To the Editors:

In his article “China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia,”¹ Thomas Christensen argues that East Asia is primed for conflict. He contends that security dilemma theory, and two other exacerbating factors, predict spirals of tension between China and Japan. First, Chinese historical memories of Japanese aggression make China especially fearful of increases in Japanese military activities. Second, because China regards Taiwan as a renegade province rather than an independent country, the acquisition of even defensive weapons by Taiwan or Japan (a potential Taiwanese ally) threatens China and may provoke spirals. Based on these arguments, Christensen concludes that the United States should limit the Japanese role in the U.S.-Japan alliance. For example, the United States should not codevelop theater missile defense (TMD) with Japan because this could trigger spirals between Japan and China (p. 75).

In this letter I argue that Christensen greatly overstates the potential for conflict in the region. First, I argue that he misapplies security dilemma theory to East Asia. Security dilemma theory actually predicts stability in the region, not dangerous spirals. Second, I show that Christensen’s application of security dilemma theory is falsified by evidence from the past fifty years. This evidence confirms my argument that spirals are unlikely in East Asia, despite historical grievances and the issue of Taiwanese sovereignty. The implication of my analysis is that U.S. alliance policies in East Asia need not be hamstrung by fears that the region is primed for conflict. Japan can and should be a full and active member of the alliance that guarantees its security.

SECURITY DILEMMA THEORY AND THE RISK OF SPIRALS IN EAST ASIA

Christensen argues that security dilemma theory predicts that East Asia is prone to spirals of tension (p. 49). The theory posits that an increase in military capability...
inherently increases both a country’s defensive and offensive capabilities. Therefore a state seeking only to boost its own security may threaten its neighbors. Christensen argues that heavy dependence on sea trade in East Asia will encourage states in the region to build power projection forces to protect their economic interests in the sea-lanes. These power projection forces will threaten other East Asian countries, triggering spirals and possibly wars (p. 50).

Christensen is wrong: security dilemma theory predicts stability in East Asia. The theory only predicts dangerous spirals (those leading to major crises or wars) under conditions in which offensive military operations are easy. In East Asia, however, geography and current technology trends make the region highly defense dominant. Water barriers separate Japan, China, and Taiwan (the countries Christensen examines), so an invasion of any of these countries would require an extremely difficult amphibious assault. Furthermore, offensive operations against shipping in the sea-lanes would not be much easier. Because the region is defense dominant, security dilemma theory does not predict dangerous spirals between Japan, China, and Taiwan.

Amphibious invasions have always been extremely difficult offensive operations, and they are increasingly so in this age of long-range detection systems and antiship missiles. Because of long-range detection technologies, attackers are unlikely to achieve surprise. Preparing for an amphibious assault would require massing stockpiles of equipment, hundreds of ships, and tens of thousands of men at port facilities near the target. These preparations would be difficult to conceal from satellites. Moreover, once launched, an amphibious force could be tracked by long-range airborne radars. Not only is surprise increasingly difficult to achieve, but antiship missiles have substantially increased the lethality of air and ground forces against surface ships, making it very dangerous to move naval forces near an enemy’s coast. Even the U.S. Navy, with the most sophisticated naval defense systems in the world, worries about its ability to

4. Security dilemma theory also considers an additional variable: the distinguishability of offensive and defensive forces. See Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” pp. 199–206. If offensive and defensive forces are indistinguishable, the theory predicts that spirals will be intense. Critics have persuasively argued, however, that offensive and defensive military forces are rarely if ever distinguishable. See, for example, John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 24–27. For a summary of these arguments, see Sean M. Lynn-Jones, “Offense-Defense Theory and Its Critics,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Summer 1995), pp. 672–674. Therefore the likelihood of spirals ultimately depends on the relative ease of offensive and defensive operations. When offense is extremely difficult (as it is in East Asia), there is no reason to expect intense spirals, preemptive attacks, or preventive wars.
6. China would have to expect that U.S. satellites would detect preparations for an amphibious assault of Taiwan. Furthermore, Japan and Taiwan have their own aircraft designed to track ships at long range. China is in the process of buying sophisticated airborne radar aircraft.
operate in an antiship missile environment near enemy shores. It is very unlikely that Japan, China, or Taiwan could successfully move an invasion armada to the coast of a determined adversary.

