



KIPEC Focus: Expert Interview

Taiwan Strait Security and Implications for South Korea

KIPEC Focus: Expert Interview is a series that explores key developments in the United States through in-depth conversations with leading experts.

On November 18, KIPEC invited John Dotson, Director at the Global Taiwan Institute, for an interview on rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait. Mr. Dotson is a former U.S. Navy officer and previously served on the staff of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. He has written extensively on Chinese political warfare, PLA modernization, and cross-Strait security.

The interview focused on how recent developments around Taiwan affect South Korea's strategic environment. We examined shifts in Washington's attention to the issue, China's growing coercive behavior, and the implications for the ROK-U.S. alliance. Mr. Dotson also offered views on how South Korea should prepare for potential crises while managing its relationships with both Washington and Beijing.

This report provides a summary of the key points discussed during the interview.

Q1. In the Washington policy community, discussions about the Taiwan Strait feel especially prominent right now. Has attention actually increased, and what is driving this level of interest?

Answer: Attention has increased, but it has risen gradually, not suddenly. For many years, U.S. policy was shaped by optimism about engagement with China. During that period, Taiwan was often treated as a complication in the U.S.-China relationship. That environment has shifted as U.S.-China relations have deteriorated. American businesses have grown more skeptical, and China's behavior has become more aggressive. This includes military pressure on Taiwan, coercive actions against regional states, and more confrontational diplomacy. These changes have created more room for Taiwan in U.S. policy discussions. There is also stronger appreciation for Taiwan's democratic progress. Overall, intensifying U.S.-China strategic rivalry is the main reason attention to Taiwan has grown.

Q2. What are South Korea's strategic equities in the Taiwan Strait, and how should Korean lawmakers understand the current dynamics there?

Answer: South Korea shares regional interests such as avoiding conflict, protecting economic stability, and keeping sea lanes open. For Korea, these stakes are especially high because of its export-driven economy and reliance on maritime trade. Korea is also in a difficult position between two major powers: China as its key trading partner and the United States as its security ally. Rising tension in the Taiwan Strait adds pressure to this balance. China has become more assertive under Xi Jinping, shifting from patience to coercive tactics. Military activities, gray zone operations, and influence campaigns have all intensified. These actions create a more unstable environment that could disrupt trade routes and reshape regional security. Korea must therefore pay close attention to the evolving situation.

Q3. In a potential Taiwan Strait conflict, what would a U.S. military defeat mean for South Korea, and what support might the United States expect from Korea?

Answer: A U.S. defeat in a Taiwan conflict would have serious consequences. It would damage U.S. credibility, weaken American military power, and alter the regional balance. Korea would then face difficult strategic choices because its long-standing security dependence on the United States would come into question. Korea might have to reconsider how it positions itself between the United States and China. If a conflict did occur, the United States would likely seek diplomatic support from Korea and possibly logistical assistance. Washington would also expect Korea to monitor North Korea closely to prevent a second crisis. U.S. Forces Korea would likely focus on logistics and deterrence on the peninsula rather than fighting near Taiwan.

Q4. Congress appears to be moving toward more strategic clarity on Taiwan¹, while the administration maintains strategic ambiguity. How should South Korea interpret this difference?

Answer: Differences between Congress and the administration are not new. For decades, Congress has generally been more supportive of Taiwan than the executive branch. During earlier periods of engagement with China, administrations tended to avoid actions that might upset Beijing, while Congress pressed for stronger support for Taiwan. That pattern continues today, but support for Taiwan has become more bipartisan. Lawmakers from both parties are now more skeptical of China and more willing to speak out on Taiwan's behalf. For South Korea, this means that U.S. signaling on Taiwan may vary across branches of government but is rooted in broader bipartisan concern about China.

Q5. The recent joint fact sheet reaffirmed the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.² How should Korean lawmakers interpret this language?

Answer: The language in the fact sheet is measured and largely standard, but it is still significant. It shows that the Korean government is willing to acknowledge concerns about unilateral changes to the

¹ Recent congressional initiatives illustrate this shift toward greater "strategic clarity" on Taiwan. On January 17, 2025, House members introduced [H. Con. Res. 8](#), calling for the United States to resume normal diplomatic relations with Taiwan and abandon the One China Policy. On May 15, 2025, Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi and bipartisan co-sponsors introduced the [Six Assurances to Taiwan Act](#), which seeks to codify the Reagan-era assurances into U.S. law and prevent any administration from altering them without congressional approval.

² "They emphasized the importance of preserving peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. They encouraged the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues and opposed unilateral changes to the status quo."

status quo. Even this gentle formulation indicates greater willingness by Korea to discuss Taiwan-related issues publicly. In previous years, Korean officials often avoided the topic to prevent friction with China. This shift suggests rising awareness of the risks associated with growing tensions in the strait, even if the expression remains cautious.

Q6. How do regional partners such as Japan, Australia, and the Philippines view a potential Taiwan crisis, and what steps are they taking? What does their approach mean for South Korea in terms of its security position and coordination with these partners?

Answer: Several regional partners are becoming more vocal and more active as concerns grow about China's behavior. The Philippines has been especially direct, given China's coercive actions in the South China Sea and the large number of Filipino workers in Taiwan. Japan has also made unusually clear statements that a Taiwan contingency would directly affect Japan's own security. These governments are exploring deeper security coordination, including discussions on joint exercises and limited deployments. This trend raises important questions for Korea. Seoul will need to consider whether it should engage more with these countries in security matters or maintain distance out of concern for its relationship with China.

Q7. From your vantage point, what are the most realistic policy options for South Korea to prepare for a Taiwan-related crisis while balancing relations with both Washington and Beijing?

Answer: South Korea is already taking some useful steps. Korean leaders are showing more willingness to acknowledge regional security issues beyond the peninsula. Korea still must prioritize the North Korean threat, but it can also pursue quiet contingency planning for a potential crisis in the Taiwan Strait. This includes military planning related to logistics, alliance coordination, and monitoring North Korea. Economic contingency planning is equally important. Korea's export-driven economy depends heavily on open sea lanes, which a Taiwan conflict or expanded Chinese maritime claims could disrupt. Preparing for these scenarios, even privately, would help Korea protect its interests while managing its complex position between the United States and China.

Q8. Looking ahead, what scenarios seem most plausible for the Taiwan Strait, and what early-warning indicators should Korean policymakers monitor?

Answer: In the coming years, China's coercive pressure on Taiwan will likely intensify. This includes gray zone operations such as air and naval incursions, Coast Guard activity, and psychological pressure on Taiwan's public. China may also escalate toward partial or undeclared blockade measures, such as demanding inspections of ships or restricting sea lanes. This is more likely than a full-scale invasion in the near term, though escalation risks remain high. South Korean policymakers should monitor increases in Chinese military activity, Coast Guard operations, and attempts to restrict maritime access to Taiwan. These patterns would indicate a shift from steady pressure toward a more dangerous crisis environment.

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