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The Changing Power Dynamics of the East Asian Region? The Escalating China–Japan Relations³

Although Sanae Takaichi's identity and demeanour were known, one of her speeches caused serious tension in Sino–Japanese relations, leading to a rapid escalation of the relationship between the two sides. This was followed by economic measures, initially predictable ones like stopping Chinese tourists, or symbolic solutions like bringing pandas back from Tokyo Zoo. The study presents the background of the relationship, the escalation, and the expected future steps.

Keywords: Japan, People's Republic of China, foreign policy, Sanae Takaichi, China–Japan relations

Introduction

In November 2025, following a speech by newly elected Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, China–Japan relations rapidly escalated and reached a decades-long low. The economic turnaround of states that have deepened their economic ties in recent times might seem unexpected from an economic perspective, but it was a predictable consequence regarding the development of regional relations – the extremely rapid course of events illustrates this. The escalation started with diplomatic and communication tools, followed by commercial-economic pressure – but for now, it is in a more predictable course. While the likelihood of a military conflict between the two actors is relatively low, the resolution of the confrontation is hindered by heated nationalist sentiments on both sides. The paper presents the background and causes of the escalation, as well as the context of regional-global geopolitics.

The historical pattern of China–Japan relations

The relationship between the two sides has never been considered balanced: ties were frozen for decades following the Japanese occupation and World War II, but they pragmatically developed in parallel, not independently of each other, along with the establishment of trade relations and global processes. Tensions between the sides persist today due to, on the one hand, differing interpretations of past events, and on the other hand, competition between the two states regarding regional aspirations. A certain

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opposition can also be observed at the global level, where actors are rivals, for example, in terms of development policies.⁴ The China–Japan rivalry can be traced back to the late 19th century, to the First Sino–Japanese War, when Japan acquired Taiwan from imperial China and gained influence over Korea. The conflict between the two sides was further deepened by the Second Sino–Japanese War, during which Japan not only occupied part of China but also committed mass atrocities against the Chinese population, leaving China behind only after its surrender in World War II. Southeast Asia faced similar oppression during World War II while Japan was working to establish the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.⁵

The true normalisation of relations began in the 1970s, when, following international developments and seeing the American rapprochement as well, Japan officially recognised the People’s Republic of China – opening a new chapter in the history of the two countries. This easing was due to global political changes and the end of China’s isolation, but it was also linked to the economic opening that began in the 1980s. In the 2000s, the opportunities offered by the Chinese economy were attractive to the Japanese economy and companies as well, and in the late 2010s, changes in American foreign policy, but in a broader context, global processes, made rapprochement possible.

During these periods, the parties also signed four strategic documents that still define China–Japan relations today. These documents are also important because the Chinese side is citing their violation and/or consideration in the current standoff:

- The 1972 Joint Communique, which recognised the People’s Republic of China⁶
- The 1978 Japan–China Treaty of Peace and Friendship⁷ institutionalised relations between the two countries.⁸ This document was based on the principles of peaceful cooperation, mutual non-aggression, and non-interference, and the move strengthened the doctrine of then Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda, which stated that Japan did not wish to be a military power and did not intend to defend its interests with military means, but rather sought to define itself as an economic and cooperative power in the region
- The 1998 Joint Declaration, which primarily aimed to improve bilateral relations between the two countries⁹

⁴ Goreczky, Péter: *Versengés és együttműködés: Kína és Japán gazdasági kapcsolatai*. [Competition and Cooperation: Economic Relations Between China and Japan]. [online], *KKI Elemzések*, 2018/4. Source: hia.hu [21.10.2025]; Tarrósy, István (2019): A kínai „Övezet és Út Kezdeményezés” és Kelet-Afrika: geopolitikai térnyerés, infrastruktúra, függőség [China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” and East Africa: Geopolitical Expansion, Infrastructure, Dependence]. *Területi Statisztika*, 59(6), 669–692.

⁵ Lévai, Dániel (2023): *Roosevelt és Truman: a második világháborús amerikai külpolitikai tervezés és valóság Kelet-Ázsia kontextusában* [Roosevelt and Truman: American Foreign Policy Planning and Reality in the Context of East Asia During World War II]. *Külggyi Szemle*, 22(4) 7–27.