Like amphibious assaults, operations to interdict the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) are inherently difficult. First, severing the SLOCs is hard because there is no single, critical chokepoint through which East Asian sea trade must pass; merchant ships may choose among multiple routes through the region. Analysts often focus on the Strait of Malacca because a high fraction of Asian trade passes through these waters, but vessels could divert to alternate routes. Such routes would lengthen the journey by only a few days and would increase costs by only a small amount. For example, according to one recent study, if tankers traveling from the Persian Gulf to Japan were rerouted from the Strait of Malacca to the Lombok Strait, this would add less than one-half of 1 percent to the price of the oil.

Second, severing the SLOCs would require a large naval force. Maintaining continuous patrols across a vast expanse of ocean would require keeping a large number of ships, submarines, and aircraft on station, plus many more at home to relieve and resupply them. Third, attacks on the sea-lanes are difficult because naval forces are most vulnerable when they operate away from their own shores. In home waters, ships are protected from air or submarine attack by ground-based aircraft and coastal defenses. On the open seas (or worse, near enemy shores), ships would have only their own defenses. Only sophisticated naval forces can mount an effective defense against dedicated air or submarine attacks.

Finally, cutting the SLOCs through East Asia is an extremely difficult offensive operation because the United States is committed to keeping the sea-lanes open and has by far the most powerful navy in the region. Any navy attacking sea trade in East Asia would not only be vulnerable to air attack when it operated close to land; it would be vulnerable at all times to air, surface, and submarine attacks from U.S. Navy carrier battle groups.

In sum, because of pronounced defensive dominance in East Asia, security dilemma theory predicts that states in the region can increase their own security without threatening others. China, Japan, and Taiwan are unlikely to spiral into wars or major crises because amphibious attacks and interdiction of the SLOCs are extremely difficult offensive operations. Good fences make good neighbors and, as security dilemma theory tells us, water barriers encourage stability and peace.

FIFTY YEARS OF DOGS THAT DIDN’T BARK
Christensen may disagree with my theoretical arguments about the security dilemma; however, we have fifty years of evidence with which to test our two interpretations of

8. Ibid., p. 81.
the likelihood of spirals in East Asia. Christensen writes that two factors exacerbate the chance of spirals. First, because of historical memory of Japanese aggression, China fears any expansion in Japanese military activities (p. 51). Second, because China claims sovereignty over Taiwan, increased military capabilities of Taiwan (or Japan, a potential Taiwanese ally) threaten China because they help Taiwan maintain a policy of independence from the mainland (p. 51). If Christensen is right—if spirals are likely in East Asia for these reasons—then his theory predicts that spirals, and possibly wars, should have erupted after (1) substantial increases in Japanese military activities; (2) substantial increases in Japanese military capabilities; and (3) increases in Taiwanese military capabilities. Conversely, my interpretation predicts that because the region is highly defense dominant, increases in Japanese military activities, or increases in Taiwanese or Japanese military capabilities, need not produce spirals, major crises, or war.

For the past fifty years, Japan and Taiwan have made the kind of military moves that Christensen argues will create spirals. Each of these moves is a case that we can use to test Christensen’s hypothesis against mine. Using these cases makes sense for several reasons. First, Christensen worries about spirals in the region even if the United States remains militarily engaged (p. 49), as it has been for the past fifty years. Second, the dispute over the status of Taiwan existed throughout this period. Third, because the Soviet Union acted as a counterweight to U.S. power in Asia during the Cold War, China arguably had more freedom of action then than it does today. Below I compare the predictions of Christensen’s and my hypotheses against empirical evidence since the 1950s.

