

Commentary



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Strengthening international cooperation against disinformation: The case of a Taiwan Strait contingency

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The rapid development of communication technology, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have all contributed to a rise in the perceived threat posed by foreign disinformation. As countries struggle to combat disinformation, many are moving towards expanding international cooperation with like-minded allies and partners. For instance, Canada has shown its willingness to cooperate with partners like Japan and Taiwan in its fight against foreign disinformation. Japan, which will be hosting a Group of Seven (G7) summit under its presidency this year, has also just launched a new policy to combat against disinformation threats – one that recognizes cognition as a new battlefield in the digital society and with the realistic possibility of a Taiwan Strait contingency in mind.

This commentary explores the potential for cooperation between Canada and Japan in the fight against disinformation. In the process, it will analyse the

latest debates and countermeasures regarding disinformation in Japan, and identify common challenges and solutions for democracies in combatting disinformation.

Discussion on a Taiwan Strait contingency

In March 2021, US Admiral (Ret'd) Philip Davidson, former Commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command, stated at a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing that China could invade Taiwan in the next six years. His statement was intended to emphasize China's military expansion and to urge the US Congress on the need to strengthen US military forces. Although there was no firm basis for the six-year deadline, the fact that this statement (with its specific deadline) came from one of the top former US military leaders had quite a big impact upon the general public's view that the Taiwan Strait contingency is a realistic possibility.

Following Davidson's remarks, a US-Japan summit meeting was held in April 2021, and the joint statement of the summit included a reference to the "importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait." This was first time since the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and China in 1972 that the Taiwan Strait had been included in the US-Japan summit statement. Since the summit, concern over a Taiwan Strait contingency has only grown in Japan, and it is now one of the hot topics among Japanese policy experts and academics, with several think tanks in Tokyo carrying out serious studies on the Taiwan Strait.

The US has become increasingly concerned about the situation in Taiwan, and influential experts are calling for "strategic clarity" instead of "strategic ambiguity," suggesting the US government should state clearly that the US will defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack against the island nation. President Joe Biden stated in a few occasions that the US will defend Taiwan against a Chinese attack, but the US government clarified in each occasion that there was no policy changes, and the US would continue to honour the one-China policy and maintain its policy of strategic ambiguity.

Meanwhile, the governments of Japan and the US seem to have become more alarmed recently about the possibility of a Taiwan Strait contingency. At the bilateral level, after the 2+2 US-Japan Security Consultative Committee meeting on January 11, 2023, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi and Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada pointed out the importance of the Taiwan Strait for international peace and security.

On the Japanese side, the government, together with Okinawa Prefecture and other local governments, plan to conduct the first drill this March to verify evacuation methods for residents of remote islands in Okinawa Prefecture for a possible future Taiwan Strait contingency. At the private level, opportunities for table-top exercises in this field have increased dramatically in Japan. Also, a Sankei Shimbun survey conducted at the end of the last year revealed that about 70 percent of major Japanese companies recognize the Taiwan Strait contingency as a realistic business risk.¹

Possible disinformation threats

The term “Taiwan Strait contingency” refers to a state of war or military conflict in Taiwan. In view of Japan’s geographical proximity, it is only natural for Japan to prepare various safety measures in the case of such a contingency. Discussions of a Taiwan Strait contingency, however, often overlook the threat of possible information warfare, including disinformation campaigns employed by China against Japan and Taiwan. It is well known that Russia conducted cyberattacks, electronic attacks, and information warfare during its annexation of Crimea in 2014, and both Russia and Ukraine have since been engaged in intense information warfare following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Information warfare, including disinformation campaigns, are often used to destabilize a targeted country by focusing on existing divisions or certain divisive narratives in the society and amplifying them, which can significantly impact a government’s policy-making process. It is well recognized that Russia has been utilizing these tactics in its broader strategy, as seen in what it tried to achieve during the US presidential election in 2016.

Applying this to the Taiwan Strait contingency, it is undeniable that China may engage in information warfare not only against Taiwan but also Japan. Its basic strategy is to separate Japan from the US, as seen in the social media activities of China’s so-called “wolf warriors” in Japan. In the case of a Taiwan Strait contingency, its goal would be to prevent Japan from intervening in the event of a Chinese attack against Taiwan. China might try to reach out to Japanese

sentiment that is allergic to military matters, for instance, by arguing that the presence of US military bases in Japan would bring Japan into the war.