⁶ *Joint Communique of the Government of Japan and the Government of the People’s Republic of China*. [online], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 29.02.1972. Source: mofa.go.jp [21.10.2025].

⁷ *Japan and China – Treaty of Peace and Friendship*. [online], United Nations, 12.08.1978. Source: treaties.un.org [21.10.2025].

⁸ United Nations 1978.

⁹ *Japan-China Joint Declaration On Building a Partnership of Friendship and Cooperation for Peace and Development*. [online], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 26.11.1998. Source: mofa.go.jp [21.10.2025].

- The 2008 Joint Statement, which addressed cooperation opportunities regarding common challenges existing at the regional level (e.g. climate change)¹⁰

In addition to the documents, it's worth highlighting the discussions on strengthening and deepening economic relations, which are taking place at the regional level. Since 2012, we can talk about the potential establishment of a planned free trade agreement, the China-Japan-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (CJSKFTA)¹¹ – the discussions stalled early on, but in March 2025, at their latest trilateral meeting, which was prompted by uncertainty created by U.S. trade policy, the parties agreed to continue joint thinking. Here, the states issued a joint declaration in support of regional and global trade.¹²

The U.S. tariff policy is concerning for all three countries: China is a key target of U.S. policy, Japan has faced tariffs of 25% and then 15%,¹³ and in the case of South Korea, not only tariffs but also problems with U.S.–South Korean investments have generated tension¹⁴ – cooperation could therefore be logical for maintaining economic and trade relations, as these countries are also key trading partners with each other. This is also evidenced by the latest trade data published in October 2025, which show that Japan's exports increased by 4.2% in September compared to the previous year, as strong shipments to Asia offset the decline in exports to the United States. Japan's exports to Asia jumped 9.2% compared to the same period last year, and while exports to the United States decreased by 13.3%, exports to China increased by 5.8%.¹⁵

Alongside periods of rapprochement, tensions related to the past also periodically intensified, such as in the 1980s, primarily due to nationalist-toned educational reforms¹⁶ and visits to the Yasukuni Shrine.¹⁷ These visits became regular during the term of Junichiro Koizumi (2001–2006). During this period, the duality of relations between the two countries was also evident. While nationalist tensions increased and the two countries suspended mutual state visits between 2002 and 2006,¹⁸ economic ties deepened and numerous Japanese companies invested in China due to its pragmatic and open economic policy. The early 2010s were also a tense period. Tensions flared up again

¹⁰ *China-Japan Joint Statement on All-round Promotion of Strategic Relationship of Mutual Benefit*. [online], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 22.05.2008. Source: mfa.gov.cn [21.10.2025].

¹¹ Chiang, Min-Hua (2013): *The Potential of China-Japan-South Korea Free Trade Agreement*. *East Asia*, 30(3), 199–216.

¹² *South Korea, China, Japan Agree to Promote Regional Trade as Trump Tariffs Loom*. [online], Reuters, 30.03.2025. Source: reuters.com [21.10.2025].

¹³ Bharade, Aditi: *Japan's Tariff Negotiator Says the US's Reciprocal Tariffs will be Lowered by Next Week*. [online], Business Insider, 09.09.2025. Source: africa.businessinsider.com [21.10.2025].

¹⁴ NG, Kelly – Lee, Hosu: *Firms Will Hesitate to Invest in US after Raid – S Korea President*. [online], BBC, 11.09.2025. Source: bbc.com [2025.10.21].

¹⁵ Kageyama, Yuri: *Japan's Exports and Imports Grow in September Despite Trump's Tariffs*. [online], AP News, 22.10.2025. Source: apnews.com [22.10.2025].

¹⁶ For example, under Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's leadership, a nationalist approach was taken to soften the language regarding Japanese aggression during World War II by rewriting textbooks. Selden, Mark – Nozaki, Yoshiko: *Japanese Textbook Controversies, Nationalism, and Historical Memory: Intra- and Inter-national Conflicts*. [online], *Asia-Pacific Journal – Japan Focus*, 7(24), 15.06.2009. Source: apjif.org [21.10.2025].