JAPAN. Evidence from the past half-century does not support the predictions of Christensen’s hypothesis. Neither increases in Japanese military activity or roles, nor increases in Japan’s military capabilities, have led to spirals. Since the 1950s Japan has repeatedly increased its military roles and activities in the U.S.-Japan alliance without triggering spirals with Beijing. During the Korean War, less than a decade after Japan’s occupation of China, Japan aided the United States in a war against the Chinese. In addition to providing rear-area support, Japan conducted minesweeping operations for U.S. forces. Next, Japan’s role in the alliance with the United States expanded with the creation of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in 1954. In 1981 Japan extended its patrol of sea-lanes to 1,000 miles from its coasts. In 1991 Japan sent minesweepers to the Persian Gulf, deploying military personnel overseas for the first time since World War II. In 1992 Japan’s Diet enacted the Peacekeeping Operations Law, permitting Japanese SDF personnel to participate in United Nations peacekeeping activities. In 1996 the United States and Japan issued a communiqué in which Japan’s commitments to support the United States in a Korean war were made concrete. Therefore since the

9. For example, Christensen predicts escalatory spirals if Japan participates in a Taiwan crisis (p. 67). He also argues that China fears new defensive military roles for Japan in the U.S.-Japan alliance, because such roles may erode Japanese antimilitary norms, leading to a more assertive Japanese foreign policy (pp. 51, 56, 58, 62–64, 75). These fears will exacerbate the security dilemma, making spirals more likely between China and Japan (p. 51).
1950s, Japan has repeatedly expanded its military roles and activities in the U.S.-Japan alliance. At such occasions Beijing often voiced protests and expressed fear, but there is no evidence of spirals. Furthermore, if Christensen is right about East Asia, increases in Japanese military capabilities should have triggered spirals, and perhaps wars. Over the past fifty years, Japan has rebuilt its defeated World War II forces into the most powerful East Asian military. But despite repeated Japanese military buildups, no spirals or wars occurred with China. Starting in the late 1970s, Japan procured advanced F-15J fighters, P-3C sea patrol aircraft, and E-2C early-warning aircraft. The 1990s brought another round of substantial increases in Japanese capabilities. Japan’s navy acquired sophisticated Aegis-equipped destroyers and three Osumi-class amphibious assault ships. During this decade Japan procured AWACS early-warning aircraft and recently announced that it would buy in-flight refueling tanker aircraft. In sum, for the past half-century, and particularly in the last decade, Japan repeatedly acquired weapons that it could use to help defend Taiwan. According to Christensen, this should have provoked spirals with China, but none occurred.

Taiwan. Christensen’s hypothesis also predicts that increases in Taiwan’s own military capabilities will lead to spirals with China (p. 51). Like Japan, over the past fifty years Taiwan repeatedly upgraded its military forces. Often such moves provoked furious condemnation from Beijing, but none triggered a dangerous spiral. Taiwan increased its capabilities with arms purchases, first right after the Korean War and again in the late 1950s.10 Taiwan modernized its air force again in the 1970s11 and again in the 1980s with the Indigenous Defense Fighter program. The 1990s have brought a new series of significant increases in Taiwan’s defensive capabilities. In 1992 Taiwan purchased 150 F-16s from the United States and 60 Mirage fighters from France.12 It upgraded its air defense systems and procured sophisticated early-warning aircraft.13


12. In 1981 the Reagan administration decided against selling Taiwan the FX fighter for fear of antagonizing Beijing. Similar arguments were invoked in 1992 against the F-16 sale, but the Bush administration went ahead. China provoked no crisis or war over the sale. After the Mirage sale, China recalled its ambassador from Paris in protest. See Patrick Tyler, A Great Wall: Six Presidents and China: An Investigative History (New York: Century Foundation, 1999), pp. 310–321.

During this decade Taiwan also increased its naval and ground capabilities. Therefore over the past fifty years, and particularly in the past decade, Taiwan has repeatedly upgraded its defense forces. If Christensen’s hypothesis were correct, these moves should have created spirals leading to a series of major crises and wars between China and Taiwan. Once again, the evidence does not support his hypothesis.

EAST ASIA: PRIMED FOR PEACE OR RIPE FOR RIVALRY?

Christensen argues that in the interest of regional stability, the United States should avoid codeveloping TMD with Japan because this may be provocative toward China. He worries that historical tensions and Chinese fears of Taiwanese independence make East Asia prone to spirals and conflict. But spirals are unlikely in the region because defense is highly dominant. Not surprisingly, fifty years of arming Japan and Taiwan, and expanding Japanese military roles, have not triggered spirals or wars. Such actions often trigger condemnation from Beijing. If tirades are the kind of regional instability Christensen fears, then he is right. But history shows that Chinese bombast does not harm East Asian, or U.S., security.

