those who refused to comply with public health guidelines. For example, the Shincheonji religious sect was at the center of a superspreader event but obstructed official access to its membership list. Criminal proceedings ultimately acquitted the sect's leaders of any deliberate non-cooperation (Choe 2021). Another sect, Jeil Sarang, staged an anti-mask demonstration, but officials refrained from banning it for fear of being seen as curtailing civil liberties (KBS News 2020).

This is not to say, however, that the SHARP framework should be seen as granting carte blanche for political executives to override existing legal frameworks. As illustrated in the domestic constitutional controversies in both the ROK and Taiwanese case studies, for every instance wherein a government's chief executive should be willing to override the courts in the public interest, there are other circumstances when the SHARP framework has been reflected in the actions of the courts or the general public in blocking executive actions that are in clear violation of the public interest. Such circumstances underscore the importance of multiple stakeholders—ranging from government executives, the courts, the media, the general public and others—in appreciating the nuance and circumstances that balance between strong executive action on the one hand, and the role of the civil society in resisting executive abuse of power on the other.

Elsewhere, a second blind spot concerned the ROK's conservative attitudes toward the LGBT community, whose members were reluctant to share contact details for fear of being "outed." When an infected individual visited an LGBT bar but provided a false phone number, contact tracing efforts were seriously hampered (Korea Herald 2020).

Responding to Mass Casualty Events

Shortcomings in the ROK's public policy implementation are further illustrated by three mass casualty incidents over the past two decades: the

2003 Daegu Subway Fire, the 2014 Sewol ferry sinking, and the 2022 Itaewon crowd crush. Together, they reveal the influence of four main factors:

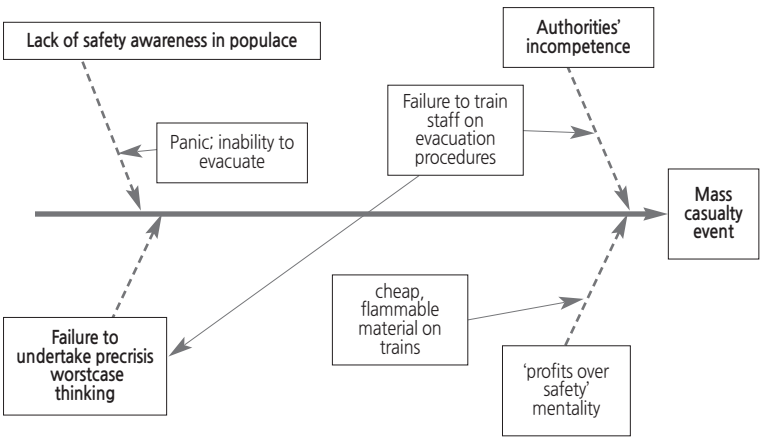
1. Lack of pre-crisis planning for worst-case scenarios
2. A "profits over safety" mentality
3. Public inattention to personal safety and situational awareness
4. Incompetence among relevant authorities

Moreover, as Kee et al. (2017, 505) noted apropos the Sewol sinking, "people at the sharp end were usually held accountable and punished, but system level-lessons have hardly been learned." Each of these factors is traced in the accompanying Ishikawa Diagrams below.

The 2003 Daegu Subway Fire (see Figure 2) incident involved a man attempting suicide by setting himself on fire in a subway carriage.

Figure 2

DAEGU SUBWAY FIRE, 2003



Source: Author

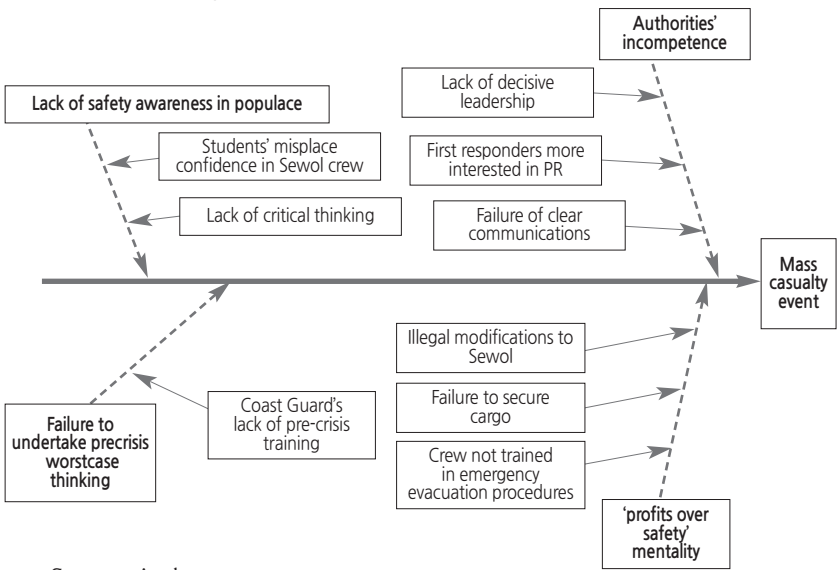
The Daegu Metropolitan Transit Corporation had used cheaper, flammable materials and failed to train staff adequately on evacuation procedures. When the fire spread to a second train, its driver, in a panic,

fled with the train key—locking passengers inside. Lacking knowledge of how to open the doors, many were trapped. Although the arsonist, the two train drivers, and two subway officials were jailed, the root causes received limited attention. For instance, radio communications from the train were deleted by subway officials to evade responsibility (Korea Times 2016). One positive outcome was the creation of the Daegu Safety Theme Park to educate the public on safety procedures (Hankyoreh 2013).

The sinking of the ferry Sewol in 2014 reflected similar shortcomings (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

THE SEWOL SINKING, 2014



Source: Author

Chonghaejin Marine made unauthorized modifications to increase the ferry's cargo capacity, undermining its stability (Professional Mariner 2014) while failing to secure vehicles and cargo properly. When the vessel capsized, the Coast Guard's adherence to rigid protocols—together with inadequate pre-crisis planning—slowed rescue operations (Noh 2014). The response from President Park Geun-Hye's administration also drew criticism; records suggest her aides were more concerned with media

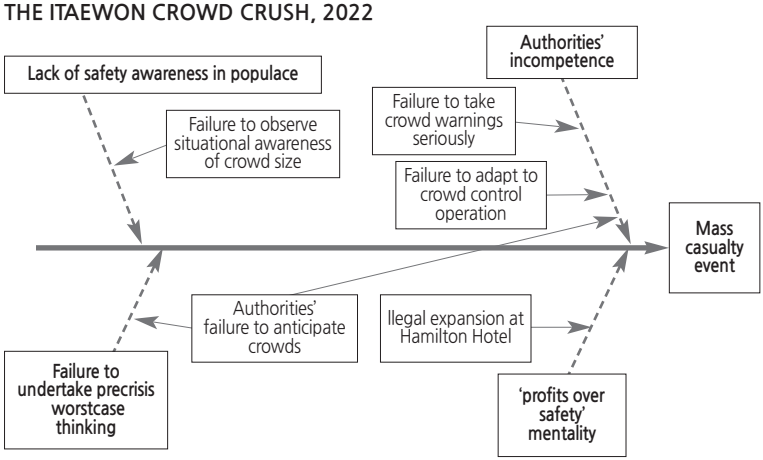
coverage than effective rescue. Of the 476 people on board, 250 were high school students; they deferred to the captain's instructions to stay put, unaware of the danger (Straits Times 2014; Kee et al. 2017, 14). Media outlets then vied to exploit the tragedy, prompting Park Chong-Ryul, then President of the Journalists Association of Korea, to remark: "[w]e need to ask ourselves whether that kind of distorted yellow journalism… was really necessary… The public wanted to know what really happened, not what the government says" (cited in Korea Herald 2014).

Kee and his colleagues (2017, 20-21) adopted Jens Rasmussen's (1997) "AcciMap" approach to show how a confluence of factors led to the disaster. They cautioned that simply punishing low-level personnel offers only short-term reassurance while neglecting the systemic issues that precipitated the incident. Furthermore, although Chonghaejin Marine and some crew members faced criminal charges, the Supreme Court absolved the government and Coast Guard of liability (Korea Herald 2023). Records of President Park's activities on the day of the tragedy were also deleted, fueling concerns that officials were more intent on covering up failures than advocating reform (Shin 2021).

The 2022 Itaewon crowd crush had clear similarities (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

THE ITAEWON CROWD CRUSH, 2022



Source: Author

After COVID-19 social distancing measures were lifted, large Halloween crowds converged on Itaewon. Police on site were mainly tasked with preventing pickpocketing and lacked the flexibility to adapt to urgent crowd-control needs. Nearby, the Hamilton Hotel had expanded illegally, narrowing an alley that became the scene of a deadly crush (Park 2022). Despite repeated calls from the public warning of overcrowding, the police downplayed these concerns (Choe 2023). In the tragedy's aftermath, social media users inaccurately accused a bystander of pushing the crowd, revealing a public rush to scapegoat individuals rather than scrutinize institutional failings.

