



## TODA PEACE INSTITUTE TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH CLUSTER ON TAIWAN: RAPPORTEUR'S REPORT

Hugh Miall

# About the Author

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## HUGH MIALL

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# Introduction

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This report identifies the scope for reassurance measures in the Taiwan Strait dispute.

At a time when tensions in the Taiwan Strait are high, the positions of the parties remain incompatible, military preparations are ramping up, and there is no official dialogue between the parties. The Toda Peace Institute convened a research group to identify how the parties could shift from relying on deterrence to putting more emphasis on reassurance.

Scholars and decision-makers from Mainland China, Taiwan, the United States, Japan, Europe and New Zealand met twice online and a third time in person. The aim was to identify which reassurance measures the main parties seek from others, and what reassurances they can offer to others.

This report summarises the main conclusions of the papers and discussions and provides an overview of the potential contribution of reassurance measures to peace and stability in the region.

## Deterrence and reassurance

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The current policies of the actors in the region suggest a heavy reliance on deterrence, but much less use of reassurance.[1] As Kai He puts it, 'Deterrence aims to prevent aggression by demonstrating defensive capability or threatening retaliation, whereas reassurance seeks to alleviate an adversary's suspicions by demonstrating peaceful intent.' [2]

Deterrence aims to prevent an adversary from taking actions that the deterrer does not want. Reassurance aims to encourage an adversary to consider taking actions that the reassurer does want. It is also used to convince an adversary that if he does comply, he will not be punished.[3]

Assurance and reassurance have traditionally played a significant part in deterrence theory.[4] Thomas Schelling argued that adversaries can benefit from taking actions that reassure their opponents about their intentions, thereby reducing the risk of escalation.[5]

At present, the parties in the Taiwan Strait dispute rely heavily on deterrence measures and put little reliance on reassurance. At the Shangri-La Forum in May–June 2025, US Secretary of Defense, Peter Hegseth, said that the US would give Taiwan 'a strong shield of deterrence' by investing in its defence. Similarly, China carries out military exercises to deter the Taiwanese authorities from declaring independence, and to prevent outside interference in what it considers its own sovereign territory and maritime waters.[6] Both China and the US have strong forces capable of intervening forcefully in Taiwan if necessary.

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[1] Glaser, Bonnie, Jessica Weiss and Thomas Christensen, 'Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence', *Foreign Affairs*, 9 December 2024.

[2] Kai He, 'US-China Reassurance: Theory and Practice', Report No. 217, Toda Peace Institute, 31 March 2025.

[3] Unfortunately, the concepts do not translate well into different languages. In both English and French, reassurance means both to give an assurance again and to vouchsafe positive intentions. In German and the Scandinavian languages, these concepts have separate words. 'Beruhigung' means calming, pacifying, while 'versicherung' means assurance. In Chinese, 再保证 ('reassurance') only has the connotation of giving an assurance again and other words are used for pacifying.

[4] Assurance is in the very name: 'Mutually Assured Destruction'. Reassurance of allies through extended deterrence has been a central feature of international relations and a significant driver of the nuclear arms race.

[5] Schelling, Thomas, *Strategy of Conflict*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960.

[6] Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's Negative Comments on China at the Shangri-La Dialogue, 1 June 2025. [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/202506/t20250601\\_11638402.html/](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/202506/t20250601_11638402.html/)

The risk of relying too heavily on deterrence is that actions intended to dissuade an adversary may be interpreted as escalatory and may make more likely the very conflict they are intended to prevent. A spiral of military actions motivated by deterrence can create a security dilemma and potentially lead to a loss of control by decision-makers in a crisis. Reassurance measures can also be risky if they are interpreted as appeasement or as a sign of weakness. But a reassurance spiral is more likely to lead to benign results including mutual confidence and reciprocated de-escalation.[7] Steps that could lead to a reassurance spiral are therefore worth identifying. The following sections describe the reassurance measures sought and offered by each party, and the discussion then brings them together.