—Jennifer M. Lind
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The Author Replies:

Jennifer Lind’s thoughtful critique of my article makes several interesting theoretical and historical arguments for East Asian stability that warrant response. On some of her points, I fully agree. For the purpose of this exercise, however, I concentrate on the following points of difference: where I think she does not fully understand my views on security dilemma theory expressed in the article (in some cases this may be my fault, and I welcome the opportunity to clarify); our assessments over current challenges


15. At most, one crisis (1954–55) resulted from Taiwanese steps to increase its defensibility. Interestingly, the crisis was not caused by a Taiwanese arms purchase but apparently by Taiwan’s signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States. Despite all of the occasions on which Taiwan improved its defensive capabilities, this is the only one that produced a crisis. No serious spiral ensued.

16. Similarly, in a recent case, Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui’s breezy abandonment of the “one China” policy in July 1999 passed with much sound and fury but no violence from Beijing.

stability in the region; and our interpretations of history and its meaning for contemporary affairs.

Lind oversimplifies my argument when she states that I believe East Asia is necessarily “primed for conflict.” Instead, I argue that it would be so in the absence of the traditional deterrence and reassurance role played by the United States. Even if the United States were able to maintain that role for no more than ten to fifteen years, I argue, this would make a major contribution to long-term stability because regional actors might have time to complete domestic transitions, solve current economic difficulties, and build on nascent security regimes. Also, I do not subscribe to the view that security dilemmas cause conflict by themselves. Instead, I believe that they fuel tensions and make other disputes harder to manage. This is why I mention the nonrealist variables above and why I point out that East Asia is full of potential flash points, especially in the absence of a U.S. role as referee. These flash points include widespread island sovereignty disputes, potential struggles over natural resources and sea-lanes near those disputed islands, and the Taiwan question. Finally, although I subscribe to a version of security dilemma theory, I do not believe that actors’ fears are the only forces for instability in the region. This is why, despite Beijing’s concerns, in the article I support almost all aspects of recent U.S.-Japan alliance strengthening, including the refusal to exclude Taiwan from the alliance’s geographic scope. These measures shore up the alliance, facilitate U.S. power projection, and deter regional aggression. But I argue that the United States should not allow itself to become overly dependent on Japanese military assistance, particularly near Taiwan. I am not sure how this flexible strategy leaves the United States “hamstrung,” as Lind suggests.

This more conditional take on security dilemma dynamics shapes my views on U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, a topic not discussed in any detail in the article but highlighted by Lind. As I argue elsewhere, Washington should weigh the military value of any weapon transfer to Taiwan against the political costs of exacerbating tensions with Beijing. Arms transfers that enhance overall stability include those that allow Taiwan to survive a mainland fait accompli attack and thereby allow time for the United States to respond if it so chooses. Destabilizing transfers are those that might give Taipei the false impression that cross-strait war would carry low costs either because Taiwan appears invulnerable to coercion or because the transfers imply an unconditional U.S. commitment to Taiwan’s defense. Taipei’s overconfidence could encourage adventurist diplomacy and could drag the United States into an otherwise avoidable war. Moreover, fears that Taiwan is growing confident could accelerate mainland buildups and make Beijing impatient about “solving” the Taiwan question before it becomes more intractable. Especially because it would carry important political meaning about future U.S.-Taiwan defense ties in peacetime, I believe that a current decision to include Taipei as an active participant in a future regional upper-tier theater missile defense (TMD) system would be destabilizing.2