Unlike the KCDC's adoption of a Quadruple Loop Learning approach, municipal authorities have shown limited capacity to learn from past tragedies. Following the Itaewon crowd crush, the National Police launched raids on local police departments, arresting two officers for destroying internal reports (Seo, Jeong, and Yeung 2022). This defensive posture—focusing blame on lower-ranking officials while sparing senior policymakers—further eroded public trust and missed an opportunity for systemic reform (Park 2023). Equally concerning was Minister of the Interior and Safety Lee Sang-Min's refusal to resign, a stance that did little to demonstrate accountability or leadership by example (Hankyoreh 2023).

Domestic Constitutional Crises

In December 2024, President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law, among other reasons, apparently to obstruct an ongoing corruption investigation (Croissant 2024, 3-4). In the immediate aftermath, Democratic Party (DP) leader Lee Jae-myung initially wondered whether Yoon's announcement was a deepfake, but sought verification. Upon confirmation, Lee and other parliamentarians recognized that a failure to act promptly would allow Yoon to establish a fait accompli—a "self-coup" (Kim 2025).

Alarmed by these developments, numerous members of the National Assembly, including some from Yoon's ruling People Power Party (PPP),

made it past martial law troops to enter the National Assembly building and vote to revoke the martial law order. Meanwhile, elements of the Korean military, although formally mobilized by Yoon, quietly undertook measures to counter what they apparently deemed illegal orders (Lee 2025a).

Equally notable was the speed with which the general public mobilized: citizens converged on the National Assembly to support the legislators' decision, followed by widespread demonstrations demanding that Yoon be held accountable (Wang 2025). Legal proceedings against him have since emphasized the importance of robust judicial mechanisms to penalize actions that violate the constitution and public interest. Although the ROK's president enjoys immunity from most criminal charges, this does not extend to insurrection or treason, underscoring the critical function of legal safeguards in preventing abuses of power (Kuhn 2025).

According to Aurel Croissant (2024), there are two dimensions of democratic resilience within South Korean civil society relevant to the crisis. First, the public's swift mobilization against Yoon's declaration exemplified "reactive resilience," whereby citizens collectively resist direct threats to constitutional democracy. On the other hand, Croissant noted the weakness of the ROK's "preventive resilience," evident in the loss of institutional strengths and civic activism following Park Geun-hye 2017 impeachment, contributing to creating the conditions for Yoon's overreach.

Several potential Achilles heels became apparent during the 2024–25 martial law crisis. First, many younger Koreans were initially unfamiliar with the implications of Yoon's martial law declaration. Although Chun Doo-hwan's 1980s martial law era features in high school curricula, numerous young people either accepted Yoon's accusation (Yoon, cited in KBS, 2024) that the DP had undertaken "a clear anti-state act plotting a civil war" ("내란을 획책하는 명백한 반국가 행위입니다"). To their credit, many sought information online—an encouraging example of prompt digital research—but it also revealed the shortcomings of an education system that has long emphasized rote memorization over the

capacity to appreciate the direct relevance of key principles of civic governance, constitutional rights, and historical understanding without having to undertake an impromptu search on the internet. Had Yoon succeeded in tightening his grip on cyberspace before the public could investigate, such online research would have been ineffective in a government-controlled information sphere.

Second, South Korea's high level of political polarization formed a critical blind spot. Preceding left-leaning Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun had come under fire for allegations of corruption and being overly friendly towards North Korea; subsequently, this polarization deepened under the conservative presidencies of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. In the run-up to Yoon's martial law declaration, rightwing conspiracy theories alleging Lee Jae-myung's pro-Pyongyang views circulated on social media, and may have contributed to Yoon's decision to impose martial law (Choe 2025). Such a backdrop accounts for the backlash from conservative members of South Korean civil society, such as the "National Flag Brigade" ("태극기 부대"), who accused the left of acting in North Korea's interests. Polarization persisted following Yoon's rescinding of martial law, evidenced by some PPP members' resistance to investigating Yoon and first lady Kim Keon Hee for corruption. Yoon's supporters even tried to obstruct law enforcement agents enforcing an arrest warrant on January 3, 2025.

The DP, too, has contributed to this polarization, as corruption allegations within its ranks (and indeed the election fraud conviction of Lee Jae-myung, who is also facing ongoing corruption trials, as well as imprisonment of DP-aligned opposition leader Cho Kuk), as well as emphasis on improving cooperation with North Korea, have left some voters uncertain whether Yoon or the DP poses a greater danger to the constitutional order. Media outlets aligned with differing political camps released contrasting polling data on Yoon's public approval, exacerbating existing echo chambers (Lee 2025b).

Third, the concentration of power in the presidential office remains a significant vulnerability. While the North Korean threat often justifies

strong executive authority for national emergencies, it can also open avenues for misuse. In the months prior to martial law, Yoon placed loyalists in key positions, including Kim Yong-hyun as Defense Minister and Park Jong-joon as Chief of the Presidential Security Service (PSS).

Park refused to cooperate with the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO) when it executed a court issued arrest warrant against Yoon. These incidents highlight the need to ensure that agencies responsible for preventing corruption and power abuses remain insulated from political manipulation. Furthermore, PSS members' readiness to defy the CIO's arrest attempt illustrates the necessity for law-enforcement bodies to have the authority and resources to enforce court orders. This challenge was compounded by the CIO and the police engaging in mutual blame for failing to arrest Yoon on January 3. While constitutional safeguards offer a legal framework to deter abuses of power, civic engagement is also indispensable in resisting unlawful state actions.

Despite these issues, the unified response of both PPP and DP members in mourning the victims of Jeju Air Flight 2216 at Muan Airport shows potential for national unity in the aftermath of tragedy—an essential factor in building long-term societal resilience. Likewise, Acting President Choi Sang-Mok's decisive efforts to tighten air-transport safety and sustain a heightened security posture toward Pyongyang in this uncertain period demonstrate the possibility of a more resilient South Korea. Achieving that resilience, however, requires addressing, rather than overlooking, the aforementioned shortcomings.

Case Study: Taiwan

Dealing With COVID

After experiencing the 2003 SARS outbreak, Taiwan recognized the importance of efficient digital contact tracing and, in 2004, enacted the Communicable Disease Control (CDC) Act, establishing the National Health Command Center (NHCC) to coordinate public health policy

effectively. Mark Manatan (2024) identified both the ROK and Taiwan as examples of "Agile Governance," characterized by a multistakeholder approach aimed at implementing public policy in society's long-term interests. Since Agile Governance heavily relies on cyberspace and AI to facilitate efficient communication, it depends on trust among government, the public, the media, and other stakeholders.

Taiwan's National Health Insurance (NHI) Health Cloud program, launched in 2014, gave authorities access to residents' medical records, enabling them to quickly identify vulnerable individuals (Lu et. al. 2024). The authorities then introduced an "electronic fence" at points of entry, integrating health insurance, immigration, and customs data for streamlined digital contact tracing (Goldwasser and Tang 2020). Recognizing that public trust is critical for voluntary compliance with health measures, Article 6 of the 2015 Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) ensures that personal data are collected only during emergencies and must be deleted as soon as feasible (Laws and Regulations Database of the Republic of China 2023). Additionally, the NHCC prioritized the human element and the need for mutual trust between the public and officials in its "whole-of-society" public health response (Martin 2020; Zhang 2020, 46–76). These efforts complemented the Police Cloud Computing Plan, established in 2012, which integrated data from law enforcement agencies nationwide for comprehensive contact tracing. Public trust in these systems was bolstered by strong multistakeholder governance, high levels of civic participation (Marmino 2022), and inclusivity, as demonstrated by the swift creation of mobile applications by Taiwan's online community to track face-mask and sanitizer availability (Chou and Kimbrough 2020).

Trust and transparency between government and citizens also helped Taiwan counter online misinformation (Bloomberg 2020). A key example is the VTaiwan online portal (Horton 2018), initiated by Digital Minister Audrey Tang, who asserted that involving the public in policy development promotes high levels of support (Silva 2020). VTaiwan enabled the authorities to communicate transparently with the public during crises,

mitigating the impact of misinformation. In response to attempts by accounts operating from the People's Republic of China to spread rumors, Taiwan adopted the "2–2–2" rule: within 20 minutes, government ministries must dispel false claims using no more than 200 words and two humorous images (Bondaz 2020). Meanwhile, the Taiwan Fact Check Center, established in 2018, launched a WhatsApp chatbot to help citizens verify suspect information (Wong 2020). By encouraging internet users to report dubious content for fact-checking, Taiwan's online community strengthened the overall resilience of the information environment (Kerr and Phillips 2020). Collectively, these measures promoted clarity in official communications, reduced public panic, and helped counter the spread of fake news.