## A Mainland China perspective on reassurance

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Mainland China regards Taiwan as part of China and considers the US as the most consequential actor in the struggle over Taiwan. Therefore, Beijing seeks reassurance principally from the US, in relation to the US–China relationship broadly, as well as in relation to Taiwan.

Beijing seeks three forms of reassurance from the United States. First, the US should declare that it accepts the need for long-term peaceful coexistence with China. Second, the US should not obstruct peaceful reunification with Taiwan as a means of gaining advantage in the strategic rivalry with China. Third, the US should not support Taiwanese independence.

In return, Mainland China offers reassurance by making it clear that peaceful unification with Taiwan is its first choice. This is spelled out in the 2022 document on ‘The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era’. Beijing is also committed to cross-strait economic cooperation and cultural exchanges. Beijing would welcome integrated development across the Strait.

Beijing rejects the idea of strategic rivalry between great powers, as well as the politics of blocs and Cold Wars. Instead, Beijing wishes to manage the competition with the US responsibly and peacefully.

With regard to the legal status of Taiwan, China asserts its legal claim on the grounds that the PRC succeeded the ROC as the legitimate government of China in 1949, and China retains its status as a single entity in international law, with unchanged territorial boundaries. It would like an assurance from the Democratic People’s Party in Taiwan (DPP) that they abandon the ‘two state theory’ propounded by Lee Teng-hui in 1999, and also the claim that UN Resolution 2758 which recognises China as a member of the United Nations did not resolve Taiwan’s UN status. The DPP should either freeze its independence claim or acknowledge the cross-strait ‘1992 Consensus’ that there is One China as a basis for talks on arrangements for Taiwan’s international representation in the future.

Beijing also wants the DPP to stop its policy of economic decoupling from the Mainland and preventing people-to-people exchanges. It wants to see exchanges between schools and scholarly exchanges resumed.

Deterrence is recognized to be a double-edged sword: it is difficult to win hearts and minds while also retaining a credible deterrent threat. So, China appears keen to talk to the DPP as well as the KMT. In the absence of an agreed political foundation for talks, official-level dialogue is not possible, but China seems prepared to enter into Track II dialogue with scholars and former officials of the DPP. Such a dialogue could be held in Macao.

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[7] For the idea of a reassurance spiral in US-China relations, see Carla Freeman, “Toward A ‘Reassurance Spiral’ in US-China Relations”, [Policy Brief 224](#), Toda Peace Institute, 9 June 2025

Given the political turbulence in Washington, connecting Track II to Track I seems challenging at present, and US funders are reducing their support for dialogue efforts. However, there are bodies which could host such a dialogue. The Toda Peace Institute would be prepared to follow up its sponsorship of this workshop by co-hosting such a meeting.

Beijing would also welcome a city-to-city forum between Xiamen and Kaohsiung on the basis of the mayor of Kaohsiung accepting that people on both sides of the Strait belong to the Chinese nation. This would complement the channel that does exist between the cities of Taipei and Shanghai in connection with the annual Shanghai–Taipei Forum.

Beijing hopes that the US and Taiwan authorities will respond to these offers of reassurance from the Chinese side.

## Taiwanese perspectives on reassurance

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From the perspective of the KMT, finding a way to develop a political dialogue with mainland China is very important. As yet, Taiwan has been spared a war. But the gulf is growing between those who insist on unification, by peaceful or non-peaceful means, and those who claim that Taiwan is already de facto independent and aim to edge towards a sovereign existence with US support. Beijing excludes third party mediation, and cross-strait economic cooperation has been suspended. The reliance of both Mainland China and the United States on deterrence measures is resulting in a military build-up on both sides. Coupled with the development of a separate Taiwanese identity, this is generating a sense of urgency for unification on the Chinese side, risking the possibility of a military conflict.

Reassurance measures could help to foster trust and confidence, if reciprocated. However, decision-makers may be unlikely to choose reassurance out of rational choice, as fear of one another cancels out trust. The parties need to develop empathy and an understanding of one another's perspectives.

There was progress towards mutual confidence-building during the presidencies of Lee Teng-hui (in the 1990s) and Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016). Both Beijing and Taipei were then willing to shelve disputes as a first step towards peacefully managing their relationship, in line with the practices that have sustained the long East Asian peace.