¹⁷ The Yasukuni Shrine is a controversial Tokyo shrine established by Japan to commemorate Japanese soldiers who died since 1853, and it also honours World War II war criminals. *Yasukuni Shrine*. [online], Britannica. Source: britannica.com [21.10.2025].

¹⁸ He, Yinan (2013): *40 Years in Paradox: Post-Normalisation Sino-Japanese Relations*. *China Perspectives*, (4), 7–16.

alongside Japan's already chaotic domestic politics, and the territorial dispute between the two countries in the East China Sea escalated: in 2010 and 2011, the Japanese Coast Guard detained several Chinese fishermen,¹⁹ and then in September 2012, the Japanese government nationalised the Minami-Kojima, Kita-Kojima, and Uotsuri Islands located in the disputed area, purchasing them from their owner.²⁰ The political instability was not helped by the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, and relations reached a new low.

It can be said that the relationship between the two countries, overshadowed by historical events, is clearly defined by trade and economic interests. "The two economies are highly complementary, their differing industrial and technological capabilities generate trade and investment opportunities for each other"²¹ but the competition for influence in regional and global processes has also created rivalry between the parties, which is further exacerbated by territorial disputes in the East China Sea.

Rivalry is also reinforced by institutional-alliance systems, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialog (QUAD), whose official aim is not to counter China, but in Beijing, the cooperation was definitely interpreted in this way.²²

In summary, it can be said that the relationship between the two sides has alternated between periods of rapprochement and estrangement depending on global political and economic conditions, largely based on U.S. foreign policy considerations – alongside historical grievances and nationalist aspirations that have always been in the background. In the case of Japan and China, we must discuss two major economic players, overlapping regional and global strategic interests, and an uneasy past that defines all these relationships – a past that the changing world order²³ could even reinterpret, as evidenced by some rapprochement between Japan and China within the framework of a trilateral China–Japan–South Korea meeting, at least in light of U.S. foreign policy.²⁴

Sanae Takaichi – The return of Shinzō Abe?

On 21 October 2025, the Japanese parliament elected Sanae Takaichi by a simple majority, with 237 votes in the House of Representatives and 125 votes in the House of Councillors, making her the country's first female prime minister who will have to address the challenges facing the East Asian nation in a transforming international environment. Following the resignation of former Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba in September 2024, the question of the country's leader came up again, and Takaichi, who had been elected leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) shortly before, was given the mandate. Sanae Takaichi is

¹⁹ Wakatsuki, Yoko: *Japan Arrests Chinese Fisherman After 7-Hour Chase*. [online], CNN, 20.12.2011. Source: edition. cnn.com [21.10.2025].

²⁰ *Japan Government 'Reaches Deal to Buy' Disputed Islands*. [online], BBC, 05.09.2012. Source: bbc.com [21.10.2025].

²¹ Goreczky 2018: 7.

²² Csicsmann, László – Trembeczki, Zsolt (2025): India Nyugat-ellenes fordulata? Az amerikai–indiai kapcsolatok és a többirányú elköteleződés politikája. [India's Turn Against the West? The American-Indian relations and the policy of multi-directional commitment] *MKI-elemzés*, (10).

²³ See Vörös, Zoltán – Tarrósy, István ed. (2024): *Átalakuló világrend. Az unipoláris pillanat vége?* [A Changing World Order. The End of the Unipolar Moment?]. Budapest: Ludovika.

²⁴ Reuters 2025.

not an unknown figure in Japanese domestic politics, yet her appointment as prime minister is somewhat surprising in a conservative, patriarchal society. Takaichi is a strongly nationalist, sometimes considered assertive in security policy, ultra-conservative politician – but this latter characteristic should be understood in the context of Japanese, not international, circumstances: that is, security is her priority, she is critical of China, she values U.S.–Japan relations, and it also means she believes in state intervention and is quite generous in providing social welfare programmes.²⁵ In addition to all of this, she is conservative regarding same-sex marriage, the recognition of spouses having separate surnames, and female inheritance within the imperial house. She has spoken out several times on topics considered taboo in Japan, such as the war or migration,²⁶ but based on her past work and life, we can expect a continuation of Abe's policies and *Abenomics* from her. This means that amending Article 9 of the Constitution will likely remain a topic, and it seems her already critical stance toward China will be evident in her approach to Taiwan as well.