Responding to Mass Casualty Events

Because of the threat of conflict with the mainland, Taiwan has developed heightened emergency preparedness measures that encompass not only responses to armed invasion but also a robust civil defense system and additional training for handling natural disasters and mass casualty events. These preparations are laid out in legislation such as the All-Out Defense Education Act ("全民國防教育法") and the All-Out Defense Mobilization Readiness Act ("全民防衛動員準備法") (Laws and Regulations Database of the Republic of China Taiwan). Taiwan's response to several significant incidents further illustrates how governments can mobilize a "whole-of-society" approach to address emerging sub-state threats.

The 2014 Kaohsiung Gas Explosion stemmed from a propylene leak in a corroded underground pipeline carrying gas from CGTD to LCY Chemical (Yang et al. 2016). Initially constructed by the state-backed CPC, the pipeline's involvement resulted in a court ruling that not only CGTD and LCY but also the Kaohsiung City Municipal Government shared responsibility for the tragedy (Strong 2018). In response, multiple municipal and national-level officials resigned almost immediately to acknowledge these safety lapses, underscoring the importance of accountability for preventable incidents.

The 2015 New Taipei Water Park Fire occurred when flammable cornstarch—potentially ignited by discarded cigarette butts—was used during a recreational event. The event organizer received a prison sentence for failing to follow safety regulations related to flammable materials, while the water park's owners were fined for neglecting to ensure proper emergency vehicle access (Yang 2016). Although no government agencies contributed directly to the tragedy, the official response involved multiple ministries—including Health and Welfare, Economic Affairs, Justice, and Education—along with local authorities. Beyond supporting survivors with medical care, these stakeholders worked together to identify systemic issues and prevent similar incidents.

Media reforms following a high-profile kidnapping in 1997 were also noteworthy. Although not a mass casualty event, the kidnapping of Pai Hsiao-yen offers insight into how media behavior can be reformed in the public interest. Pai, the daughter of a well-known Taiwanese actress, was abducted and subsequently murdered—an outcome partially attributed to frenzied media coverage that followed police operations and panicked the kidnappers, resulting in Pai's rape and murder. Some newspapers then even published photos of her body.

The public outcry that ensued prompted a period of reflection on the media's disregard for victims' rights and its prioritization of profit over public welfare. Widespread demonstrations led to stricter regulations, including amendments to the Sexual Assaults Prevention Law (性侵害犯罪防治法), which prohibited media outlets from identifying or speculating on victims in cases of sexual violence. Despite initial media pushback and concerns over freedom of speech, the government's enforcement of fines for noncompliance eventually helped establish standards of reporting more aligned with the public interest (Taiwan Association for Human Rights 1997).

Domestic Constitutional Crises

On 17 March 2014, President Ma Ying-jeou of the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) sought to expedite passage of the Cross-Strait Service Trade

Agreement (CSSTA) with Mainland China. Despite a previous agreement in June 2013 to conduct a clause-by-clause review with the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the KMT reversed its position, prompting criticism that the CSSTA would grant the Mainland increased economic influence over Taiwan. In addition, because the CSSTA was designed to benefit corporate interests, many young Taiwanese feared that the agreement would exacerbate their socioeconomic marginalization.

Although President Yoon Suk Yeol's martial law declaration in the ROK represented a more egregious power abuse than President Ma's legislative maneuver, comparing civil society's responses in both cases proves instructive. Public backlash in Taiwan manifested as grassroots mobilization against the CSSTA, suggesting that any attempt at martial law in Taiwan would likely encounter even stronger public resistance—highlighting the critical role of grassroots civic activism in societal resilience.

Concerned that the KMT-majority Legislative Yuan would pass the CSSTA without proper oversight, various NGOs and student groups formed the Defend Taiwan Democracy Platform to organize repeated protest rallies. Local celebrities gathered signatures for a national referendum, and student activists engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience, preserving the moral high ground and garnering substantial public support (Hsiao and Wan 2017). On 18 March, members of the Sunflower Movement occupied the Legislative Yuan to signal their opposition, fully aware this action was illegal but viewing it as a justified response to the KMT's circumvention of legislative due process (Ho 2019). From this perspective, a hallmark of a resilient civil society is citizens' willingness to engage in civil disobedience when they deem certain laws or processes unjust.

The Legislature's role in recognizing civil society's concerns was underscored by Speaker Wang Jin-pyng, a member of the ruling KMT, who ignored President Ma's request to deploy police against the occupiers (Rowen 2015). Additionally, the Sunflower Movement's adept use of

social media to scrutinize the CSSTA and stimulate open debate prevented the KMT from obscuring the agreement's potential to increase Beijing's economic leverage over Taiwan. Shiau Ching Wong and Scott Wright note that the movement's "hybrid media practices" harnessed social networks to mobilize civic discourse and amplify support (Wong and Wright 2018). While China's state-run *Global Times* labeled the Sunflower Movement "irrational" (*wu lixing* 无理性)") and "populist" (民粹), accusing it of paralyzing Taiwan's rule of law, the student activists were in fact deeply involved in grassroots politics, committed to community betterment, and seeking greater global engagement (Yang 2024).

Notably, the Sunflower Movement's aftermath has contributed to a long-term strengthening of Taiwanese civil society, showing how a society can be not only resilient in the face of domestic political crises but potentially emerge stronger (Wu 2019). According to Ho Ming-sho (2019), post-Sunflower initiatives have included calls for constitutional and legislative reforms, direct democracy measures, greater social justice, and educational reforms aimed at reducing Sino-centric content—closing potential channels for Mainland propaganda. This trend is also evident in the growing influence of Watchout, a local media watchdog that uses digital tools to keep citizens engaged in civic and legislative affairs, thereby adding another layer of defense against misinformation and hybrid warfare.

Conclusion: Policy Recommendations

While the distinct circumstances of the two countries examined in this manuscript advise caution against overreliance on extrapolation when formulating policy prescriptions, they also share important commonalities. These commonalities suggest several tentative implications for how states might adopt strategies of Sociocommunity Hardening and Adaptable Resilience in Policymaking (SHARP). The recommendations are organized into four thematic areas.

1. Internal Review to Identify Blind Spots:

Governments, civil services, and other relevant stakeholders should incorporate formal "devil's advocate" roles within their organizations, focusing on "Black Swan" and "Black Elephant" scenarios that may plausibly arise in the short, medium, and long term. Employing a "backcasting" approach to scenario-based planning is useful, but these processes must be free from politically motivated interference. Ideally led by professionals committed to the public good, such reviews should regularly revise worst-case assumptions according to new information—an approach exemplified by the KCDC's quadruple learning model for emerging viral threats.

2. Adaptability to Unanticipated Challenges:

While thorough contingency planning is essential, it is impossible to anticipate every potential threat, even with a "backcasting" methodology. In practice, this underscores the need for key stakeholders—such as civil servants, first responders, and healthcare officials—to adapt resources and personnel swiftly as new challenges arise. Rigorous adherence to strictly defined standard operating procedures may prove inadequate if these procedures cannot be adjusted to accommodate rapidly evolving circumstances or intelligence. Personnel must be able to multi-task, repurpose existing protocols, and shift their operational focus at short notice.

3. Public Engagement and Education in Ensuring Vigilance:

The accelerating proliferation of AI-generated "information disorder," which can fuel disinformation and hybrid warfare tactics, will likely continue outpacing the capabilities of governments and fact-checkers. Consequently, it is vital for authorities to promote public engagement and education rooted in social inclusiveness, especially among neglected groups. A culture of ongoing active learning, civic awareness, and self-improvement can help empower citizens to discern and counter misinformation. "Edutainment" facilities such as the Gwangnaru Disaster Experience Center and Daegu Safety Theme Park in South Korea demonstrate how practical skills—ranging from first aid and personal

safety to online threat awareness—can be conveyed effectively to the general population. Moreover, South Korean and Taiwanese examples illustrate how public mobilization against unconstitutional behavior highlights the potential for strong grassroots civic awareness to enhance resilience, including better responses to mass casualty incidents.

4. "Tough Love" in Governance:

Although SHARP theory emphasizes transparency and the cultivation of public trust, there remains a need for "tough love," in which authorities impose firm penalties when necessary to uphold public safety and the rule of law. While voluntary compliance is generally more effective than coercion, situations may arise—such as deliberate noncompliance with legitimate health guidelines, as occurred with certain religious groups in South Korea during the pandemic—that jeopardize the greater good. Additionally, companies prioritizing profit over safety pose significant risks to communities and therefore warrant strict enforcement measures. Equally, leaders should be prepared to hold government officials, civil service personnel, and first responders accountable for negligence or incompetence, thereby setting an example of ethical conduct and reinforcing public trust.

