BEYOND SIMPLE ANALOGIES: JAPAN, POLAND AND THE CHALLENGE OF TAIWAN DETERRENCE

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In the early 1990s, President Lech Wałęsa envisioned Poland becoming a "second Japan"—an advanced economy with cutting-edge technology. Today, Polish observers note with irony that Japan may instead become a "second Poland." Poland has emerged as NATO's primary logistics hub supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression. Under this framework Japan would assume a parallel role for Taiwan—a prospect that raises profound questions about alliance strategy, burden-sharing, and the realities of deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.

Poland's evolution into a logistics hub began in late 2021, before Russia's full-scale invasion. What started as modest military deliveries rapidly expanded into comprehensive support encompassing weapons, humanitarian aid, refugee assistance, equipment maintenance, medical care, and military training. This transformation required substantial infrastructure investment. The conflict exposed critical vulnerabilities: rail gauge incompatibility between Polish (1435mm) and Ukrainian (1520mm) systems, border-crossing bottlenecks at Medyka and Dorohusk, and capacity constraints throughout the logistics chain.

With support from the United States, NATO, and the European Union, Warsaw invested heavily in infrastructure upgrades—expanding rail capacity, streamlining customs procedures, and developing the physical infrastructure necessary to sustain high-volume military transport. The political economy proved favorable. Polish public opinion views Russia as an existential threat, and local communities and businesses eagerly participated in defense spending programs worth billions.

Japan faces fundamentally different challenges in attempting to replicate Poland's role for Taiwan. Taiwan is an island separated from Japan by over 100 kilometers of water at the nearest point. Unlike Poland's land border with Ukraine, any logistics operation would depend entirely on maritime and air transport—both highly vulnerable to interdiction.

Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae's Nov. 7, 2025 statement that a Taiwan contingency would constitute an "existential crisis" (生存危機, *seizon kiki*) for Japan signals recognition of these stakes. Beijing's response—including tourism restrictions, student exchange suspensions, and rejection of trilateral summit proposals—demonstrates how even declaratory statements regarding Taiwan provoke Chinese retaliation. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's January 2026 criticism of "certain political forces in Japan" for "reversing history" during parliamentary discussions of Taiwan contingencies illustrates Beijing's strategy of reframing security debates as historical grievances to fragment democratic alignment.

To function as an effective logistics hub, Japan would need to dramatically expand port facilities, airports, and storage across not just the Nansei Islands closest to Taiwan, but throughout the country. Before distributing aid, Japan must receive and store deliveries from Australia, Europe, and the United States. This requires massive infrastructure investment in an already congested system.

If Russia wished to interrupt aid to Ukraine at its source, it would need to attack Poland—triggering Article 5 and war with NATO. Japan faces a more dangerous prospect: a Taiwan invasion scenario likely includes simultaneous strikes on US bases across the Western Pacific, potentially including Japanese territory. Even in a blockade scenario short of full invasion, Beijing possesses extensive "gray zone" capabilities to interrupt maritime and air transport without triggering automatic alliance responses.

As Oriana Skyler Mastro and Brandon Yoder note in their recent *Foreign Affairs* analysis, deterrence presents an inherent paradox: "Do too little, and Beijing may gamble it can seize Taiwan before Washington is able to respond. Do too much, and Chinese leaders may conclude that force is the only remaining path to unification." Japan's potential role as a logistics hub sits squarely within this dilemma—visible preparations might provoke precisely what they aim to deter. However, their recommendation that "military upgrades should be concealed or downplayed until they are fielded" conflicts with the transparency required for democratic legitimacy and the visible commitment necessary to reassure Taiwan.

Taiwan's own vulnerabilities compound these challenges. Research by Morgado and Hosoda examining Taiwan's resilience identifies fundamental weaknesses: food self-sufficiency at only 30.7%, energy import dependency at 96.85%, and inadequate stockpiling systems for critical materials including rare earth elements. Taiwan's merchant fleet has shrunk dramatically, with only 13% of Taiwanese-owned vessels flying the ROC flag—the remainder registered as flags of convenience and potentially unavailable during crisis. Their analysis concludes that while Taiwanese authorities have implemented some resilience measures, "policies for securing energy, resources, and food are not designed for the worst-case scenario of a complete blockade of Taiwan."

