

# the japan times

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## Japan finds ally in Taiwan's president-elect

### Focus

JESSE JOHNSON  
STAFF WRITER

Japan will find a like-minded ally in Taiwan President-elect Lai Ching-te, who hopes to build even stronger ties with Tokyo as both look warily at China's designs on the self-ruled island.

Lai described his win in Saturday's election as a "victory for the community of democracies," and signaled that his administration would look to deepen cooperation with Japan by meeting with Tokyo's de facto ambassador and a Japanese lawmaker just a day after the poll in Taipei.

Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association chief Mitsuo Ohashi held talks with Lai and his running mate, Hsiao Bi-khim, Taiwan's former top envoy to the United States, at the headquarters of Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party, with the president-elect noting that the neighbors are both "concerned about regional peace and stability," the DPP said.

China claims Taiwan as a renegade province that must be united with the mainland, by force if necessary. This policy has triggered concerns of a possible invasion by China, despite U.S. President Joe Biden hinting that the United States would help Taiwan militarily in the event of a conflict.

Lai on Monday told a visiting delegation of former top U.S. officials that he hoped the United States could continue to support Taiwan.

"I am grateful for the strong support from the United States for Taiwan's democracy, which demonstrates the close and solid partnership between Taiwan and the United States," local media quoted Lai as saying.

The election of Lai, who Beijing has called a "worker for Taiwan independence and destroyer of peace across the Taiwan Strait," has stoked fears that tensions could surge to even higher levels.

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On Monday, China lured away one of the handful of countries that formally recognize Taiwan, poaching the Pacific Island nation of Nauru, which said it would sever ties with Taipei. The move leaves Taiwan with just 12 diplomatic allies.

But unlike Nauru, Taipei's relationship with Tokyo is likely to grow under Lai, who has said that Chinese military exercises in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and elsewhere have shown that both Japan and Taiwan "directly face China's threats."

"If Taiwan is invaded by China and the Taiwan Strait becomes an inland sea of China's, that would inevitably also pose a threat to Japan," he said in an interview with the Yomiuri Shimbun last October, hinting that he expected Japan would deepen security cooperation with Taiwan.

Tokyo views any conflict over the democratic island as an existential threat, and has beefed up defense spending and dispatched Self-Defense Force personnel and weapons to its far-flung southwestern islands near Taiwan while bolstering its military alliance with the U.S.

At the same time, Japan has repeatedly "stressed the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" and urged "a peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues"—a stance reiterated Monday by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi.

"Taiwan is an extremely important partner for Japan, with whom we share fundamental values and close economic and personal relationships," Hayashi told a news conference. "As an important friend, the government intends to further deepen cooperation and exchanges between Japan and Taiwan" in a nongovernmental format.

Hayashi's remarks came after Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa on Saturday congratulated Lai on his victory, a move that prompted the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo to express "strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition" to the message, which it said

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KANAZAWA, ISHIKAWA PREF.  
KYODO, JIJI

The government will step up its efforts to rebuild the lives of those affected by the New Year's Day earthquake that struck the Noto Peninsula by using an additional ¥100 billion from reserve funds from the fiscal 2023 budget within this month.

The use of additional funds for an emergency aid package that will be unveiled soon was announced Sunday by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida as he visited areas devastated by the quake that hit Ishikawa Prefecture and surrounding areas.

The emergency package will consist of measures such as temporary housing for those affected and the rebuilding of infrastructure damaged by the magnitude 7.6 quake.

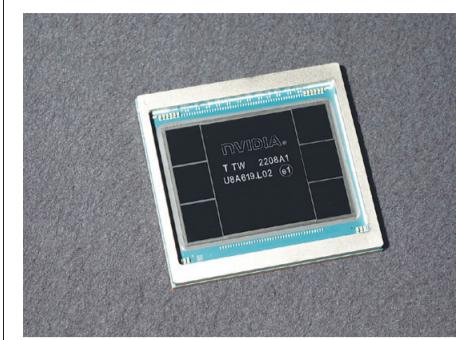
The package will also include steps to process disaster waste and help rebuild sectors such as farming, fishing and tourism.

Kishida said the government will shortly designate the Jan. 1 earthquake as an extraordinary disaster under the large-scale disaster reconstruction law.



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## COVID-19 four years after Japan's first case

TOMOKO OTAKE  
STAFF WRITER

On Jan. 15, 2020, a male resident of Kanagawa Prefecture in his 30s who had returned from a trip to the city of Wuhan, China, was found to be infected with the coronavirus, becoming the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Japan.