The Role of the Media: Balancing Regulation and Censorship?

The two case studies highlight the media's importance as both a stakeholder and a channel for transparent discourse on key societal issues. While Taiwan's media sphere continues to grapple with misinformation under the banner of free speech, ongoing dialogue among government, civil society, and media outlets has led to incremental reforms (Wei 2022). In contrast, media reform in the ROK has often reflected the priorities of whichever political faction is in power, contributing to ongoing polarization (Schafferer 2003). Moreover, the major media corporations in South Korea, driven by a desire to maintain access to policymakers, may avoid controversial questions, undermining their watchdog function and weakening public trust (Oh 2022).

Both the South Korean and Taiwanese experiences demonstrate how

media, civil society, and legislative bodies can become focal points for resistance to controversial actions by executive leaders. Yet, in an era of intense political polarization, some segments of the public have begun to reject legitimate legislation they perceive as "unjust," as seen in certain anti-mask protests and, more recently, among hardline supporters defending impeached political figures. These dynamics underline the critical role of trusted, impartial media in offering balanced analysis and commentary on public affairs, ensuring citizens remain well-informed rather than entrenched in echo chambers. Ultimately, the capacity of government agencies to heed public concerns—and the ability of the media to report on such issues objectively—are essential prerequisites for sustaining societal trust over the long term.

In particular, the South Korean case study demonstrates an interesting duality concerning the wide-ranging government executive powers on the one hand, and civil and judicial oversight over government abuses of power on the other. While there may be circumstances wherein strong executive powers are necessary to protect the public interest (for instance, in enforcing public health guidelines and countering malicious disinformation during COVID, as well as during wartime), such powers, if left unchecked, can also be abused by political executives, as illustrated in Yoon Suk Yeol's attempted martial law declaration. Such nuances thus underscore the need for further research to explore and clarify the parameters upon which an appropriate balance of powers undergirding SHARP theory can be achieved.

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Taiwan's Evolving Military Strategy Against China: History, Inconsistency, and Implications for Japan[1]

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Abstract

Despite heightened risks of Chinese aggression, Taiwan lacks an effective military strategy to ensure its survival and autonomy, largely because its authorities and society remain deeply divided over a pertinent one. While the overall importance of asymmetric warfare is widely acknowledged as the most militarily rational approach, concrete policy formulation and implementation have yet to make a decisive shift in force restructuring, weapons acquisition, and overall reforms aligned with the conceptually agreed Overall Defense Concept (ODC). First, this study briefly traces the evolution of Taiwan's military strategy over the past several decades, highlighting the various slogans and covert intentions that have shaped it. Second, it explores why Taiwan must adopt an ODC-based asymmetric warfare strategy. Third, the analysis examines the range of political rationales that serve as major impediments to this strategic shift. Finally, the study summarizes the structure of obstacles and discusses the implications of Taiwan's inaction for Japan's basic grand-strategic reorientation.

Keywords: Military strategy, Asymmetric warfare, Overall Defense Concept (ODC), Military rationality, Political rationality

1 This research was conducted as a 2024 ROC MOFA Taiwan Fellow at the Taiwan Center for Security Studies, Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, during the author's sabbatical leave from St. Andrew's University in Osaka, Japan (Momoyama Gakuin Daigaku). An early draft of this paper was presented at the seminar held on August 26, 2024, at the Institute.

Introduction

In the face of heightened uncertainties and the risk of armed aggression by the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan must urgently develop a clear and effective military strategy to ensure its survival and maintain autonomy. However, the Taiwanese authorities and society remain sharply divided over how to fight, which weapons to acquire, and how much to spend on them. These questions are central to Taiwan's military strategy and, in turn, shape a significant part of its overall defense posture.

Over the last decade, Taiwan's military establishment has gradually recognized the conceptual importance of asymmetric warfare (MND 2009, 11; TSEF 2023, 20–22), especially in the context of the Overall Defense Concept (ODC) articulated in 2019 (MND 2019, 68–69; Lee 2023). Nevertheless, there has been no decisive shift in weapons acquisition, force organization and deployment, or overall military posture. Instead, strong inertia from the longstanding symmetric warfare approach persists, despite existential threats and the fact that such inertia is typically overcome when a heightened sense of crisis emerges (Colby 2024; Yu 2024; Lau 2024; Fish 2023). Given that policy options are well-known and the most militarily rational approach is clear, the central puzzle remains: why has Taiwan not yet made this shift?

To address this question, an in-depth analysis that combines historical, conceptual, and political perspectives is necessary to identify the primary driver of inaction and Taiwan's consequent predicament.

Accordingly, this study first discusses the evolution of Taiwan's military strategies from 1949 to the present, focusing on the intricate interplay of slogans and covert intentions. Second, it explains the concept of asymmetric warfare as distinct from symmetric warfare and expounds the ODC as the basis for Taiwan's shift toward an asymmetric strategy. Third, it explores the major impediments to this shift that are ascribable to deep-seated political

rationales.[2] Finally, this inquiry explores the broader implications of Taiwan's failure to fully implement the ODC for Japan's needs in considering its basic grand-strategic reorientation.

The Evolution of Taiwan's Military Strategies: Slogans and Covert Intentions

To grasp the conceptual and operational significance of the ODC, it is essential to situate it within the evolution of Taiwan's military strategies from 1949 to the present. The ROC Ministry of National Defense divides this history into six stages (MND 2019, pp. 68–69).

First Stage (1949–1969)

This period began in 1949, when the Republic of China armed forces under leader Chiang Kai-Shek and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government retreated from China to Taiwan. It continued until 1969, when Chiang faded into the background of day-to-day governance yet retained ultimate power and influence. During this period, the Party-State regime in Taipei struggled for survival amid disorganized armed forces, striving to reorganize what remained. Despite lacking sufficient military power, Taipei publicly proclaimed "offensive operations" (攻勢作戰, Gongshi Zuozhan) against communist China, a largely symbolic gesture aimed at maintaining regime cohesion.

These years also witnessed the First and Second Taiwan Strait Crises

2 As of summer 2024, opinions on the ODC remain sharply divided among Taiwanese defense experts, exemplified by two retired ROC admirals. Admiral Lee Hsi-Ming, a pioneering advocate of the ODC (Lee 2023), served as Commander of the ROC Navy (January 2015–May 2016), Deputy Defense Minister for Policy (June 2016–April 2017), and Chief of the General Staff (May 2017–June 2019). By contrast, Admiral Chen Yeong-Kang, a leading ODC skeptic (Chen 2024), served as Executive Vice Chief of the General Staff (September 2012–July 2013), Commander of the ROC Navy (August 2013–January 2015), and Deputy Defense Minister for Policy (March 2015–May 2016). In effect, Lee overturned Chen's approach and introduced the ODC, suggesting that Taiwan's defense establishment is split between supporters of these two opposing policy positions.

(1955–1956 and 1958), during which Beijing's military offensives forced Taipei to take a defensive stance. In response, Taipei formulated "Project National Glory" (國光計劃, Guoguang Jihua), funded with its own limited resources, to conduct small-scale guerrilla warfare and covert operations in China. However, the project's scope was curtailed because the United States—Taiwan's sole security guarantor—objected and obstructed its implementation. Chiang's gradual withdrawal from domestic politics effectively ended the project; it was officially terminated in 1973 (Matsuda 2002; Chang 2023).

Second Stage (1969–1979)

This stage concludes with the United States shifting its diplomatic recognition from the ROC to the PRC and legislating the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), a domestic legal instrument that has governed unofficial relations with Taipei since the abrogation of the Mutual Defense Treaty in 1980. In retrospect, this was a transitional period in which Taipei shifted its defense policy from a partially offensive posture to a wholly defensive one. It overlapped with the power transition process from President Chiang Kai-Shek (1950–1975) to his son, Chiang Ching-Kuo (1979–1988). During this time, Taiwan benefited from a treaty-based security guarantee from the United States and promoted "offensive and defensive operations as one" (攻守一體, Gongshou Yiti). Hence, this stage was marked by both residual offensive doctrines and a growing emphasis on defensive operations.

Third Stage (1979–2002)

Spanning from the derecognition of the ROC in 1979 to the third year of President Chen Shui-Bian's first-term Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration in 2002, Taiwan adopted "defensive operations" (守勢防衛, Gongshou-Fangwei)—a decisive shift in military strategy. This adjustment was a natural progression given that the United States was no longer a treaty-based security guarantor but rather a partner under the TRA, which provided Taiwan with defensive arms and an ambiguous

security commitment. During much of this stage, Taiwan maintained a favorable qualitative (if not quantitative) military balance across the Taiwan Strait, aided by US arms transfers. Even as China's rapid military buildup began to narrow this balance, Taiwan continued to benefit from general deterrence backed by US military preponderance. A key illustration of this occurred during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996, when China backed down following the dispatch of two US carrier battle groups.