However, in 2019 President Tsai Ing-wen abandoned the 1992 Compromise, which was the foundation for further discussions on a settlement, and President Xi Jinping deployed coercive measures to deter Taiwan from taking further initiatives in the direction of independence. These postures make it difficult for either side to reverse course and offer reassurance rather than just more deterrence.

Nevertheless, there is scope for each side to offer assurances that could reverse the drift of current policies. The Taiwan authorities could refrain from referring to independence in official documents. In turn, the Mainland China authorities could reaffirm their commitment to a peaceful settlement of the dispute. The Taiwan authorities could reduce the level of military exchanges with the United States and keep them on a private basis. Mainland China could keep its forces 24 nautical miles from the coast of Taiwan and abstain from carrying out military exercises around Taiwan. The Taiwan authorities could reaffirm their commitment to the ROC constitution (which refers to one China) and the Act Governing Relations Between the People of Taiwan and the Mainland. Following the steps outlined in the PRC's anti-Secession Law of 2005, Beijing and Taipei could declare an end to the state of hostility, engage in political consultations to map out the future of cross-strait relations, agree the steps and arrangements for peaceful reunification, and determine the status of the Taiwan authorities and Taiwan's room for international operation compatible with its status. The two sides could also agree military and political confidence-building measures and seek common ground while setting aside differences.



Beijing maintains that it made a concession to the Taiwan authorities when it accepted the 1992 Consensus. Under the DPP, the Taiwan authorities have rejected this. A new creative idea is needed to do the work of the 1992 Consensus in opening the way to negotiations. Some Beijing scholars have hinted that if the Taiwanese side made the first move, the two sides could come up with a new political foundation for talks.

Further developments in identity politics in Taiwan might make it difficult to carry out these reassurance measures. But people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to the same Chinese ethnicity and culture. In the short to medium term, they need to find a basis for maintaining peaceful coexistence.

## A US perspective on reassurance

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At the time of the workshop, it was difficult to anticipate what the Trump 2.0 Administration's policy would be on Taiwan and China. In other areas of foreign policy, including Ukraine, President Trump has been willing to radically reverse his predecessor's foreign and security policies. There is some evidence that President Trump prefers to withdraw the US from expeditionary roles and concentrate on homeland defence, the Middle East and Europe. He has been willing to upset allies and impose tariffs on the rest of the world. In this domain, it is highly significant that Taiwan is the world's leading producer of advanced data chips, which are vital for both China and the US. Perhaps surprisingly, President Trump has expressed positive views on China, and more negative ones on Taiwan than other US policymakers. His decision not to allow a visit from President Lai Ching-te in July 2025 accords with one of the reassurance measures canvassed in this workshop, and he aims to meet President Xi Jinping in November, with a view to reaching a deal on the trade war and other US–China disputes. Taiwanese data chips may become part of such a deal. It is possible that bilateral diplomacy between the two Presidents could set US–China and US–Taiwan relations on a new course, perhaps in ways that would look worrisome from Taipei's perspective.

At the Shangri-La Forum in May 2025, Defense Secretary Peter Hegseth said that the US would keep the peace in Taiwan by strengthening deterrence. In the same month President Trump asked for a 13% increase in the US defence budget. The US is deploying more cruise missiles and other modern weapons in East Asia. Nevertheless, a military judgement is that the effectiveness of US deterrence is uncertain. The balance of forces in the region is thought to be moving to China's advantage, and war games conducted by both the US and China indicate that China might come out best from a conventional war over Taiwan. Moreover, the US policy of strategic ambiguity makes it uncertain what the US would do in the event of China using force. Public scepticism about military interventions and the divided state of public opinion, together with President Trump's unpredictability, make it uncertain how the US would respond.

Given the costs, regionally and globally, of an armed conflict over Taiwan, and the high level of economic interdependence between the US and China, both sides have strong incentives to avoid conflict. The US and China could take actions designed to increase strategic stability, such as agreeing codes of conduct to avoid escalation from unintended air and sea encounters, maintaining communications systems for crisis management, and reaching arms control agreements.