In addition, China might step up its efforts to influence the people of Okinawa where US military bases are concentrated. There is a narrative in China that Okinawa was originally an independent state called Ryukyu and belonged to the Qing Dynasty. A report launched by the Japanese Public Security Intelligence Agency (2017) pointed out that Chinese universities and think tanks were conducting studies on the “undecided theory of Ryukyu’s belonging” and were promoting exchanges with Japanese organizations advocating “Ryukyu independence”.

To the international community, China could possibly wage information warfare and legal warfare, by reiterating their historical assertion that Taiwan is an integral part of Chinese territory through traditional media and social media.

Japan’s new threat perception of disinformation

In December 2022, Japan revised its National Security Strategy and recognized, for the first time, the cognitive domain as a security concern. It will establish a new structure within the government to aggregate and analyse disinformation, to strengthen external communications, and to enhance cooperation with non-governmental agencies.

Japan’s awareness of disinformation has been gradually growing in recent years, but no specific countermeasures have been taken by the government. Japan has been historically and linguistically isolated from overseas, often described as a “Galapagos syndrome,” and thus, Japan has been protected from severe threats of disinformation. However, with technological advancement, these barriers will be broken down sooner or later, at which point Japan could be exposed to serious threats of disinformation. Moreover, it is generally believed that during a crisis, people are in a psychological state where they are more likely to believe disinformation and misinformation. The crisis would include not only natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, but also wars like in a Taiwan Strait contingency.

Therefore, it is essential for Japan to take countermeasures against disinformation as soon as possible. Needless to say, disinformation is always a threat to democracy from peacetime to wartime. It would be more efficient and effective if there was a clear chain of command for disinformation countermeasures within

the government apparatus, as is the case of the Taiwanese government. In this regard, it is commendable that the Japanese National Security Secretariat is now planning to play a central role in command and control within the government based upon the new National Security Strategy.

Roles of the private sector

In addition, disinformation campaigns have a broad target audience, ranging from the government to the private sector and the general public. Therefore, the role of the private sector in the fight against disinformation is essential. For example, fact-checking (usually by private sector actors) has been cited as an effective countermeasure against disinformation (Hanchett 2022), but it is not a panacea by itself. The content that gets fact-checked often depend on the stakeholders of those who do the fact-checking; in other words, there is a risk that the fact-check is not neutral regarding the content.

In Japan, fact-checking methodologies have not been well developed, and there are only three fact-checking groups active in Japan, according to Duke Reporters' Lab.² Although another fact-checking group was established last year, there has already been some debate in Japan about the legitimacy of their fact-checking activities. The debate includes where the money comes from, as their activities are funded by tech giants, Yahoo and Google; their stated policy that “accurate and rigorous news organizations” are exempt from fact-checking; and that the staff tasked with carrying out fact-checks are four university students.³ In this regard, countermeasures could be made more credible by being more inclusive, including groups such as media companies, universities, think tanks, social media platforms, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and others.

Furthermore, disinformation countermeasures often run counter to principles of freedom of expression. In the US, some Republicans have sued the White House and other officials, accusing them of pressuring the platforms to stifle the voices of its political critics in violation of the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech (Myers 2023). In Japan, the 21st article of the Constitution, which guarantees free speech and freedom of assembly and association, could become a barrier to the Japanese government's efforts to combat disinformation.

Most importantly, governments need to be wary of implementing countermeasures that might give them overly broad powers of regulation and control, which could end up infringing on such vital democratic rights as

freedom of expression. Instead, greater emphasis should be placed on increasing people's media and information literacy to increase national deterrence in the medium- to long-term. There is also a need to instill critical thinking at an early stage in the education process, which will be the most effective countermeasure to eliminate vulnerability to disinformation.

Toward international cooperation as a countermeasure

Promoting international cooperation and collaboration are also an essential measure in the fight against disinformation. It is necessary to cooperate at various levels with countries and regions that share democratic values, conduct information-sharing when it comes to cases, analysis and good practices, and seek cooperative mechanisms for countermeasures.