Fourth Stage (2002–2009)

Continuing into the second year of President Ma Ying-Jeou's first-term KMT administration, this stage reinforced the defensive posture by introducing the concept of "effective deterrence and resolute defense" (有効威嚇・防衛固守, Youxiao Weihe・Fangwei Gushou). In the face of China's rapid military buildup, Taiwan aimed first to exert effective general deterrence, and, if that failed, to employ robust military capabilities and preparedness as a "resolute defense."[3] This approach suggests that Taipei remained reasonably confident in its deterrent power, supported by US military preponderance.

Fifth Stage (2009–2017)

This stage continues until the second year of President Tsai Ing-Wen's DPP first-term administration. During this fifth stage, Taiwan embraced an all-out defensive posture labeled "resolute defense and effective deterrence," reversing the order of the concepts from the previous stage. Taiwan sought to establish specific deterrence by demonstrating credible "resolute defense" capabilities. Should specific deterrence fail, these same capabilities would then be used in active defense. This shift was driven by

3 "Resolute defense" entails strengthening information, communications, and electronic warfare (ICW) capabilities; ensuring the security of operational command and control systems and critical infrastructure; and enhancing force protection to improve joint countermeasures and overall defense effectiveness. Additionally, it emphasizes the integration of civilian and military resources to establish an all-encompassing defense posture. This includes constructing a multi-layered defense-in-depth strategy by leveraging geographic features such as channels and trenches, as well as bolstering operational sustainability to ensure long-term strategic endurance (MND 2019, 65).

China's continued military expansion, which by this time significantly outstripped Taiwan's capabilities, and by a relative decline in the United States's role as Taiwan's predominant security guarantor—due to the waning of its military preponderance. During this stage, policymakers increasingly recognized that offsetting China's quantitative edge with Taiwan's qualitative advantages was no longer feasible.

Sixth Stage (2017–Present)

Beginning in 2017 and continuing under President Lai Ching-Te's DPP administration, Taiwan has carried forward the Tsai administration's strategy of "resolute defense and multi-domain deterrence (防衛固守·重層嚇阻, Fangwei Gushou·Chongceng Xiazu)." Faced with China's growing military might, Taiwan can no longer rely solely on its own forces for an extended period. There is wide consensus that US military power in the western Pacific—particularly in a Taiwan theater of operation—may be at a disadvantage relative to China's rapidly expanded capabilities. While the United States remains a global military superpower, it would need at least a month to mobilize sufficient follow-on forces for deployment beyond its already-positioned assets in the region. During that interim, Taiwan must stand on its own. This imperative underpins Taiwan's emphasis on demonstrating a robust, resolute defense by employing specific deterrence—through multi-domain intercepts and joint firepower strikes (MND 2019, p. 68).

Over the past decade, asymmetric warfare has been consistently identified as a critical operational approach (MND 2009, 11; MND 2021, 67; MND 2023, 63–65; TSEF 2023, 20–22).[4] Accordingly, the

4 "Symmetric warfare" refers to armed conflict between regular military forces that employ similar frontline weapons, equipment, and platforms, utilizing comparable operational and tactical strategies. In contrast, "asymmetric warfare" involves the use of dissimilar weapons, equipment, and platforms, often characterized by engagements between regular armed forces and irregular or guerrilla troops. Typically, symmetric warfare relies on high-tech, high-cost weapon systems and platforms, while asymmetric warfare prioritizes lower-cost, low- to mid-tech alternatives that exploit an adversary's vulnerabilities. However, the distinction between symmetric and asymmetric warfare is not always clear-cut and can vary depending on context. For instance, the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) by

ODC was officially recognized in the ROC Defense Report of 2019 as the most pertinent operational concept (MND 2019, 68–69; Lee 2023).

The Need for a Shift to Asymmetric Warfare

Military Rationality

In practical terms, Taiwan must prevent Chinese invasion forces from achieving a "fait accompli" before the United States can intervene—a process that will likely take at least a month.[5] Once US reinforcements arrive, they would coordinate with Taiwan to expel enemy forces from the island. Because China's invasion forces are both numerically superior and increasingly technologically sophisticated, Taiwan should avoid confronting them with similar platforms, weapons, and operational or tactical strategies. Instead, Taiwan must "(attack) and (capitalize) on the adversary's vulnerabilities and (disrupt) its operational center of gravity," aiming at weak points where the adversary is unprepared (MND 2021, 67).

Within the broad concept of asymmetric warfare, the Overall Defense Concept (ODC) has emerged as a contentious key to Taiwan's military strategy. It is designed for "force protection, decisive battle in littoral zone, and destruction of enemy at landing beach" by employing "tactics of mobility, concealment, dispersion, deception, camouflage, escort,

one conventional military against another would be considered asymmetric, whereas a conflict between two guerrilla forces would be symmetric. Similarly, submarine warfare against a fleet of surface combatants is asymmetric, while engagements between submarines are symmetric. These variations highlight the fluidity of the terms and their dependence on specific operational and strategic circumstances.

5 The utility of the Overall Defense Narrative (ODN) is inherently limited in both scope and duration, focusing primarily on preventing Chinese invasion forces from achieving a fait accompli. Given the rapidly widening cross-Strait military imbalance, Taiwan's strategic priority must be short-term survival rather than mid- or long-term force modernization efforts, which, while desirable, are currently unaffordable luxuries. Fundamentally, Taiwan remains a weak power within the broader US-China military rivalry—positioned more as an object of great-power competition rather than an autonomous strategic actor.

shrewdness, and misleading, as well as a swift and effective damage control" (MND 2019, pp. 68–69). Mirroring some of the tactics Ukraine has used against Russia, this approach emphasizes acquiring numerous small, dispersed, mobile, and lethal weapons that are relatively inexpensive but leverage modern technology for guerrilla-style warfare. Such an approach employs portable Javelin and Stinger missiles and armed drones, rather than advanced platforms like large warships, jet fighters, or main battle tanks. The ODC facilitates a form of asymmetric conventional warfare suited to a weaker force facing a more powerful adversary, aiming to avoid a straightforward war of attrition that would be overwhelmingly disadvantageous to the weaker side.

In this respect, the ODC contrasts with a more expansive notion of asymmetric warfare, which could include, for instance, deploying large submarines against capital ships or using long- and medium-range missiles against high-end platforms—particularly those located on military bases or serving as fixed ground targets. This distinction matters because Taipei faces hard choices and high opportunity costs in weapons acquisition, weighing the choice between procuring fewer expensive high-end platforms or investing in larger numbers of inexpensive, ODC-relevant systems.

Notably, although the ROC National Defense Report (NDR) of 2019 first highlighted the ODC as Taiwan's core military strategy, subsequent NDRs in 2021 and 2023, as well as later Quadrennial Defense Reviews (QDRs), no longer used the term "ODC," referring only to "asymmetrical warfare" (MND 2019, 2021, 2023). Taiwan's defense establishment has neither explicitly rejected the ODC nor replaced it with another concept, thereby obscuring its central importance. This is likely ascribable to general endorsement of the ODC among many top political leaders and policy makers—evidenced by President Tsai Ing-wen's repeated public endorsements (Tsai 2019, 2020)—and the absence of any specific statements on it from President Lai.

As a result, the ODC and asymmetric warfare are often treated as interchangeable, or the latter is viewed as a broader concept encompassing

the ODC. Official publications from the ROC Ministry of National Defense provide little clarity on this overlap. Consequently, the ODC, while still notionally accepted, appears to have been hollowed out as a practical guide for budgetary and acquisition decisions. For the defense establishment, this obfuscation causes minimal operational inconvenience since the ODC no longer serves as a formal basis for resource allocation.

Moreover, current interpretations of the ODC are heavily influenced by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, which has become a common reference point—even though the ODC was officially introduced in 2019, well before that conflict began. This "standard" version of the ODC diverges significantly from the specifics in the 2019 NDR due to unique geographical and topographical distinctions between insular Taiwan and continental Ukraine, as well as Taiwan's much more pronounced military, economic, and overall power disadvantage compared to China. These constraints naturally limit Taiwan's options and priorities for defense acquisition.

In essence, the central questions are what drives this policy obfuscation, and, more specifically, how Taiwanese political, military, administrative, and industrial forces may have obstructed or undermined full realization of the ODC. The hypothesis related to these questions follows, but it is important to distinguish between general conceptual discussions of the ODC (Thompson 2021) and more concrete policy prescriptions for ODC-aligned weapons acquisition in Taiwan's defense planning (MND 2019; Lee 2023).

