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Japan-China-Taiwan Relations After Taiwan's Sunflower Movement

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Madoka Fukuda, Associate Professor at Hosei University, explains that "If cross-strait relations come to a standstill in the aftermath of the Sunflower Movement, there is a possibility that Japan's ties to Taiwan will once again incur protests from China."

When Taiwanese students occupied the Legislative Yuan for several weeks this spring to demand that the Taiwanese government adopt more transparent proceedings in deliberations on the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) with China, their so-called "Sunflower Movement" was watched with keen interest by many in Japan. According to the Central News Agency of Taiwan, there was more media coverage of the protests in Japan than anywhere else in the world. Some Japanese people have expressed sympathy for Taiwan's weak position against a rising China, fearing that it too is being forced to trade its autonomy for economic dependence. Others have expressed admiration for the democratic and peaceful aspects of the movement, which clearly differentiate Taiwan from China. There have been few discussions yet, however, about how the movement and its outcome will affect the future of Japan-China-Taiwan relations.

The Ma Ying-jeou administration, since winning election in 2008, has worked hard to improve Taiwan's economic and cultural ties with China. Its approach differs substantially from that of the Chen Shui-bian administration (2000–2008), which often encouraged Taiwanese nationalism and created political tensions with China, which also created concerns for the United States. More recently, both the United States and Japan have welcomed Ma's approach of détente from the perspective of promoting stability across the Taiwan Strait. Based on improved cross-strait economic and cultural ties, China has recently begun to call for political dialogue with Taiwan. Despite their government's deepening ties with China, many citizens in Taiwan have expressed a stronger "Taiwanese" as opposed to "Chinese" identity and have become less favorable toward unification with China than they were before 2008.

It was against this backdrop that Taiwanese students began to express a sense of crisis, fearing that the Ma administration would become entwined in China's strategy for unification without first vetting the issue through any democratic proceedings. In the end, the movement succeeded in convincing the administration to postpone deliberations on the CSSTA until after the government passes a new law for monitoring agreements with China. It is thus inevitable that the ratification of the CSSTA will be delayed considerably and cross-strait relations will now progress at a slower pace.

One relevant question is how this slowdown in cross-strait ties will affect Taiwan's economy and its relationship with other countries. Ma has set a diplomatic goal of participating more in regional integration initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—a goal based on the assumption that China would tacitly permit him to do so. This is one of the reasons why the Ma administration had been rushing to ratify the CSSTA. From the perspective of participating more in regional integration, Japan would then become the second most important partner for Taiwan in the region after the United States.

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The importance of Japan’s relationship with Taiwan also has to be understood within a wider historical context. Since the 1990s, Taiwan’s democratization has added a new dimension to the Japan-Taiwan relationship. Successive Japanese administrations have basically followed the same policy of maintaining an unofficial relationship with Taiwan and hoping for stability in the Taiwan Strait, while respecting the Sino-Japanese joint communiqué of 1972. Though there are limitations to this diplomatic and political relationship, Japan-Taiwan ties have not only been enhanced economically, but also culturally and socially. Taiwan’s democratization has led to a relaxation of controls on public opinion, allowing positive memories of the Japanese colonial era to be expressed along with increased public appreciation and affinity for Japanese culture. Lee Tung-hui, Taiwanese president from 1988 to 2000, has often drawn upon his own Japanese connections to repeatedly call on Japan to further develop its friendship with Taiwan without submitting to Chinese threats. Lee’s words appeal to many Japanese because they too have begun to consider China as a potential threat and resent China’s frequent criticism of Japan’s past invasion of China. This was the context for the beginning of a closer and more comprehensive Japan-Taiwan relationship.

From 2000 onwards, the Chen administration tried to further enhance the bilateral Japan-Taiwan relationship, only to have its efforts met with Chinese obstruction. Chen tried not only to maintain the relationship that Lee had initiated, but also to develop multilayered channels for a more substantive bilateral relationship with Japan. These developments, however, were often cited as diplomatic breakthroughs and that only provoked China. Therefore, Japan often found itself in a dilemma, caught between Taiwan’s appeal to further promote relations and China’s adamant protests against any such measures. Under these circumstances, a free trade agreement (FTA) has never been an official agenda item for Japan and Taiwan, although in 2001 they agreed to organize an unofficial study group on the topic.

When President Ma came to office, some Japanese policy makers were concerned that his administration might neglect Japan as a result of his cooperative policy toward China. In fact, the Ma administration has actually changed its policy toward Japan in some areas. Ma has argued that rather than maintaining the same policy of Lee and Chen toward Japan, Taiwan should have more practical relations with Japan. To that end, he has made efforts to counter his image of favoring China over Japan by proposing that Japan and Taiwan form a “special partnership” as a result of decreased tensions in cross-strait relations.

Under Ma’s tenure, Japan and Taiwan have been solidifying their economic and cultural ties by signing a number of unofficial agreements—including a bilateral investment agreement and an open skies agreement—without any major protests from China. As a result, Japan and Taiwan have now accumulated a number of practical agreements, based upon which they have also tried to build a *de facto* FTA. Along with this economic integration, Japan and Taiwan have also strengthened their people-to-people interactions over the past few years, resulting in opinion poll results reflecting that about 70 percent of both Japanese and Taiwanese respondents feel close or relatively close to each other.

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If cross-strait relations come to a standstill in the aftermath of the Sunflower Movement, there is a possibility that Japan’s ties to Taiwan will once again incur protests from China. As recent developments show however, Japan and Taiwan now enjoy ever closer economic and sociocultural ties, and the two sides share the common values of freedom and democracy. Indeed, Japan and Taiwan have been enhancing these ties while simultaneously respecting the Japan-China joint communiqué of 1972. Japan therefore should continue on its current course of further solidifying practical agreements with Taiwan and further stabilize the relationship as a means to substantially include Taiwan in the process of regional economic integration. In doing so, Japan should not emphasize any strategic intent of containing China by strengthening ties to Taiwan, which would certainly provoke China. Japan and Taiwan should instead demonstrate the model of a mature and inclusive bilateral relationship, stressing that it will always be open to China.

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