With regard to political reassurance measures, the US could reassure China by reconfirming its one China policy, avoiding high-level meetings with Taiwan officials, keeping its relations with Taiwan authorities unofficial, discouraging independence moves, and restricting military assistance to Taiwan to defensive weapons.

The US can reassure Taiwan by providing defensive weapons and keeping sufficient capabilities itself to deter an attempt at forceful unification.

## A Japanese perspective on reassurance

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Japan has not endorsed the 'one China' policy officially, but the Japanese Government has said that it respects and understands China's position that Taiwan is an unalienable part of China. This is based on the understanding that China and the Taiwan authorities will find a peaceful way to settle the dispute over Taiwan's status.

Most Japanese people regard Taiwan and China as separate countries. They have neighbourly feelings towards Taiwan and regard Taiwan as the closest democratic country to Japan. Japan and Taiwan have offered each other mutual support in the pandemic and natural disasters.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Japanese people have feared that a similar development could occur in East Asia. If such a 'Taiwan contingency' arose, with US intervention in Taiwan, US forces in Japan might come under attack, and this would drag Japan into the conflict. The support Japan's Self Defence Forces could offer to Taiwan in that eventuality is likely to be limited. It is unclear whether the Self Defence Force would even be able to evacuate Japanese nationals living in Taiwan. The Taiwan public's perception that Japan would come to Taiwan's aid may not be realistic. The Self Defence Forces and Taiwan's military forces have no regular communications and lack a good understanding of one another's situations.

It is important to maintain in operational use the hotline which exists, but is not currently in use, between the SDF and the PLA. Multilateral hotline communications between all the forces that operate in the maritime and air space around Taiwan are also needed.

## Identity and reassurance

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The dispute over Taiwan is usually seen in terms of geopolitics, ideology, and sovereignty. But it is fundamentally an identity-based conflict, not only an interest-based rivalry. All three of the main parties—the US, China, and Taiwan—have constructed their identity around collective dreams and collective traumas.

In the US case, the dream is to 'make America great again' and to maintain US primacy. Losing Taiwan would threaten this dream.

In the case of mainland China, the collective dream is national rejuvenation, and the collective trauma is the century of national humiliation. Recovering Taiwan is seen as a test case of China's recovery from this trauma.

In Taiwan's case, the trauma was the killing of thousands of Taiwanese by the KMT government in the massacre of February 28 1947 and the 'White Terror' that followed. This makes Taiwanese people wary of a new Chinese authoritarian government, which they fear might behave in a similar way. Therefore, people in Taiwan cling to their democracy and de facto independence, shielded from their more powerful neighbour by US deterrence.

There is a danger on all three sides that some are coming to think that these collective dreams can be achieved only through a war. But linking these collective dreams to the future of Taiwan makes the stakes existential for all parties and could legitimise the use of force. Yet a war would impose huge losses on all sides. China stands to lose its international legitimacy and respect if it forces unification on Taiwan. The US stands to lose its political and economic position in the Indo Pacific. And Taiwan stands to lose the most, as its democracy depends on peace.

There are ways of meeting identity needs that do not require a resort to force. Strategic reassurance aims to respect the identity needs of other parties and reduce the cost of restraint. Diplomacy and official statements by all parties could be more sensitive to the identity needs of other parties. Taipei could avoid referring to China as a hostile country and dial back its de-Sinicisation policies. All parties could develop a narrative of a shared future.

By these and similar means, Taipei and the US could find ways to assure Beijing that national rejuvenation does not require coercive reunification and that democracy in Taiwan does not have to mean formal independence. Beijing could assure the other parties that its aim is peaceful unification achieved through agreement and dialogue on both sides of the Strait.