Taiwan's Case Against Symmetric Warfare

A Full Invasion vs. Gray-Zone Activities

Since former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, China has increased its military pressure on Taiwan, leading to a "new normal" imposed by Beijing's gray-zone operations. These include frequent incursions by Chinese military aircraft across

the Taiwan Strait median line—previously viewed as a de facto border—and into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). Additionally, Chinese fishing vessels, maritime militia, and law enforcement ships have intruded into peripheral waters under Taiwan's effective control, such as those around the Kinmen islands. China has also conducted military exercises in the broader Taiwan theater of operations, some of which appear to rehearse partial or full-scale invasions of Taiwan.

In response, Taipei has felt compelled to match China's saber-rattling with similar high-end platforms (MND 2023, 34–42). By doing this in peacetime, Taiwan strives to preserve a geospatial buffer around its main island, and, to some degree, around smaller frontline islands. This approach is politically rational, given the high public visibility of major modern military platforms; possession of such systems helps reassure the Taiwanese public, maintain morale against China's provocations, and sustain government approval ratings. It also aligns with the organizational interests of Taiwan's military and the defense industry regarding budget allocations and career advancement.

However, China's gray-zone activities themselves pose little existential threat; they largely serve as psychological warfare through military harassment and pressure. Since Beijing's hostility and sub-war-level military operations persist, Taiwan's corresponding surveillance and warning measures do little to deter China while gradually straining Taipei's military preparedness. Some experts advocate that Taiwan should concentrate on its own defense buildup and preparedness, minimizing tit-for-tat responses (Lee 2023). Such an approach would undercut further investment in symmetric warfare capabilities.

Initial Waves of Saturation Missile Attacks and Subsequent Air Raids

In a full-scale conflict, China could destroy or neutralize a substantial portion of Taiwan's high-end military hardware—particularly aircraft and large naval vessels—by targeting air and naval bases with salvos of missiles

and bombs at the outset of an invasion.[6]

Specifically, many of Taiwan's fighter jets could be destroyed on the ground, where they are most vulnerable to missile strikes and aerial bombardment. Even if fighters are sheltered in underground bunkers, they could still be immobilized when their runways are damaged by missiles and bombs, and eventually destroyed by follow-up air raids (Lostumbo et al. 2016).[7]

Taiwan's air force has built extensive underground bunker complexes, particularly near an eastern base equipped with a 2,500-meter runway in mountainous terrain. These bunkers can reportedly accommodate around 250 of the air force's roughly 300 fighter jets. However, runways, fixed radar installations, and resupply facilities—such as fuel depots and ammunition storage—remain highly susceptible to missile attacks, aerial bombardment, or strikes from carrier-based aircraft operating in waters east of Taiwan. Consequently, Taipei plans to use nearby highways as supplementary runways (Huanyu-bingfeng 2023; Jiang 2023; Hsu 2000). Nonetheless, the survivability or usability of fighter jets in this scenario remains uncertain, making further investments in such aircraft hardly justifiable (Lostumbo et al. 2016).

A similar fate could befall many of Taiwan's capital ships, likely to be targeted in port at major naval bases such as Zuoying and Suao. The latter is especially vulnerable to aerial bombardment by Chinese carrier-based

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6 In an interview conducted in Taipei on August 7, 2024, an anonymous retired three-star officer estimated that approximately 30% of Taiwan's jet fighters and capital ships would be destroyed in the initial wave(s) of Chinese missile attacks. However, the accuracy of this estimate remains uncertain, as survival rates depend on multiple variables, particularly whether the attack is a surprise. Given the scale and technological sophistication of China's missile arsenal, a more pessimistic assessment suggests that survival rates could be as low as 30–40% or even lower. The interviewee noted that Taiwan's mobile vertical-launch missile systems would likely have significantly higher survivability. Nonetheless, skepticism remains regarding whether these systems could maintain operational effectiveness if national command and control centers, including ground-based radars and communication infrastructure, were severely damaged in an initial strike.

7 During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Iraqi jet fighters sought refuge in Iran to avoid destruction. Similarly, in the event of a Chinese invasion, Taiwan might consider relocating some of its aircraft to the Miyako or Ishigaki islands in southwesternmost Japan as a temporary safe haven. However, this scenario is highly unlikely, as Japan's pacifist constitution and legal constraints would currently prohibit such an action.

aircraft operating off Taiwan's east coast waters. Should any surviving ships escape to the western Pacific, they would soon become ineffective without access to resupply and maintenance facilities. Alternatively, remaining in the theater exposes them to attacks from Chinese submarines, given Taiwan's limited anti-submarine warfare capabilities. Without air superiority or at least significant air control, Taiwanese warships are highly vulnerable to Chinese carrier-based aircraft. Thus, increasing investments in capital ships is likewise hardly justifiable.[8]

Eastern Taiwan Waters as "Strategic Depth"?

Taipei views the waters east of Taiwan as offering "strategic depth,"[9] but this appears to be illusory. Taiwan's navy has only limited anti-submarine warfare capabilities against China's large submarine fleet, nor does it possess a robust capacity for submarine operations against major surface combatants. Although Taiwan has initiated a program to build eight Haikun-class conventional submarines—starting with the first, which is set to enter service in 2025—constructing one submarine per year and training adequate crews will take roughly a decade, pushing full operational preparedness far into the future. Concerns over a potential conflict with China arising before the fleet is complete only exacerbate these uncertainties (Matsumura 2025, 178–180).

More critically, Taipei's pursuit of a full-fledged blue-water navy—replete with capital ships—appears misguided. Without sufficient replenishment assets, Taiwan's navy cannot conduct extended operations on the high seas. There are also no plans in the near term to rectify this shortfall.

In principle, a middle-power maritime state like Taiwan might aspire

8 Japan's pacifist constitution effectively prevents Tokyo from unilaterally intervening in a Taiwan conflict unless Japan itself is directly attacked. However, Japan can provide rear-area and logistical support to US forces if the conflict is deemed to pose a direct threat to its national security. The extent of Japan's involvement remains uncertain, particularly whether the US Seventh Fleet and US Air Force units stationed in Japan would engage in full-scale military operations alone without the involvement.

9 This perspective is evident even among proponents of the Overall Defense Concept (ODC), who acknowledge its limitations and challenges in implementation (TSEF 2023, 19).

to possess a blue-water navy. However, given China's aggressiveness and the significant cross-Strait power imbalance, Taiwan must prepare for potential amphibious invasions from the island's western side. To meet this threat, Taiwan should invest in ODC-appropriate naval capabilities, such as mines, small missile boats, unmanned surface combatants, unmanned underwater vehicles, and midget submarines—rather than capital ships or large submarines.[10] Taiwan lacks the wherewithal to invest heavily in blue-water navy capabilities from a medium- to long-term perspective. Its primary objective is to hold out against an invasion for at least a month—the time needed for US forces to overcome the tyranny of distance and arrive in theater. Consequently, a green-water navy is more relevant to Taiwan's current defense requirements; attempting to control the western Pacific's deep waters is neither feasible nor necessary.

In conclusion, military rationality dictates that Taipei should embrace the ODC-based asymmetric warfare strategy for both acquisition and operational doctrines. Pursuing a symmetric warfare approach instead implies either an explicit or implicit rejection of military rationality in favor of another motive—most likely tied to political rationality.

Major Impediments Underpinned by Political Rationality

"Naked" Defeatism

A mainstream segment of the KMT mandarin class, epitomized by former ROC President Ma Ying-Jeou, appears to have already abandoned

10 Large submarines face significant operational constraints in the shallow waters of the Taiwan Strait, where the average depth is approximately 60 meters, with half of the area being less than 50 meters deep. These depth limitations severely restrict maneuverability and increase the risk of detection. Additionally, the region's underwater environment causes significant diffuse reflection of sonar waves, complicating blind underwater navigation and further reducing the effectiveness of large submarines in this theater (Matsumura 2025, 178).

the prospect of a last-ditch military defense against a Chinese invasion. Instead, it supports—or at least appears open to—unification of China and Taiwan, effectively favoring negotiated absorption of the latter by the former (Shih 2024). From this viewpoint, Taiwan cannot possibly repel an invading force given the stark inferiority in military power. As a result, it dismisses an asymmetric warfare approach, especially one grounded in the ODC, which would rely heavily on guerrilla and urban warfare within Taiwan.

This position focuses on achieving favorable terms of unification, effectively constituting a "third United Front" between the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).[11] One avenue for this is the potential alignment between Taiwan's KMT and the Revolutionary Committee of the KMT—one of the CCP's satellite parties—transforming the Taiwan-based KMT into a de facto local branch of the CCP.

