

Japan as the Sixth Eye:  
Benefits and Challenges from the Perspective of a Taiwan Conflict Scenario

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## Abstract

The military threat that China poses on Taiwan grows increasingly with each passing year. In order to maintain an open and free Indo-Pacific, the US will need the close cooperation and sharing of intelligence between allies in the region, particularly Japan. Japan is also threatened by an ascendant China and there has been a push within the government to improve collaboration with Five Eyes (FVEY), to the point of becoming the “Sixth Eye”. With Japan’s ISR capabilities and in-depth intelligence on the East Asia region, the FVEY intelligence alliance stand to benefit from Japan’s contributions. However, issues of safeguarding confidential information due technical and structural deficiencies that Japan faces must also be considered. This paper seeks to outline the benefits for FVEY and Japan in the event of a Taiwan invasion scenario by China, and the challenges that Japan currently faces that would hinder its effective collaboration with the other FVEY members.

## Introduction

On 17 April 2021, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and United States President Joe Biden issued a joint statement declaring “there is an agreed recognition over the importance of peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait”, the first time that United States and Japanese leaders have referred to Taiwan in a statement since 1969.<sup>1</sup> Both the United States and Japan point to China as the country that poses the most risk to peace and the international world order. The United States has singled out China as the only competitor potentially capable of challenging a stable and open international system<sup>2</sup> and China is the most mentioned rival in Japan’s annual “Defense of Japan” white paper, appearing twice as often as North Korea.<sup>3</sup> In light of the this security landscape of the East Asia region, there are proponents within the Japanese government, including the former Japanese Minister of Defense Taro Kono, of joining the Five Eyes intelligence alliance (FVEY).<sup>4</sup>

FVEY is an intelligence alliance consisting of the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>5</sup> Under this agreement, the five nations share intelligence with each other, avoid duplication, and even work together side by side at some stations. The nations also agree not to spy on one another. All the benefits that come with this world’s oldest intelligence alliance are unknown to the public, but the impacts are occasionally reported. For example, it’s been reported that the intelligence-sharing relationship enabled American and British security and law enforcement officials to thwart a major terror attack in 2006. Recently as the tensions between China and the United States intensify, conflicts between China the other members of the intelligence alliance have also increased. China has accused FVEY members of working with the United States to contain China, criticizing Australia for leading calls for an investigation into the origins of the coronavirus outbreak and Canada for the arrest of a Chinese hi-tech executive in response to an extradition request from the US.<sup>6</sup> The issue of how to deal with China has posed a challenge to FVEY; notably New Zealand’s stance on China has greatly deviated from the other member nations as being too soft.<sup>7</sup> As of 2018, Japan has been collaborating

with FVEY in an intelligence-sharing agreement on matters regarding China and given that Japan and FVEY countries strategic concerns for Taiwan and South China Sea region are aligned, Japan as a “Sixth Eye” appears to be a logical step.<sup>8</sup>

Integrating Japan into an expanded FVEY has the potential to bring many benefits to the intelligence alliance, particularly on the monitoring the military and cyber activities of China, and could a key advantage in a potential Taiwan conflict scenario. However, there are multiple challenges that Japan will likely need to address before entry.

### Benefits of Integrating Japan into FVEY

The most direct benefit that Japan can bring to FVEY would be collection from Japan’s intelligence network in the East Asian region. Japan has robust intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities that can perform continuously during peacetime that would provide FVEY members greater situational awareness in the region, particularly useful for detecting a buildup prior to a hypothetical Taiwan scenario.<sup>9</sup> In addition to ISR, the Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) and the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) have assets that can respectively perform Air Early Warning & Control (AEW&C) and Anti-Surface Warning (ASW) currently undergoing modernization (Table 1 and 2). As of April 2021, Japan has acquired its first Global Hawk, providing the ASDF with a theater ISR platform able to conduct high-quality ISR and processing, exploitation, dissemination (PED) capability for high-quantity collections, and is planning on acquiring two more for a total of three.<sup>10</sup> Supporting the ISR missions are the four YS-11EB planes that are capable of electronic intelligence (ELINT) and the E-2Cs/E-2Ds, which are also capable of Air Early Warning & Control. Of note, the ASDF is the largest operator of the E-2s behind the US Navy. However, unlike the US Navy, ASDF’s E-2s are based on land allowing them to have more fuel and a longer operational time. Regarding MSDF ISR capabilities, the ISR core in the MSDF aviation wing is its P-1s and P-3Cs, which are considered critical surveillance assets despite not having advanced imagery intelligence (IMINT) or ELINT collection capabilities. The P-1s and P-3s are supported by OP-3Cs that capable of

collecting IMINT and EP-3 that can collect ELINT. All considered, the number of assets that the SDF possesses for ISR and the amount of collection from it is a strength that would benefit FVEY.

Table 1. ISR and ASW Capabilities of the Air Self Defense Force.

### ISR and AEW&C Capabilities

Service	Asset	August 2019	Circa 2029
ASDF	RF-4E/EJ	10	0
ASDF	RQ-4B Global Hawk	0	3
ASDF	E-2C	13	0
ASDF	E-2D	1	13
ASDF	E-767	4	4
ASDF	EC-2	0	Not available
ASDF	YS-11EB	4	Not available

Table 2. ISR and ASW Capabilities of the Maritime Self Defense Force.