Identities are based on collective experience but are also malleable. They are often shaped by top-level leaders. It was President Xi Jinping who set the goal of national rejuvenation. Beijing's sense of urgency is driven by fear of the changing sense of identity in Taiwan. If it becomes impossible to win over hearts and minds, then the prospects for peaceful unification will be lost. Younger people on the Chinese mainland, especially in the elite universities, do not consider that national rejuvenation is their highest priority and do not favour the use of force in Taiwan. (However, taxi drivers might have a different perspective). A generational change of leaders may bring prospects for different priorities. Beijing needs to take into consideration that identity is complex and contested in Taiwan, and it needs to avoid pushing Taiwan into a corner in which the DPPs nationalistic approach becomes the only option.

## Discussion

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Table 1 (page 10–11) collates the suggestions made by all the participants about the reassurance measures that could be taken by each of the main parties. Evidently the parties could choose from a wide range of options if they wish to develop a reassurance strategy.

In the very near term, the priority is to avoid an armed conflict. This suggests there is a case for beginning with measures that could change preferences between armed conflict and other options feared by the parties. If the Taiwan authorities convinced mainland China that they did not intend to continue the march towards independence, so reducing Beijing's fear of secession, China could safely wind down its military deterrence. The same would apply if the US persuaded China that the US would not use Taiwan as an instrument in strategic rivalry with China. In turn, a reduction in the size and frequency of Chinese military exercises could reduce the need for a US military build-up in the area.

In the medium to long term, reassurance measures could persuade parties that their preferred options are compatible. Here the development of a new foundation for political talks, going beyond or building on the 'one China' and '1992 Consensus' frameworks, could lead towards negotiations and peaceful conflict management.

Domestic politics and political differences have an important bearing on the acceptability of these reassurance measures. At present, there is acute political disagreement in Taiwan on the way forward.<sup>[8]</sup> The same is true, to a lesser extent, in US politics, and is likely to be true in China too, though differences there are less in public view. Intra-party Track II discussions in Taiwan might help to complement dialogues such as the one reported here.

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[8] Nachman, Lev and Wei-Ting Yen, 'Taiwan's Democracy is in Trouble', *Foreign Affairs*, 1 August 2025.



To what extent are reassurance measures compatible with existing deterrence policies? Policymakers in Mainland China might argue that any lessening in the tempo of its military exercises could prompt the DPP to intensify efforts to realize independence, and policymakers in the United States might argue that any reduction in military support for Taiwan and in the US arms build-up in East Asia could be taken as a sign of weakness by China, which would make an armed conflict over Taiwan more likely. On the other hand, measures of restraint, such as not crossing within 24 nautical miles of the Taiwan coast, and scaling back the frequency of exercises, could be linked to reciprocal steps by the United States and Taiwan authorities, such as a reduction in US weapons sales to Taiwan and declaratory steps by Taiwan authorities to reduce China's fear of imminent secession. In principle such initial measures of restraint would not be incompatible with retaining deterrence.

For deterrence to work effectively, all sides have to be clear about their red lines. But it is questionable whether such clarity exists. For example, if the US ramps up arms sales to Taiwan significantly, this would be seen as sensitive escalation by Beijing, but whether it would trigger an immediate forceful response is unclear. Similarly, if China denied US ships the space to operate in the waters between the mainland and Taiwan, the US and its allies might consider that this crossed a red line, though what military response they would take is unclear. Crucially, if the Taiwan authorities continue to assert separate nationhood and proceed with incremental steps towards de facto independence, it is not clear at what point Beijing would determine that (in the words of the Anti-Secession Law) the possibilities for peaceful unification were completely exhausted.[9]

Advocates argue that it is precisely the uncertainty about where the red lines lie that makes deterrence a powerful tool. But the uncertainty makes it possible for parties to approach and cross red lines inadvertently, stumbling into a war that nobody wants.

Looking further ahead, participants at the workshop discussed their visions for how a peaceful future in the Taiwan Strait might come about by 2049. Perhaps not surprisingly, there were as many visions as participants. They included: peaceful reunification; a more pluralistic China with federal arrangements and considerable autonomy; a 'one China many Chinese nations' model; a highly developed and reformed China cooperating with a neutral Taiwan that becomes an East Asian Switzerland; and, perhaps more realistically, continuation of the status quo, with no declaration of independence by Taiwan and no interest in forcing unification by China.