Su Chi (蘇起), who served as Secretary-General of the ROC National Security Council (2008–2010) under Ma's presidency, presents a more sophisticated variant of this position. Su coined the so-called "1992 Consensus," with "One China with respective interpretations" (Su 2002), suggesting his inclination toward cross-Strait stability and peace through diplomatic maneuver and negotiation. Recognizing the severe relative decline of US military power, he is deeply skeptical about US commitment to the defense of Taiwan and implies that maintaining cross-Strait stability is the priority, even at the high risk of eventual unification through negotiation. In his view, sustaining a high-casualty conflict involving guerrilla and urban warfare[12] is politically infeasible, reflecting a strong sense of resignation rather than active resistance against a Chinese invasion (Su 2015, 2017,

11 The first United Front of the two parties was formed from 1924 to 1927, while the second one was from 1936 to 1947.

12 The Battle of Okinawa in 1945 resulted in approximately 94,000 civilian deaths, accounting for roughly 28.5% of the island's pre-war population of 330,000. If a similar proportion of casualties were applied to Taiwan's current population of 23 million, this would equate to approximately 6.56 million civilian deaths. Even with a more conservative estimate, considering modern humanitarian laws and potential evacuation measures, the civilian death toll in a large-scale conflict over Taiwan would likely exceed one million.

2018a, 2018b; Su 2024, 224–274, 360–399).

"Veiled" Defeatism

Another perspective in Taiwan posits that the island can deter or defeat a Chinese invasion by deploying substantial long-range missile capabilities (Reuters 2021; Allport 2021). Under this logic, if deterrence fails, Taipei's missiles would destroy key command-and-control (C2) centers on the mainland, rendering a Chinese invasion infeasible.

However, this view relies on the highly optimistic assumption that Taiwan can sufficiently expand its long-range missile arsenal (NTI) to neutralize an incoming invasion force in a decisive first strike. In reality, Taiwan is unlikely to be able to outpace Beijing in a missile arms race, given its disadvantages in financial resources and production capacity. Moreover, in the event of a surprise attack, China's quantitative superiority would likely overwhelm Taiwan's missile forces. Even if Taiwan did manage to disable many C2 centers, Beijing could switch to backup or decentralized facilities, facilitated by satellite communications, to maintain operational capabilities (Chin 2024; Jones 2024).

While the National Defense Reports (NDRs) of 2021 and 2023 do not rule out long-range land-attack missiles as ODC-relevant weapons, neither do they prioritize them under the ODC's acquisition guidelines, which emphasize trade-offs between high- and low-priority weapons systems. Lee Hsi-Ming, the main architect and proponent of the ODC, has put forward a comprehensive list of ODC-essential capabilities that notably does not include long-range missiles (Lee 2023, 319–370). Although transporter-erector-launcher-based missiles have survivability advantages, they are not high priorities within the ODC, the key objective of which is to ensure Taiwan can withstand a Chinese invasion for at least one month.

Given these realities, an emphasis on long-range missiles could serve as a veiled strategy to avoid the necessity of guerrilla and urban warfare—implicitly accepting surrender if missile strikes fail to deter or halt an invasion. Although Taiwan recently extended its mandatory conscription

period from four months to one year, this measure still falls short of meeting the manpower requirements for an intensive asymmetric defense, while only helping produce a sense of diligence for reinforcing its self-defense vis-à-vis the United States as sole security guarantor. The ODC-based approach might have been more feasible under the pre-1987 martial law regime—when society was more tightly controlled and geared toward fighting the Communist regime—but is far less so in today's democratic, open, and affluent Taiwan. Effective asymmetrical warfare would necessitate large-scale civilian mobilization akin to the example of Ukraine,[13] an approach for which Taiwan seems unprepared politically and socially.

This "veiled" form of defeatism within the KMT also wields indirect yet substantial influence on the DPP. Owing to the legacy of the KMT's postwar authoritarian regime, in which the military was under party control, the DPP lacks adequate talent and deep experience in military-defense affairs. Despite the transition to a state-controlled military, personal ties, mindsets, and worldviews shaped under the KMT remain entrenched among both current and retired military leaders, who wield significant informal sway. Consequently, the KMT's veiled defeatism continues to exert substantial influence on DPP military policy via these pro-KMT/pan-Blue[14] officers.

The ROC as an Imaginary Great Power

The ROC's state identity is deeply conflicted, given the stark contrast between its de jure jurisdiction—which is formally larger than that of the People's Republic of China—and its de facto control, which is limited to Taiwan and a few smaller islands, effectively making it a middle power. Nevertheless, the vestiges of great-power grandeur persist among current

13 Based on an anonymous interview conducted in Taipei on April 22, 2024 with a senior scholar from a leading local think tank specializing in Taiwanese domestic politics and public opinion.

14 Referring to the color of the KMT, "pan-blue" denotes parties, groups, and individuals who advocate a shared Chinese identity with the People's Republic of China and eventual unification as one polity.

military leaders who have inherited prewar ROC military traditions through personal connections, mindsets, and worldviews. This continuity can be traced to the authoritarian KMT party-state regime before democratization, combined with the DPP's dearth of talent and expertise in defense and military affairs, which forces it to rely on established military leadership.

Notably, the National Defense Report of 2015, the last issued by President Ma's KMT administration—with former admiral Kao Kuang-Chi (高廣圻) as Minister of National Defense—noticeably referred to the 70th Anniversary of Victory in the War of Resistance against Japan. His foreword constitutes a surfaced manifestation of the ambivalent state identity (MND 2015, 21), in that the victory is falsely ascribed to the ROC's military prowess, not to its political-diplomatic choice to join the Allied Powers. The ROC won the final triumph thanks to the windfall of the US decisive military defeat of Japan. Operationally, Imperial Japanese forces held the overall superiority over ROC forces, as illustrated by "Operation Ichi-go" in 1944, when Japanese troops launched a massive offensive across China proper (Boustead 2024).

Kao's reference to the significance of victory aligns with attempts to glorify KMT leadership and the ROC armed forces. Such glorification is commonplace in military history narratives of many countries, yet in this case it is indicative of the persistent reminiscence of past great-power grandeur, rather than an acknowledgement of present realities such as its being a middle power facing existential threats posed by a neighboring great power.

This conflicted identity hinders a clear articulation of Taiwan's national security interests. Three DPP administrations—under Chen (2000-2008), Tsai (2016-2024), and now Lai (2024-present)—have similarly struggled with the ROC's legacy constitutional framework, which they have followed obligatorily. As a result, Taipei finds it challenging to commit to a fully rational arms buildup aimed at maximizing warfighting capabilities. Instead, it is tempted to reduce the dissonance of its conflicted identity by preserving the illusion of great-power grandeur through high-profile

acquisitions of advanced fighters, large naval vessels, and main battle tanks, even though such acquisitions yield high opportunity costs by diverting resources from ODC-relevant assets.[15] A pronounced preference thus remains for a full-fledged blue-water navy—complete with large conventional submarines and fleets of advanced air superiority fighters—rather than a green-water navy supported by a larger number of drones.

In preparing for a potential large-scale Chinese invasion, Taiwan must focus on defending its main island. Attempting to defend outlying territories such as Itu Aba and Pratas in the South China Sea, or Kinmen and the Matsu islands near the mainland, is strategically unsustainable. Nor do US defense commitments—ambiguously set forth in the Taiwan Relations Act—extend to these smaller islands. Itu Aba and Pratas have no civilian population; their enduring prominence derives primarily from their role as symbols of the ROC's historical sovereignty claims. Kinmen and the Matsu island group have populations culturally distinct from Taiwan and were never under Imperial Japanese or CCP jurisdiction. If attacked on a large scale, their defense would be infeasible, potentially requiring relocation of their residents to Taiwan proper or acceptance of Chinese occupation.

Although Beijing might eventually opt to seize some or all of these frontline islands to demonstrate incremental progress toward "unification," it may also forgo such actions, given their limited operational value for a Taiwan invasion. In addition, a successful seizure would reduce the ROC almost entirely to the main island, further reinforcing perceptions of a transition to a "Republic of Taiwan." Thus, unless political rationality overrides military rationality, Taiwan does not need a blue-water navy to defend these peripheral islands.

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15 High-end military acquisitions may also be driven by political rationalities, particularly the need to demonstrate to Washington that Taiwan is making substantial investments in its own defense. Such purchases serve to reassure US policymakers, garner congressional support, and maintain favorable relations with the US defense industry. This dynamic is expected to become even more pronounced with the return of Trump to office, given his administration's emphasis on allied burden-sharing in defense spending.

The Vested Interests of the Military

The military's fundamental mission is to defend the nation, relying on credible deterrence and combat capabilities. With this mission come vested interests in force organization, weapons/equipment acquisition, budgeting, and career development. Any strategic pivot—such as shifting from symmetric to asymmetric warfare or prioritizing ODC-relevant systems over high-end platforms—would threaten these vested interests. Tank crews, fighter pilots, officers serving on large capital ships, and submariners would lose their traditional paths to prominence if the defense budget is realigned decisively toward ODC-centric acquisition.