Given mainland acquisitions of advanced Russian fighters, Taiwan’s F-16s are useful for maintaining air superiority, a capability critical to deterring or countering a fait
accomplished by the People’s Republic of China (PRC). On balance, therefore, the 1992 U.S. decision to transfer 150 F-16s seems a wise one. But it was hardly cost free, as Lind argues. The transfers, which did not begin until April 1997, contravened the 1982 U.S.-PRC political understanding regarding arms sales to Taiwan. The Bush administration’s decision came one year after Taiwan began deconstructing its traditional “one China” policy by revising the Unification Guidelines. The F-16 decision and the restoration of high-level contacts between Washington and Taipei in the early 1990s set a baseline of suspicion that made Beijing all the more worried about President Lee Teng-hui’s 1995 U.S. visit. The resulting missile crisis fueled an arms competition across the Taiwan Strait, increased Japan’s concerns about China (and vice versa), hardened attitudes in Taipei and Beijing about cross-strait dialogue, and increased American enthusiasm for upgrading defense relations with Taiwan. Since the crisis the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has increased its capacity to strike Taiwan with ballistic missiles; the PLA Air Force has called for a more offensive doctrine; and Taiwan’s vice president and presidential candidate, Lien Chan, has called for the development of Taiwan’s own offensive missiles.3 Lind dismisses all of these events, including the 1995–96 crisis, as mere “tirade.” I consider them destabilizing.

Applying a similar cost-benefit calculation to U.S.-Japan codevelopment of upper-tier TMD, I find the policy ill-advised. Costs include added difficulties in managing the alliance’s relationship with China and the potential that Washington might be tempted to ask for active Japanese military participation in a future Taiwan crisis. I did oppose the initial U.S. push for codevelopment of upper-tier TMD with Japan, but I do not argue that the United States should now snub Japan and unilaterally “limit” its role, as Lind suggests I do. This would be too damaging to the alliance. Instead, I argue that the United States and Japan together should be willing to reconsider Japanese participation in the program in exchange for tangible cooperation from China on the issues that finally convinced Tokyo to participate after five years of U.S. pressure: North Korean ballistic missile development and Chinese missile buildups. I am not particularly sanguine about this occurring, but the potential benefits that the allies would sacrifice in such a deal would not be great because the United States would still pursue upper-tier TMD and then deploy TMD ships to Japan. Lind offers no reasons why Japan should need its own upper-tier missile defense systems, especially mobile ones that can travel to Taiwan. Nor does she address my discussion of how future Japanese dependence on U.S. upper-tier systems might shore up the alliance better than codevelopment of TMD would. If, as Lind argues, Japan and its sea-lanes are safe, then why is it a good idea for Japan to pursue its own mobile upper-tier systems?

Lind does argue convincingly that the seas separating the major regional actors make amphibious invasion difficult. I agree. But I argue in the article that the traditionally narrow focus in security dilemma theory on homeland invasion and territorial conquest does not capture the potential spiral dynamics in the region, particularly as they relate

to Taiwan. Lind does not mention the many offshore island sovereignty disputes that affect the foreign relations of all of the important regional actors and that are often complicated by natural resource issues. Her alternatives to the Strait of Malacca for Mideast oil are compelling, but this does not address intraregional trade, which may be harder to divert and which can be threatened coincidentally during conflicts over sovereignty disputes. I will not try to counter her argument about the ease of protecting sea lines of communication point by point, but will make the following observations. Regional actors are not as sanguine as Lind about the ease of sea-lane protection. They remain grateful for U.S. power projection capabilities and U.S. neutrality on nearly all sovereignty disputes near the sea-lanes that the United States protects. In fact, Lind acknowledges the U.S. Navy’s role in assuring freedom of the seas. Of course, I fully agree. The issue is whether or not local powers can manage the problem themselves without creating mutual tensions in the process.

In her treatment of history, Lind claims that U.S. defense cooperation with Taiwan and Japan did not increase tensions with Beijing during the Cold War. She then draws lessons from this for the post–Cold War world. The first part of her argument is wrong, and the second part draws overly loose analogies across quite different periods. One of the most obvious differences, perhaps, is that until recently China was generally too economically backward to respond directly to many Japanese and Taiwanese defense advances with destabilizing military programs of its own. That is unlikely to remain true for long. Since the mid-1990s China has increased its weapons procurement budgets significantly and continues to pursue weapons systems of concern to Taiwan and Japan, including advanced fighters, accurate ballistic missiles, MIRV technology, AWACs, aerial refueling, antiship missiles, and land attack cruise missiles.

