

How a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan Could Destabilize Japan

In the event of an invasion, Taiwanese with the financial resources to do so would likely flee to Japan. Is Tokyo ready?

By Travis Sanderson October 22, 2019



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Taiwan's reclamation has been a cornerstone of Beijing's mission for "national rejuvenation" since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) successfully assumed power over mainland China in 1949. Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated the point in his National Day Address on October 1, 2019. Due to both Taiwan's highly-developed military defenses and preparedness, many analysts have indicated that successful reunification by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in a hypothetical invasion is far less certain than is commonly assumed – even without U.S. intervention to defend Taiwan. Yet while commentators have analyzed the likelihood of forced reunification, few have written about one consequence of such an attempted reunification: a Taiwanese refugee crisis.

In the event of an invasion, as soon as the Chinese army moves and Taiwan's government declares an emergency state, Taiwanese citizens with financial resources will begin to flee the island. Recent polls illustrate that 65.4 percent of Taiwanese citizens do not believe Taiwan can repel a Chinese invasion, despite evidence to the contrary. Arguably many will write off Taiwan's military capabilities and flee immediately; others, even in the event of a PLA failure, would depart in the ensuing weeks to avoid further danger.

Japan, by virtue of both its geographic proximity and historical link to Taiwan, is likely to face a large influx of asylum-seekers. From 1895 to 1945, Japan ruled Taiwan as a colony. Taiwanese students were forced to learn and speak Japanese and lived increasingly Japanese lifestyles for three generations; during Japan's imperial period, the Japanese empire assimilated Taiwanese people through the *Kōminka* movement aimed at fully Japanizing the society of its "model colony." Modern Taiwan's societal fabric is sewn with Japanese influence, from its transportation to language. Largely due to the Kuomintang (KMT)'s brutal martial law over Taiwan after Japan ceded the island, a dictatorship that made Japanese colonial rule pale in comparison, Taiwanese opinions of Japan remain generally favorable. Displacement would force many Taiwanese to Japan because of geographic convenience, cultural familiarity, and historical closeness.

While asylum-seekers, by nature, challenge and destabilize the anarchic world arena, Japan is particularly ill-equipped to manage what might be an inevitable refugee crisis. The European-Turkish handling of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 was shaky at best and is now in danger of collapse, but the management capability of Europe and

Turkey is much greater than Japan's. In 2015, while other world governments attempted to manage large numbers of displaced people everywhere from West Asia to the United States, Japan's sat on the sidelines. "Japan has the third-largest economy on the planet, but in the last five years, has granted refugee status to fewer than 100 people," reported Business Insider in 2018. The reluctance of the Japanese state lies largely in its fear of a "flood" of North Korean refugees, the only refugee crisis currently ongoing in Japan's neighborhood. But Japan's reluctance also leads to inexperience and its total lack of adequate refugee policy. If Europe and Turkey's management of refugees has been shaky, Japan's would be an earthquake.

In the event of a Taiwanese refugee crisis, Japan would suffer certain immediate short-term consequences nearly impossible to avoid. Japan's total lack of adequate refugee provisions would likely lead to economic strain as large numbers of Taiwanese communities arrive on Japanese shores with little hope of integration. Taiwanese asylum-seekers, unemployed, will be transformed by national media and popular culture into economic scapegoats. The lack of adequate provisions for refugees ensures the state would scramble to create largely inefficient makeshift organizations to manage the refugees. Asylum-seekers would remain unintegrated, generating social unrest among both refugees and Japanese. Economic mismanagement and ensuing social unrest would likely strain popular views of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). A resurgent political opposition, waiting in the wings, may be able to capitalize on a mismanagement of the refugee crisis to oust the LDP.

Simultaneously, a Taiwanese refugee crisis would force Japan to reckon with its revolving doors of "Japaneseness." Taiwanese intellectuals seeking asylum would likely draw on the examples of their forebears during the colonial period, when Taiwanese leaders fought for the political and civil rights of Taiwanese imperial subjects. Taiwanese refugees could make a claim on the Japanese nation itself, based on a previous version of the Japanese nation more heterogeneous than its current iteration. "Japaneseness," a category that has included and excluded Taiwanese people based on Tokyo's whim, would be a source of struggle as Taiwanese refugees demand their political and civil rights yet again.

In short, an invasion of Taiwan by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would destabilize Japan. If Tokyo wishes to avoid the political and national fallout from a refugee crisis, it must prepare effective and humane mechanisms to integrate Taiwanese that seek asylum in Japan. Beijing, meanwhile, should consider in its calculus the incredibly negative impact that a forced reunification of China would cause to its relationship with Tokyo.

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