In this sense, Canada is a flagship partner for promoting cooperation in countering disinformation among G7 members. Japan will host the G7 Hiroshima Summit as the chair this May, which will be an opportune moment for Japan to work with Canada to develop counter-disinformation mechanisms going forward, such as the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (G7 RRM). In addition, in its Indo-Pacific Strategy released last year, Canada expressed its willingness to promote cooperation with Taiwan in the fight against disinformation. At a time when concerns about a Taiwan Strait contingency are growing in the Indo-Pacific region, multifaceted cooperation between Canada and Japan and their other partners in the region will not only develop and deepen bilateral relations, but will also contribute to regional peace and stability.

Prompting Canada-Japan cooperation in the fight against disinformation

What specific types of cooperation in disinformation countermeasures can Japan and Canada provide? At the government level, the ministries in charge must be in harmony with each other. As mentioned above, Japan plans to establish a headquarter in the Cabinet Secretariat by next spring in order to realize cross-agency efforts in disinformation countermeasures. Canada, on the other hand, does not have a headquarter to integrate these efforts, although departments and agencies such as the Departments of National Defence and Public Safety, the Communication Security Establishment, and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service are actively working on disinformation countermeasures.

Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Global Affairs Canada are currently in dialogue regarding RRM, but the reorganization within the Japanese government would result in a lack of alignment between both governments in terms of their disinformation countermeasures. To realize a smooth cooperation mechanism between the two countries, there is a need to establish a communications framework at various levels of each government, from the prime minister and cabinet level to the high level of each department or agency to the unit level that actually conducts the operations. In this sense, it would be useful for Canada to be aware of the Japanese government policy-making when it comes to countering disinformation and begin to consider a Canada-Japan dialogue window.

Cooperation at the private level between the two countries should also be pursued. In line with the Japanese government's policy to promote disinformation countermeasures, it is expected that disinformation research and fact-checking will become more active in the near future in Japan, which will further increase the potential for exchange between Japanese and Canadian researchers. Joint research would be an effective means to promote cooperation among these experts. It should include research on trends in foreign disinformation campaigns that can be identified in each country, as well as research on technology development, and effective education and communication methods to improve critical thinking of the public.

The establishment of such a public-private partnership has yet to be realized within the Canada-Japan framework of bilateral cooperation. At a time when both Canada and Japan are increasingly concerned about the danger of disinformation, efforts to promote cooperation between the two countries in countering disinformation will not only contribute to further strengthening overall Canada-Japan relations, but may also serve as a guideline for regional counter disinformation efforts. [MLI](#)



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After completing a master's course at the Osaka School of International Public Policy, Osaka University, she joined the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, where she was a research fellow in 2017-2018. She then served as an officer at the Office for Strategic Communication Hub at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in 2018-2019 before joining the JIIA.

Her recently published books include *Naze Nihon no "Tadashisa" ha Sekai ni Tsutawaranai noka: Nichi chū kan Shiretsu na Imēji Sen* (Why is Japan's "Righteousness" Difficult to Convey to the World? Fierce Image Competition between Japan, China, and South Korea) (2020), and *Nise Johō Sensō: Anata no Atama no Naka de Okoru Tatakai* (Disinformation Warfare: The War in Your Heads), co-author (2023). Her most recent published articles include 'Disinformation Threats during a Taiwan Contingency and Countermeasures' (Research Report, the Japan Institute of International Affairs, March 22, 2022), 'Fighting Disinformation: Japan's Unique Situation and The Future of Canada-Japan Cooperation' (MLI Commentary, Macdonald-Laurier Institute, November 2021) and 'The Disinformation Threat and International Cooperation' (JIIA Strategic Comments, the Japan Institute of International Affairs, June 2, 2021). [MLI](#)

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Endnotes

- 1 Further information in Japanese on this survey is available here: <https://www.sankei.com/article/20230104-YPSJSWFYURPDPKRPVFFSR-SHGOM/>.
- 2 This information can be found on the Duke Reporters’ Lab’s website: <https://reporterslab.org/fact-checking/>.
- 3 Further information can be found here: <https://factcheckcenter.jp>.

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