This is not to concede Lind’s point that China’s response to past U.S. military cooperation with Taiwan and Japan was limited to “tirades.” In 1949–50 overblown Chinese fears about Japan’s remilitarization and U.S. support for Taiwan helped cement the Sino-Soviet alliance and were critical in Mao’s decision to attack U.S. forces in Korea. U.S. strengthening of its regional alliance portfolio is widely viewed, even by Lind, as the reason why the PRC attacked the offshore islands in 1954. This assault sparked a major crisis that, in turn, spawned the Chinese nuclear weapons program. On balance, these U.S. policies may have been wise, but they were costly. 5


Moreover, the Taiwan problem is fundamentally different now than it was during the Cold War. In the 1950s and 1960s, the PRC needed to defend itself against attack from Taiwan. Given U.S. intentions and Taiwan’s capabilities, this was not all that difficult. Defensive weapons in Taiwan’s hands were not as provocative then as they are now, and in general the United States restricted transfers to defensive weapons. One exception was the U.S. decision to transfer nuclear-capable Matador missiles in 1957; another major crisis followed the next year. Now China needs to dissuade Taiwan from declaring constitutional independence, an issue precluded earlier by Chiang Kai-shek’s and Chiang Ching-kuo’s strict devotion to the “one China” principle. Defensive weapons, particularly those like TMD that might make Taiwan feel safe from coercion, have taken on new meaning in the past few years because China fears Taiwanese independence. Moreover, for reasons Lind cites, U.S. assistance to counter a mainland attack on an independent Taiwan is much more feasible than earlier U.S. assistance to Taiwanese irredentism would have been.

Lind’s discussion of Japanese buildups and doctrinal shifts in the second half of the Cold War is particularly relevant for my article because those changes were not simply a matter of weapons procurement, as in her Taiwan cases, but of Japan’s more fundamental role in the alliance. This case, however, still provides a poor analogy for the post–Cold War world. The Soviet Union was uniquely gifted at creating large counterbalancing coalitions that included strange bedfellows. I do not see how Lind draws the conclusion that the existence of the Soviet Union, which had thirty-five to fifty Soviet divisions on the Chinese border, gave China “freedom of action” to take on Japan and Taiwan. It is a testimony to Chinese mistrust of Japan that, despite Sino-Soviet discord and even armed conflict, Chinese fear of Japanese remilitarization actually intensified from 1969 to 1971, as the 1969 Nixon Doctrine suggested a bigger role for Japan in the alliance and the Nixon-Sato communiqué suggested possible Japanese involvement in Taiwan scenarios. Chinese fears about the U.S. role in Japan became a major sticking point in the 1971–72 Sino-American rapprochement. The Nixon administration was able to turn Chinese fears to U.S. advantage by outlining alternative scenarios for Japan even more frightening to China than maintenance of the U.S.-Japan alliance and a degree of Japanese remilitarization. Another major difference with today is that Beijing’s concerns over Taiwan were lessening during the period of U.S.-PRC rapprochement and Japan-PRC normalization. In the 1970s Tokyo and the United States downgraded relations with Taipei and, in 1982 the United States promised to limit arms sales to Taiwan.

6. In fairness to Lind, I should state that I disagree with the conventional wisdom on the relative importance of the Matador transfers. For discussion, see Christensen, Useful Adversaries, chap. 6.
The post–Cold War world is different from those earlier periods on almost every key score. China’s capacity to purchase, build, and deploy potentially destabilizing weapons systems is growing and, barring severe economic downturns, is likely to continue to grow. With the collapse of the common Soviet enemy, the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis, and the Nye Initiative, China no longer views the U.S.-Japan alliance with such equanimity. Finally, the Taiwan problem is becoming more nettlesome just as Washington seems to observers in Beijing to be ramping up its diplomatic contacts and military cooperation with Taipei. And all of this is occurring in the context of a Taiwan leadership that is viewed in Beijing as walking step-by-step toward independence. I disagree with Lind that this is a particularly stable situation, although I do think it is still manageable if the United States is careful in how it handles the balance between deterrence and reassurance in its relations with Taipei, Tokyo, and Beijing.

—Thomas J. Christensen
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