

OPINION

Japan's Lessons for Taiwan

By ratcheting up the pressure on Taiwan, China is following a strategy that it honed in its past confrontations with Japan.

BY TAKATOSHI ITO — SEPTEMBER 4, 2022



Entrance ceremony for the Japan Coast Guard Academy, April 13, 2022. Credit: Japan Coast Guard via [Twitter](#)

Following US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's [visit to Taiwan](#), China fired [missiles](#) into six areas surrounding Taiwan and sent fighter jets across the midline of the Taiwan Strait. Some of those missiles [landed](#) in Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), [threatening](#) fishing boats from the Japanese island of Yonaguni, which is just 68 miles (110 kilometers) from Taiwan.

Although China's military exercises ended after several days, a new precedent has been set. China most likely will send more missiles and jets into the area surrounding Taiwan whenever it is displeased with the Taiwanese government or US actions toward the island.

This strategy of ratcheting up pressure on Taiwan is all too familiar to Japan. In 2010, a Chinese fishing boat [entered](#) Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands – an uninhabited archipelago that belongs to Japan, but that China [claims](#) – and intentionally rammed a Japanese coast guard vessel that had warned it to depart from the area.

When the Japanese coast guard seized the boat and detained its crew, China lashed out. Though Japan soon released the boat and most of the crew, it held the captain to [face charges](#) for the damage he had caused to the coast guard vessel.

In response, China [arrested](#) four Japanese businessmen, claiming that they were documenting potential military targets. Nobody doubted that these arrests were in retaliation for Japan's detention of the Chinese captain.

Under pressure, the Japanese government gave in. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshito Sengoku directed the coast guard not only to [release the captain](#) but also to withhold video footage documenting his aggressive behavior. Perhaps not surprisingly, the footage soon [leaked](#) on social media, leading the Japanese public to question why its government released the captain when justice was, without doubt, on its side.

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China and Japan each took different lessons from this episode. Chinese authorities concluded that pressure works. If you want to free a citizen who has been arrested in a democratic country, it helps to find some hostages from that country. China would later use the [same tactic](#) against Canada and Australia – though those countries refused to give in.

Meanwhile, Japan learned (or should have learned, at least) that appeasing unjust or aggressive Chinese demands will only embolden China’s leaders even more. After [defeating](#) the Liberal Democratic Party in August 2009, the Democratic Party of Japan was in power until 2012. Its general view was that Japan should be more sympathetic and apologetic to China. But this clearly backfired, and the DPJ lost the election of December 2012. (While many attributed that loss to economic stagnation and too-much appreciated (an uncompetitive) yen, diplomatic failures vis-à-vis China were equally important.)

Earlier that year, the DPJ government had experienced another run-in with China over the Senkaku Islands. Shintaro Ishihara, the right-wing nationalist governor of Tokyo, had called for a part of the islands to be [purchased](#) from its private owner so that it could be populated by Japan – a move that would have enraged China by reinforcing Japan’s territorial claim with new “facts on the ground.” After the Tokyo government had mobilized large donations toward the purchase, the DPJ government stepped in to [buy the islands](#) so that it could keep them uninhabited. From its perspective, it had maintained the status quo and averted a crisis.

But the Chinese government showed no gratitude for this intervention. Quite the contrary: The DPJ’s “nationalization” met with a [fierce reaction](#) in China. Japanese companies faced boycotts and destruction of merchandise and property. Japanese-brand automobiles were attacked and destroyed, and Japanese-owned department stores were vandalized. These attacks [lasted](#) for over a month because the Chinese government refused to stop them.

“ While Japan tried to maintain a peaceful status quo regarding the Senkaku Islands, China continued chipping away at it... Now, a similar effort to change the status quo is underway in the waters around Taiwan and in the sky over the Taiwan Strait. ”

China also started [sending](#) more fishing boats and coast guard “patrol” vessels into the waters around the Senkaku Islands, regularly encroaching into the EEZ and occasionally into Japanese territorial waters. And in 2021, it passed a [new law](#) authorizing its supposedly defensive coast guard patrols to fire at Japanese boats that enter what China considers its territorial waters. Japanese fishing boats are now often [chased](#) by Chinese coast guard ships, and it is only by chance that a physical confrontation has not occurred.

Given this history, Japan harbors no illusions about what China will do if it determines that its territorial and commercial interests are being violated. More “hostage diplomacy” and attacks on Japanese companies are all but assured. Japanese executives now must account for these risks of doing business in China. For good reason, the Japanese public’s views about China have [never recovered](#) to their pre-2010 level.

While Japan tried to maintain a peaceful status quo regarding the Senkaku Islands, China continued chipping away at it, gradually increasing the frequency of its encroachments into Japan’s EEZ and territorial waters. Now, a similar effort to change the status quo is underway

in the waters around Taiwan and in the sky over the Taiwan Strait. As is true for Japan, maintaining the status quo will require that Taiwan build a sufficient deterrent capability.

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BY BRENT CRANE

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