Accordingly, Taiwan's military leadership has generally resisted a complete transition to ODC-based asymmetric warfare. Despite acknowledging its conceptual merits, the shift in resource allocation has stalled. Instead, Taiwan continues to acquire expensive high-end platforms, including large conventional submarines, capital ships, fighter jets, and main battle tanks (Wu and Madjar 2024; Shan 2024; Tu and Hetherington 2024; Lo and Hetherington 2024; Lo, Tu, and Yeh 2024). Public statements notwithstanding, Taiwan's defense budgeting and acquisitions remain anchored in symmetric-warfare assumptions.

A proper assessment of any real strategic shift requires examining the balance between ODC-relevant weapons vs. high-end platforms in defense spending and acquisition. Current literature has seldom quantified these details (Yau 2024; Shen 2023). In practice, even a strong transition toward asymmetric warfare does not imply dismantling all existing symmetric capabilities; some air, naval, and armor forces must be retained to allow for future warfare that might demand a return to more symmetric options. Ideally, this might translate to an asymmetric-to-symmetric acquisition ratio of 70:30 or higher as opposed to the ratio 50:50 or lower that continues the longtime sense of attachment to symmetric weaponry.

Further complicating matters is the question of measurement. Indicators such as the share of asymmetric procurement within total defense spending, or whether personnel, maintenance, and auxiliary costs are included, can be manipulated to support the budgetary status quo.

Ultimately, the most telling metric would be which high-end platform acquisitions have been canceled—or how much of their budgets have been redirected—to fund ODC-relevant systems. This would reveal the actual extent to which resources have shifted toward ODC-relevant capabilities.

Defense-Industrial Interests

With global international relations now in great flux, all countries face hard choices in prioritizing defense spending in order to prepare for short-, medium-, or long-term military risks. For Taiwan, which confronts an immediate existential threat from China, a priority has to been put on a rapid buildup of ODC-relevant weaponry. Nevertheless, Taipei continues to purse medium- and long-term acquisition programs—such as an eight-submarine program and a new class of large guided-missile frigates—that may require a decade or more to realize.

Since at least the late 2000s, Taipei has consistently pursued strengthening its national defense industrial base for the indigenization of high-end weapon systems, such as large conventional submarines, capital ships, advanced light jet trainers, and various subsonic or supersonic medium- to long-range cruise missiles (NFF 2014; NFF 2015; An, Schrader, and Collins-Chase 2018; Liu 2020). This pursuit of domestic defense-industrial independence has generated substantial inertia, yet it does not meet with Taiwan's urgent security challenges, which call for immediate ODC-based acquisition of smaller, more mobile, and cost-effective systems.

A well-entrenched military-industrial complex in Taiwan faces the sharp conflict of its interests with the ODC-based weapon acquisition. In fact, big-ticket, high profile platforms like large submarines and advanced fighter jets dominate acquisition budgets and yield lucrative returns in pork-barrel politics and commercial interests. In contrast, firms that produce smaller ODC-relevant weaponry lack the same political clout, making it harder to secure high priority in budget allocation.

The large conventional submarine program illustrates the mis-

prioritization of legacy industrial ambitions over urgent defense needs. The decision to proceed with such an expansive, long-term project was made under President Tsai's DPP administration,[16] which lacked sufficient defense-military expertise. While the DPP has been historically vulnerable to allegations of corruption and pork-barreling (Taiwan Today 2023),[17] it also hosts an influential defense acquisition constituency that champions these big-ticket programs through its defense caucus within the Legislative Yuan. Consequently, DPP influence in defense policymaking increasingly manifests through the legislative process tied to major arms acquisitions, even as the KMT wields considerable sway over overall military strategy via pro-KMT/pan-Blue leaders in both current and retired military ranks.

Conclusion: Implications for Japan's Basic Grand-Strategic Approach

This study has explored why Taiwanese authorities have not fully embraced the ODC-based asymmetric warfare approach—despite acknowledging its importance amid intensifying existential threats from China, as well as uncertainties regarding the US-China strategic rivalry and Washington's commitment to Taiwan's defense. The analysis centered on the pivotal role of ODC-based asymmetric warfare in Taiwan's military strategy, given its stark inferiority in military power against China.

First, this paper briefly reviewed the evolution of Taiwan's military strategies since 1949, focusing on efforts to maintain sufficient defense capabilities with limited resources. Second, it explained the concept of

16 As early as 2014, the Ma administration publicly outlined a preliminary plan to develop a large diesel submarine or at least expressed an intention to move in that direction (Agence France-Presse 2014). However, it was under the Tsai administration that a concrete design concept was formulated, an implementation plan was developed, and the actual construction process was initiated.

17 The KMT has also long been plagued by corruption, largely driven by the interplay of pork-barrel politics and its entrenched local vote-gathering networks, which have sustained its political influence through patronage and resource distribution (Matsumura 2020, 13–14).

asymmetric warfare in contrast to symmetric warfare, highlighting how the ODC could serve as the foundation for a strategically rational shift. Third, the findings revealed that Taiwan's military rationality is severely constrained by deeply entrenched politically rational considerations, which hinder necessary reforms in force structure, weapons procurement, defense posture, and operational doctrine.

As a result, Taipei may implement only a partial or ineffective shift toward ODC-based asymmetric warfare. In the worst case, it could continue adhering predominantly to its traditional symmetric warfare approach, supplemented by minimal acquisition of ODC-relevant weapons. From the perspectives of the United States and Japan, Taiwan's resulting military strategy would be highly ambiguous.

This ambiguity could prevent the United States from developing an optimal war plan to counter a full-scale Chinese invasion of Taiwan, and, in turn, complicate Japan's efforts to formulate effective rear-area and logistical support that meet US operational needs. In the most severe scenario, both Washington and Tokyo might abandon the defense of Taiwan, putting it on China's orbit.

Such an outcome would compel Japan to reconsider its reliance on the US as security guarantor through the long-standing bilateral mutual security treaty. Taiwan, alongside the southern half of the Korean Peninsula, has long served as a critical buffer for Japan against major continental great powers. A hostile takeover of Taiwan would threaten Japan's security and independence,[18] given the island's central position in the first island chain and its function as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" insulating the western Pacific from Chinese power projection. With control of Taiwan, a hostile China could endanger Japan's Pacific flank and vital sea-lanes.

The current US-Japan alliance rests on an implicit strategic bargain in which Washington guarantees Japan's security (including the defense of

18 The late Shinzo Abe, former Prime Minister of Japan, stated, "A Taiwan contingency is a Japan contingency" (Matsumura 2023).

Taiwan as a prerequisite), while Tokyo hosts US bases and facilities for forward-deployed forces, ceding a substantial degree of strategic autonomy in return (Brzezinski 1997, p. 177). If the United States fails to prevent Taiwan's loss to China, the alliance relationship would fundamentally change or possibly be abrogated completely. Japan would then be forced to consider its basic grand-strategic reorientation within the US-China-Japan geostrategic triangle (Matsumura 2008).

The loss of Taiwan would therefore be a critical wildcard for both the US-led international system and for peace and stability in East Asia. Somewhat paradoxically, this scenario largely hinges on Taipei's choice and execution regarding its own military strategy.

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The Journal of East Asian Affairs welcomes manuscript submissions that provide innovative analyses of contemporary issues and policies in East Asian international relations. The Journal, which is published biannually, aims to present a diversity of views on policy issues to promote debate and offer novel solutions to regional problems. It covers a broad range of topics related, but not limited to inter-/intra-regional conflict and cooperation; emerging security issues, including climate change, threats to public health, human rights, terrorism, and cyber-crimes; geopolitical transformation in the region; economic security, such as supply chains and energy competition; and inter-Korean relations. Authors are encouraged to engage both theoretically and empirically with their subject material and employ rigorous methodologies to establish sustainable conflict resolution for global society.

The submission deadline is June 15, 2025.

■ **Guidelines**

Manuscripts should:

- Be written in English
- Be 5,000-11,000 words in length (including all references)
- Include an abstract of 150-200 words and 3-5 keywords
- Be double-spaced, written in 12-point Times New Roman font, and submitted as two Word documents (no PDF or HWP files), one of which is formatted for anonymous review
- Follow the Chicago Manual of Style for all citations:
  https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html
- Authors should also include a BRIEF CV with contact information
- The submission deadline is June 15, 2025, but manuscripts will also be accepted on a rolling basis

Manuscripts should not have been published previously and should not be under consideration for publication elsewhere. An honorarium will be provided for articles selected for publication, with the exception of research directly funded by other sources.

All manuscripts, together with the author's CV should be submitted via email. Please send inquiries and manuscripts to the following email address: joeaa@inss.re.kr

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