Domestic political constraints in Japan mirror those identified in Taiwan. Japanese customs infrastructure would strain under massive increases in military cargo. Local governments and communities in a country with strong pacifist traditions would face unprecedented pressures. Unlike Poland, where anti-Russian sentiment creates broad consensus, Japanese public opinion on China remains complex. China is Japan's second-largest trading partner *and* its primary security concern—a tension absent in Poland's relationship with Russia.

The Trump administration's National Security Strategy reveals an emerging view that most US allies no longer meet critical security requirements amid renewed great-power competition. The strategy emphasizes "burden-sharing and burden-shifting," with the Hague Commitment pledging NATO countries to spend 5% of GDP on defense. Washington increasingly distinguishes between allies requiring constant support and those capable of assuming primary regional security responsibilities.

Israel appears as the model—competent and capable of managing regional security challenges, particularly regarding Iran. Poland aims to become NATO's first member reaching the 5% defense spending threshold. Reportedly, the undisclosed NSS version lists Warsaw among European states meriting closer Washington ties.

Yet, Israel manages Iran, where regime change remains plausible. Poland faces Russia—a formidable challenge. Japan confronts not only North Korea but China, a peer competitor of entirely different magnitude. If Washington is genuinely preparing for major power conflict fought not through broad coalitions but with select trusted allies, the equation changes fundamentally. Poland and Japan would function less as logistics hubs and more as forward partners or bulwarks managing Russia and China.

This role transformation would carry several implications. Burden-sharing demands would intensify beyond current levels. Japan would face pressure for defense spending exceeding even its recent increases toward 2% of GDP. The nature of support would shift from passive logistics to active defense integration, requiring not just expanded storage facilities but integrated command and control, advanced ISR capabilities, and potentially forward-deployed US systems requiring explicit Japanese political support.

Rather than expecting Japan to become a "second Poland," Washington should pursue incremental capacity-building focusing on gradual, sustainable infrastructure improvements to avoid both Chinese provocation and domestic backlash. Minilateral distribution of logistics responsibilities across Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines would reduce political exposure for any single country while improving overall resilience. Prioritizing deterrence by denial—making Taiwan difficult to conquer rather than focusing on sustained conflict logistics—addresses the immediate invasion threat more effectively.

Addressing Taiwan's fundamental vulnerabilities in food security, energy resilience, and critical minerals stockpiling must precede extensive Japanese logistics infrastructure development. Japan supporting Taiwan makes limited strategic sense if Taiwan cannot maintain basic societal function under pressure. Finally, maintaining selective economic interdependence with China preserves deterrent leverage. As Mastro and Yoder argue, "sustaining economic interdependence, especially the asymmetric sort that currently exists, gives the United States enormous leverage over China by allowing it to threaten heavier sanctions in the event of war." Complete decoupling eliminates this leverage while potentially accelerating Chinese timelines for military action.

Former Vice-Foreign Minister Nakayama Yasuhide's recent analysis emphasizes that decisions from the 1970s regarding Taiwan's status now confront us as present realities. The decisions we make today about alliance roles, burden-sharing, and deterrence strategy will similarly define options available to future generations. Those decisions deserve more careful thought than simple analogies can provide.

The real question is not whether Japan can become a "second Poland" but whether the United States and its Indo-Pacific allies can develop a framework for Taiwan's security accounting for the region's unique characteristics while avoiding both abandonment and provocation. That framework must balance military preparation with diplomatic restraint, capability development with strategic consideration of Chinese redlines, and burden-sharing with recognition that not all burdens can or should be shared equally. The Indo-Pacific requires its own model, informed by but not imitative of European experience.

The Pilot *commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to rob@pacforum.org for more information on how to contribute.*