This marked the beginning of Japan's four-year battle with the viral disease, which had killed over 95,000 people in the country as of last summer and is confirmed to have infected at least 33 million, though given the number of untested cases, the actual figures are very likely to be much higher.

Four years later, the nation has returned to its pre-COVID norm on most levels. Businesses have bounced back, international tourism has returned and people are enjoying life without masks in most situations, with hand sanitizers at storefronts being one of the few remnants of the pandemic habits the nation adopted.

Through numerous waves of infections and the government-sponsored vaccination program, most people in Japan have acquired some level of immunity against the disease. According to a test of 2,561 blood samples collected from Nov. 25 through Dec. 4 in 22 prefectures, 56.3% of Japan's population was estimated to have N antibodies, a sign they have contracted the disease, while 95.7% possessed S antibodies, suggesting that they were protected by COVID-19 vaccines.

But experts warn against people letting their guard down completely, especially the elderly and those with pre-existing conditions, for whom COVID-19 still carries the risk of causing severe symptoms.

As with many countries, 2023 was the year Japan entered a post-pandemic phase, reclassifying COVID-19 in May from a level similar to Class 2, which is reserved for severe infectious diseases such as SARS and tuberculosis, to Class 5, which is on par with the seasonal flu.

Japan's transition came in stages. Nationwide mask guidance was eased in March of last year, after which decisions on masking were largely left up to individuals. Another big change was the scrapping of all border restrictions in April, after which people

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The construction of temporary housing units begins in Noto, Ishikawa Prefecture, on Monday. KYODO

## ¥100B from reserves pinned for relief

The designation will allow the central government to carry out work on behalf of local governments in disaster areas to restore bridges, roads as well as river and port infrastructure.

"We are determined to do all we can for the affected areas and people," Kishida told reporters at the Ishikawa Prefectural Government office after receiving a 15-point written request, including for financial aid, from Ishikawa Gov. Hiroshi Hase.

Construction of temporary housing units began Monday in the towns of Anamizu and Noto, following the start of construction in the hardest-hit cities of Wajima and Suzu on Friday.

Last week, Kishida's Cabinet agreed to use ¥4.74 billion from reserve funds under the budget for the fiscal year that runs through March to help finance relief measures, including those that help affected residents better cope with the cold weather in the region.

The death toll from the disaster was 222 as of Monday, including 14 that were counted as deaths related to the quake. The number of people who remain unaccounted for stood at 22.

Meanwhile, about 19,000 people were staying in 389 evacuation centers, including those set up in schools. Water supplies have not been restored to about 55,500 households.

With roads, the water supply and other infrastructure needing more time for repairs, Kishida urged local governments to swiftly move people at evacuation centers to better facilities.

In Wajima, a mass evacuation plan is under way for junior high school students who wish to join.

So far, parents of about 250 students out of 400 students in the city have agreed to the plan, under which students will be moved to two lodging facilities in the city of Hakusan, about 100 kilometers south of Wajima, in Ishikawa Prefecture. They are scheduled to leave on Wednesday to stay in the facilities for up to two months without being accompanied by their parents, with teachers looking after them, city officials said.

The municipal governments of Suzu and Noto are also considering mass evacuations of junior high school students.

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## Fierce fighting in Gaza on 100th day of war

NIDAL AL-MUGHRABI AND FADI SHANA  
DOHA/GAZA CITY, GAZA STRIP  
REUTERS



killed," blaming their fate on Israel.

Hamas showed it retained rocketry capacity, launching a fresh salvo on Sunday at Ashdod, an Israeli town 40 kilometers away. There was no word of any casualties. Abu Ubaida said the group had been told by several parties in the resistance fronts that they would expand their strikes on the Israeli enemy in the coming days.

The Israeli military said it had destroyed

several silos used by Hamas to fire missiles at Israel.

Over the past 24 hours, the Gaza health ministry said 125 people had been killed and 265 wounded, bringing the total number confirmed to have been killed since the start of the war to almost 24,000, with more than 60,000 wounded.

Israel's military said it had killed around 9,000 Palestinian fighters, and lost 189 soldiers, in the Gaza war so far.

Speaking through video livestream to a conference in Istanbul, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh praised the Oct. 7 attack by the group's fighters, who rampaged through Israeli communities around the Gaza Strip killing more than 1,200 people and seizing around 240 hostages, according to Israeli tallies. "We are not seekers of wars. We are seekers of freedom," he said, saying the attack was, in part, a response to the blockade Israel and neighboring Egypt placed on the Gaza Strip after Hamas seized control of the territory in 2007. The Iranian-backed group is sworn to Israel's destruction.

The Israeli military says it has shifted to a

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