Will Takaichi's presidency truly copy Abe's? What can we expect from the next period? Why was Abe so significant in Japanese domestic and foreign policy?

Shinzō Abe, who served as prime minister twice, left a lasting legacy on Japanese politics, characterised by his economic reforms known as *Abenomics* in domestic policy, his recognition of the threat posed by China in foreign policy, and his emphasis on freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region. In addition to all of this, his role is also prominent because he was both a conservative nationalist and, in some respects, an advocate for change and modernisation – for example, by increasing women's participation in the labour market, addressing deep-seated dilemmas within Japanese society.

His first term was short; he resigned in 2007 after being elected in 2006 due to health reasons. However, he publicly acknowledged that relations with China needed to be improved and sought to organise a possible summit with Hu Jintao, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and President of China. The meeting took place in October 2006 following a Chinese invitation, and the parties emphasised a return to normalising relations.²⁷ After a period of absence and a chaotic period in Japanese domestic politics that saw five prime ministers come and go, he returned in 2012 and served as the country's (longest-reigning) prime minister until 2020, when he resigned again.

Abe's China policy in his second term was replaced by value-based diplomacy that is more critical of China. One of the reasons for the change was that while the Chinese economy was a quarter the size of Japan's in 2000, by 2010, its East Asian neighbour had surpassed the island nation's economy. The day after his second appointment, he published an article on Project Syndicate advocating for cooperation between four democratic states – Australia, Japan, India, and the United States – with the goal of free

²⁵ Hale, Erin: *Who is Sanae Takaichi, Japan's 'Iron Lady' and First Female Prime Minister?* [online], Al Jazeera, 21.10.2025. Source: [aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com) [21.10.2025].

²⁶ Muzaffar, Maroosha: *Who is Japan's First Female Prime Minister? Sanae Takaichi in her Own Words.* [online], Independent, 22.10.2025. Source: [independent.co.uk](https://www.independent.co.uk) [22.10.2025].

²⁷ *Japan-China Joint Press Statement.* [online], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 08.10.2006. Source: [mofa.go.jp](https://www.mofa.go.jp) [21.10.2025].

navigation in the Indo-Pacific region.²⁸ One of Abe's first steps was to strengthen Japan's defence policy. In 2013, he adopted the country's first National Security Strategy and established the National Security Council based on the American model. Furthermore, in July 2014, Abe approved²⁹ a reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution.³⁰ This new interpretation allows Japan to exercise the right of "collective self-defence" in certain cases and take military action if one of its allies is attacked. In September 2015, the Japanese Diet officially adopted the reinterpretation by passing a series of laws that allow the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to provide material support to allies participating in international conflicts.

Abe didn't stop at reinterpreting the Constitution; the Three Principles on Arms Exports Ban,³¹ adopted in 1967, were replaced by the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, officially allowing the sale of weapons and self-defence equipment to "like-minded" countries and allies.³²

The Japanese steps were not only generated by China, but the directions of Chinese foreign policy played a prominent role in all of this. Indeed, Chinese foreign policy has become more assertive in Southeast Asia, engaging in conflicts with fishermen, research vessels preparing for raw material extraction, and also with American warships in an attempt to control the sea.³³ Southeast Asia is also a region of paramount importance for Japanese politics and the economy in terms of supply chains and trade routes, and Japan has taken several steps to compete with Chinese dominance through alternative proposals and initiatives. The Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI)³⁴ initiative is a direct challenger and alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Asia.

In 2016, aligning with Abe's cycle-opening regional analysis in Project Syndicate, the Japanese government announced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP),³⁵ whose main goals were to protect fundamental values (rule of law, freedom of navigation, etc.), achieve economic prosperity, and demonstrate a commitment to peace and stability (building maritime law enforcement capabilities, etc.). The revival of the QUAD is also a result of this approach.

²⁸ Abe, Shinzō: *Asia's Democratic Security Diamond*. [online], Project Syndicate, 27.12.2012. Source: project-syndicate.org [21.10.2025].

