Small Islands, Big Potential: A Taiwan Contingency, Alliance Politics, and the Defence of Remote Islands with Large Stakes (Takuya Matsuda/ Elliot Ji)

Debates over great power competition in the western Pacific have largely been shaped by the question over a Taiwan contingency. Nevertheless, the scholarly work on the topic has rarely focused on the strategic and operational roles that some of the Japanese administered islands in the vicinity of Taiwan. We argue that the group of Japanese islands that are adjacent to Taiwan–namely the Sakishima Islands–are strategically important assets since they are both enablers of deterrence against a Chinese invasion of Taiwan and potential vulnerabilities that China could leverage for a wedge strategy. Taking the opposite side of the main island of Okinawa across the 155-mile-wide Miyako Strait, the Sakishima Islands are part of Japan's southwest island chain that stretches towards Taiwan. Drawing from a series of Chinese, Japanese, and military-technical sources, we demonstrate that patrolling and fortifying these islands as anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) outposts could strengthen deterrence against hostile Chinese action on two levels. First, fortifying this group of small and vulnerable islands is crucial in denying China the opportunity to engage in a salami tactic to test the strength of the U.S.-Japan alliance through a *fait accompli.* Second, arming the group of small islands as A2/AD outposts could complicate Chinese operational planning for a blockade against Taiwan by directly threatening Chinese naval assets operating east of Taiwan. By doing so, the small islands not only closes a potential vulnerability of Chinese coercion but also plays a key role in checking Chinese maritime aggression. Our findings generate broad scholarly and policy implications in addressing strategic challenges in an age of great power competition, some of which are also of direct relevance to European security regarding deterrence in contested spaces, alliance politics, and escalation control.