### ISR and ASW Capabilities

Service	Asset	August 2019	Circa 2029
MSDF	P-1	19	>Total 65
MSDF	P-3C	54	
MSDF	OP-3C	4	Not available
MSDF	EP-3	5	Not available
MSDF	SH-60J	22	0
MSDF	SH-60K	58	>Total 75 <sup>a</sup>
MSDF	SH-60K (Upgraded Capability)	0	

There are diplomatic benefits to consider as well for the inclusion of Japan into FVEY. Japan's inclusion in the alliance would help pave the way for further multilateral agreements, particularly security agreements. Japan is already an active member in economic multilateral agreements, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific partnership (CPTPP), but is reticent when it comes to security agreements. Grappling with the revision of Article 9 of Japan's pacifist constitution, the ruling Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has been struggling with gathering support of "collective self-defense", relaxing restrictions to allow the SDF to perform military operations not just in defense of Japan, but also of allies. While the idea of "collective self-defense" is unpopular with the Japanese public currently, Japan's entry into FVEY would lead towards deeper engagements in other multilateral frameworks and could gradually change public opinion to become more supportive towards international involvement. This would give the government more political support to invest further in international engagements that seek to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific region and deter potential conflict from China, such as the Quad 2.0. Furthermore, in the event of potential conflict with China over Taiwan, the US will need to engage with and provide threat intelligence with Japan in order to receive support. As a close ally interested in Taiwan's independence, Japan has incentive to participate in this conflict, but the decision to do so rests on the Japanese leadership's ability to convince their people that conflict is necessary. Japan in a FVEY framework will receive critical intelligence effectively and earlier which would better support Japanese leadership's ability to forge the narrative to the Japanese people that link the operational threats to Taiwan to Japan's future survival.

### Challenges to Resolve

There are significant issues that Japan would need to overcome before joining FVEY that would be potential liabilities in the event of a Taiwan scenario. One concern is the proper protection of the sensitive information both from a cybersecurity standpoint. Japan faces immense hurdles when considering the offensive cyber capabilities of China. China is undoubtedly one of the world's strongest

cyber espionage threat actors and has an overwhelming advantage in manpower. While Japan is looking to increase the manpower of their cyber related units to more than 1,000 personnel by the end of FY 2023, it is estimated that China already has 130,000 personnel devoted to cyber activities. Allowing Japan to access FVEY intelligence networks will come at the cost of having FVEY intelligence in potentially vulnerable networks, magnifying the risk of leaks occurring. Another glaring vulnerability within SDF's communication systems is that Japan's satellite communications are not secure, meaning that the information that is gathered and transmitted is vulnerable.

In addition to the technical challenges Japan faces, the country will need to meet certain counter-intelligence structural challenges in order to effectively collaborate with FVEY. One of the weaknesses Japan should seek to remedy is having stronger coordination with its private sector, particularly on cyber threat intelligence. In general, both the governments of US and the EU member countries work with companies in charge of vital infrastructure, such as power plants, to emphasize the importance of cybersecurity and implement the sufficient measures. In contrast, according to a senior Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) official, it is a challenge for Japanese companies to secure services like cloud data exchange and storage services and many companies have not implemented any measures doing so.<sup>11</sup> While Japan has made some progress in properly implementing security standards internally in the government with the passage of the controversial Designated State Secrets Law in 2013, stronger anti-espionage legislation that encompass the private sector in charge of vital infrastructure or emerging technologies are necessary to be at least on par with that of the other FVEY nations.<sup>12</sup> However, further legislation is likely to face constitutional obstacles and public opposition. Japan also lacks a security clearance system that includes the private sector. While public servants and those working at the defense industry are vetted through a security process, most of the private sector do not undergo these evaluations. Considering cyberattacks are increasingly targeting the commercial sector with little to no cleared personnel, sharing critical information on cyberattacks is difficult if pertinent secret information

cannot be shared. In addition, while Japan has multiple government bodies that conduct SIGINT collection, Japan lacks an intelligence agency analogous to the US's National Security Agency (NSA) or the UK's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) that is singularly responsible for the intercept of communications for SIGINT. Such an organization would be vital to strengthen coordination with FVEY. Similar to the passing of the controversial 2013 Designated States Secrets Law, the creation of this intelligence body is likely to face public backlash due to privacy issues and constitutional concerns.

## Conclusion

In the event of a Taiwan scenario, it is essential that intelligence flows in an effective manner between Japan and the other FVEY countries for situational awareness and conducting operations. While Japan is already collaborating with FVEY on China, a more efficient framework is possible with Japan as member of FVEY. Japan with its robust ISR assets focused on the East Asian region and similarly aligned strategic priorities make it appear to be a great candidate as the "Sixth Eye". However, Japan faces cybersecurity and structural problems that places some doubt on whether Japan can effectively protect the information provided by FVEY. In order to better prepare for a Taiwan conflict, the US and other FVEY members should work with Japan on tackling the issues identified. Resolving those issues is the key to resolving the current barriers to intelligence sharing between Japan and FVEY and will lead to better collaboration on intelligence. As long as Japan still has these fundamental challenges on how it handles and secure intelligence, a FVEY agreement to incorporate Japan is unlikely to occur.



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