²⁹ *Japan Cabinet Approves Landmark Military Change*. [online], BBC, 01.07.2014. Source: bbc.com [21.10.2025].

³⁰ Article 9 of the peace constitution established after World War II states that Japan renounces war and prohibits the maintenance of armed forces – laying the foundation for Japan's pacifist policy.

³¹ The law prohibited exports to countries in the communist bloc, to countries subject to an arms embargo under UN Security Council resolutions, and to countries that had participated in or were close to international conflicts. *Japan's Policies on the Control of Arms Exports*. [online], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, s. a. Source: mofa.go.jp [21.10.2025].

³² *The Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology*. [online], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, s. a. Source: mofa.go.jp [21.10.2025].

³³ Mezei, Tibor: *A dél-kinai-tengeri vita az amerikai-kinai rivalizálás kontextusában* [The South China Sea Dispute in the Context of U.S.-China Rivalry]. [online], *MKI Elemzés*, 2023/50. Source: hia.hu [01.11.2025].

³⁴ *Quality Infrastructure Investment*. [online], World Bank, s. a. Source: worldbank.org [21.10.2025].

³⁵ *Free and Open Indo-Pacific*. [online], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, s. a. Source: mofa.go.jp [01.11.2025].

While a large part of Abe's second term was about rivalry with China, and economic relations began to weaken and decline during this period,³⁶ signs of rapprochement also appeared by the end of the 2010s: economic relations began to improve, and in 2018, Abe made an official visit to Beijing, which could be attributed to the changing face of American foreign policy³⁷ – once again indicating how much the relationship between the two countries is determined by American policy.

Shinzō Abe's role was also decisive in domestic politics, but the success of the economic reforms he introduced is, if possible, even more controversial. He announced his famous economic programme, *Abenomics*, in 2013. His economic stimulus programme was based on the “Three Arrows” direction:

- monetary easing by the Bank of Japan
- fiscal stimulus through government spending, and
- structural reforms

The aim of economic policy was to shake up Japan's stagnant economy, which Abe sought to achieve by expanding the money supply, increasing government spending, and implementing labour market and regulatory reforms. *Abenomics* initially achieved success in raising stock prices, weakening the yen to boost exports, and generating moderate economic growth. However, structural reforms, particularly in the areas of the labour market and corporate governance, have not yielded the expected results. Despite striving to increase women's participation (*Womenomics*) and liberalise the agricultural sector, Japan's demographic decline and high debt remained serious obstacles.³⁸ *Abenomics* has therefore only been partially successful; although it stabilised the economy and improved the employment rate, it failed to achieve the long-term transformation that would have brought stable economic growth to the country.

Abe's resignation ushered in another period of instability, with the Russo–Ukrainian War posing a challenge for Japan under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and American tariffs under the presidency of Shigeru Ishiba. In 2022, Kishida had three documents adopted aimed at revitalising and strengthening Japanese security policy: a new National Security Strategy, a new National Defense Strategy, and a Defense Buildup Program were adopted.³⁹ These documents and the trade with Southeast Asian states were clearly created in response to the People's Republic of China, which is pursuing an increasingly assertive foreign policy. His successor's idea was to create an “Asian NATO”,⁴⁰ but the decline of Trump's foreign policy and the economy shook confidence in him and he resigned.

³⁶ Goreczky, Péter: *Kína és Japán az USA-nak köszönhetően közeledik egymáshoz* [China and Japan are Drawing Closer Thanks to the USA]. [online], Kitekintő, 27.02.2018. Source: kitekinto.hu [21.10.2025].

³⁷ Goreczky 2018.

³⁸ Crawford, Mark: *Abe's Womenomics Policy, 2013–2020: Tokenism, Gradualism, or Failed Strategy?* [online], *Asia-Pacific Journal – Japan Focus*, 19(4). 15.02.2021. Source: apjff.org [01.11.2025].

³⁹ All three documents were adopted in 2022, primarily in response to doctrinal changes, highlighting capabilities for response operations and increased defence spending. *Defense Policy*. [online], Ministry of Defense, s. a. Source: mod.go.jp [21.10.2025].