## Conclusion

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The contributions of the participants suggest that an armed conflict in Taiwan is not inevitable and there are many steps parties could take to reassure one another, opening up the possibility of a reassurance spiral instead of an escalatory spiral of deterrence. It was not possible in the workshop to determine what the official responses of the parties would be to such measures. By making them available for discussion and dissemination, the Toda Peace Institute and the participants hope to contribute towards clarifying the conditions for averting armed conflict and opening the way towards a more peaceful future in the Taiwan Strait.

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[9] Article 8 of the Anti-Secession Law, as adopted by the National People's Congress on 14 March 2005, reads: "In the event that the 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan's secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan's secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The State Council and the Central Military Commission shall decide on and execute the non-peaceful means and other necessary measures as provided for in the preceding paragraph and shall promptly report to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress." <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005lh/122724.htm>

**Table 1 Reassurance measures suggested by participants**

| <b>Mainland CHINA</b>   |
|---|
| <p>Make it clear that peaceful unification is China's first choice</p> <p>Reaffirm their commitment to a peaceful settlement of the dispute</p> <p>Support cross-Strait economic cooperation and cultural exchange</p> <p>Track II dialogue with DPP</p> <p>Declare opposition to great power rivalry and bloc politics</p> <p>City-to-city forum between Xiamen and Kaohsiung</p> <p>Avoid its forces crossing within 24 nautical miles of the Taiwan coast</p> <p>Scale down military drills</p> <p>Declare an end to the state of hostility</p> <p>Engage in political consultations to map future of cross-Strait relations</p> <p>Negotiate arrangements for peaceful unification</p> <p>Negotiate on status of Taiwan authorities</p> <p>Negotiate on Taiwan's international status and scope for action</p> <p>Show sensitivity to identity needs of other parties</p> <p>Develop a narrative of a shared future</p> <p>Operate hotlines with US and Japan</p> <p>Negotiate arms control and strategic stability with US</p>   |
| <b>TAIWAN Authorities</b>   |
| <p>Freeze independence claim</p> <p>Refrain from referring to independence in official documents</p> <p>Reaffirm commitment to the ROC constitution and cross-Strait Act</p> <p>Give up two state theory</p> <p>Give up claim that UN Resolution 2758 left Taiwan's status unresolved</p> <p>Declare an end to the state of hostility</p> <p>Engage in political consultations to map future of cross-Strait relations</p> <p>Resume and develop economic cooperation and links with Mainland</p> <p>Negotiate arrangements for peaceful unification</p> <p>Negotiate on status of Taiwan authorities</p> <p>Negotiate on Taiwan's international status and scope for action</p> <p>Agree military and political confidence-building measures with Beijing</p> <p>Seek common ground with Beijing while setting aside differences</p> <p>Develop new foundation for talks going beyond 1992 Consensus</p> <p>Engage in Track II dialogue with Chinese interlocutors</p> <p>Show sensitivity to identity needs of other parties</p> <p>Avoid referring to mainland China as a hostile power</p> <p>Dial back on de-Sinicisation policies</p> <p>Develop a narrative of a shared future</p> |

## UNITED STATES

Reiterate the US's long-standing 'one China' policy  
 Accept the need for long-term peaceful coexistence with the PRC  
 Agree not to obstruct peaceful unification  
 Declare that it will not support Taiwanese independence  
 Discourage independence moves by Taiwan authorities  
 Keep relations with Taiwan authorities unofficial  
 Avoid high-level visits to Taipei  
 Restrict military support for Taiwan to defensive weapons  
 Deter forceful measures against Taiwan  
 Agree codes of conduct to avoid accidental escalation of incidents  
 Maintain communication systems for crisis management  
 Show sensitivity to identity needs of other parties  
 Develop a narrative of a shared future  
 Negotiate arms control and strategic stability with China

## JAPAN

Express respect and understanding of China's 'one China' principle  
 Support a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue  
 Support the people of Taiwan and their democracy  
 Be realistic about limitations to SDF support in Taiwan contingency  
 Operate hotlines with PLA and all states operating in Taiwan area



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