

## Tokyo's Difficult Diplomatic Tightrope Act between Washington and Beijing

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The United States is exerting pressure on Japan to provide more support for Washington's increasingly confrontational policy toward the People's Republic of China (PRC). Japanese leaders face the dilemma of trying to please its impatient ally and protector while avoiding taking a stance that would poison Japan's own relations with Beijing. Tokyo's delicate balancing act is becoming ever more difficult to sustain, especially as the contentious Taiwan issue has taken center stage.

That point was quite evident regarding the recent summit meeting between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga. In a [joint statement](#) following their April 17 session in Washington, the two leaders stated: "We emphasize the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues." It was the first time in 52 years that a summit communique explicitly mentioned the Taiwan issue. Moreover, immediately after the meeting Suga told reporters that the [two leaders agreed](#) "to oppose any attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion in the East and South China Seas." However, as long-time East Asia analyst Alan Tonelson [pointed out](#), "'oppose' could mean all sorts of things – a stern diplomatic note, a few sanctions. Maybe a very stern note. Or lots of sanctions." He noted, though, that "Neither Suga nor any other Japanese leader has said 'If China attacks Taiwan, we're sending in our troops, too.'" Indeed, just days later, Suga made comments indicating that Tokyo's backing [had crucial limits](#). In response to a question from an opposition member in the Diet on April 20, he emphasized that, despite the reference to Taiwan in the joint statement with Biden, there was no possibility of Japanese forces being committed to a military contingency involving Taiwan.

It was not the first time that Japanese leaders found it necessary to give the impression that they supported U.S. policy toward the PRC while avoiding making a substantive commitment that might prove inconvenient or worse. During the summer of 2020, Donald Trump's administration pressured its allies in both Europe and East Asia to join Washington in adopting punitive policies toward Beijing in response to the PRC's imposition of a new national security law on Hong Kong.

The response from those countries was noticeably unsupportive, and Japan's stance was no exception. After more than a week of internal debate, then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government declined even to join the United States, Britain, Australia, and Canada in issuing a statement condemning the PRC's actions in Hong Kong—much less imposing sanctions as Washington suggested. Press reports indicated that the decision “[dismayed](#)” U.S. leaders. Although Japan has sought to avoid getting entangled as relations between the United States and China have become more contentious, Japanese officials realize that they must take steps to placate Washington when the costs are not too high. Thus, Japan has [increased](#) its own naval patrols in the South China Sea and taken a [stance against Beijing's territorial claims](#) in that region. The willingness to include the Taiwan issue in the joint summit statement for the first time in decades was another example of appeasing Washington.

It is unclear how long Japanese leaders can maintain their balancing act, though. Tokyo has ample reasons not to antagonize its large, powerful neighbor. The extensive bilateral trade and investment links alone are enough to induce great caution, since disruption would be devastating to Japan's economy. The outbreak of an armed conflict in East Asia that created the prospect of a war between Japan and China would be even more calamitous, and Japanese officials are fully aware of the consequences. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, analyst Tobias Harris [contends](#) that “Japan's geography, economics, and domestic politics will militate against its enlisting in a U.S.-led cold war against China.” That point is doubly true of a hot war.

However, Japanese leaders also are unwilling to break with the United States and accept the burden of defending their country without their American security patron. Washington is not subtle about playing the security card—a point that was especially evident during President Trump's administration. Trump badgered Japan (as he did other U.S. allies) to [contribute more to the collective defense effort](#), and he hinted that Washington might reconsider its defense commitment if such greater burden-sharing was not forthcoming.

However, his policy was not one of all sticks and no carrots. He reiterated the stance first adopted by Barack Obama that the mutual U.S.-Japan defense treaty covered the disputed island chain that China calls the Diaoyus and Japan labels the Senkakus in the East China Sea. That is an increasingly important issue to Tokyo as the controversy over those islands has escalated in recent years, and Washington's backing for Japan's position is deemed crucial.

Biden has eased the burden-sharing pressure, and one of his administration's first actions was to [confirm](#) that the defense treaty covers the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue. But getting Japan to sign-on to a more hardline diplomatic stance toward Beijing was one evident trade-off that emerged in the April summit statement.

Beijing could make one move that would significantly increase Japan's incentive to resist Washington's blandishments—easing its own pressure regarding the Diaoyus territorial claim. Instead, the PRC has adopted the opposite course, [increasing its naval presence](#) in waters [near the disputed chain](#), enlisting its [fishing fleets](#) to do the same, and ratcheting up [the rhetoric](#). Even from a purely short-term tactical standpoint, that is a myopic strategy. It has the effect of driving Tokyo further into Washington's embrace. PRC leaders need to reconsider their approach. Even under the best of circumstances, though, Tokyo's position is not an enviable one. It faces the task of trying to placate both its powerful neighbor and its long-time ally and protector. If tensions between Beijing and Washington continue to mount, Japan may not be able to maintain its delicate balancing act much longer.

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