⁴⁰ Before his election, Ishiba shared his views on Japanese foreign policy and spoke there about the need to create an “Asian NATO”. *Shigeru Ishiba on Japan's New Security Era: The Future of Japan's Foreign Policy*. [online], Hudson Institute, 25.09.2024. Source: hudson.org [01.11.2025].

The question was in what direction the Takaichi government will proceed with its relations with China – especially with Takaichi being a big admirer of Abe's terms. Takaichi, like Abe, is a affiliate of the revisionist, ultra-nationalist Nippon Kaigi – an interest and lobbying group whose goal is the complete rewriting of Article 9 of the constitution, along with numerous other constitutional points.⁴¹ Consequently, it was expected that China–Japan relations would be approached more on an emotional-ideological basis rather than purely pragmatically.

Her election as prime minister also means that Japan will continue its conservative, right-wing approach – in some respects even further to the right on the spectrum, as Takaichi is considered by many LDP politicians to belong to the party's extreme wing,⁴² and she formed an alliance with the right-wing populist Japan Innovation Party, which is considered by many to be neoliberal-populist during coalition talks.⁴³

In addition to all of this, the new Japanese Prime Minister trusts in the partnership with the United States – however, this will be an exciting question regarding the changing structures, considering that in his final years, Abe himself moved closer to Beijing after many years of critical statements – primarily due to Washington's foreign policy, which has become even more difficult for Tokyo to maintain in the current trade war.

On 28 October 2025, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi received Donald J. Trump, the American president, who arrived in Tokyo as one of the stops on his Asian diplomatic tour. The meeting between the two sides, in addition to touching on this somewhat uncomfortable topic for Japan, namely the investment package, was held in a cheerful atmosphere, with mutual praise. For Takaichi, the commitment could pose difficulties alongside other planned expenditures, but none of that was apparent at this meeting: they reaffirmed their commitments and Japan is also willing to further trade cooperation: they will purchase more rice and soybeans, and also open their market to American vehicles.⁴⁴ As Trump put it: “She [Takaichi] was a great ally and friend of Abe, who was my friend... He was one of the best... I know they were very close, and I think philosophically they were close, which is very good”,⁴⁵ he clarified, suggesting that the close relationship between the two sides during the Abe era could return.

The new prime minister is therefore committed to cooperation with the United States, but economic and trade relations are not so clear-cut despite the statements made at the meeting: certain agreements, such as opening the market to American vehicles, could specifically harm the Japanese automotive industry, and it seems from economic cooperation that relations with regional players, including China, will remain essential for Tokyo.

⁴¹ Yoshifumi, Tawara – Brooks, William – Pengqiao, Lu – Yamaguchi, Tomomi: *What Is the Aim of Nippon Kaigi, the Ultra-Right Organization That Supports Japan's Abe Administration?*. [online], *Asia-Pacific Journal*, 15(21), 01.11.2017. Source: apjjf.org [21.10.2025].

⁴² Johnston, Eric: *Sanae Takaichi Unveils LDP President Bid with Call for Party's Rebirth*. [online], *The Japan Times*, 09.09.2025. Source: japantimes.co.jp [21.10.2025].

⁴³ Takaichi's economic policy ideas and the coalition partner's views do not necessarily align on the role of the state in the economy.

⁴⁴ Zurcher, Anthony – Khalil, Shaimaa: *Rare Earths, Nobel Nomination and Cheers: Trump Ends Japan Leg of Asia Tour*. [online], *BBC*, 28.10.2025. Source: bbc.com [01.11.2025].

⁴⁵ Zurcher–Khalil 2025.

The escalation of the relations

From China's perspective, the election of Sanae Takaichi was not necessarily reassuring, not only because of Japan's uncertainty and shift to the right, but also due to the prime minister herself. Their concerns were connected to her past activities, for instance when in 2021, she supported rewriting Article 9 of the constitution⁴⁶ to define the Self-Defense Forces as a national army and is an active supporter of increasing defence spending. Or when, in addition to all of this, she supported the deployment of American medium-range missiles in Japan,⁴⁷ or when she visited Taiwan in April 2025 and met with President Lai Ching-te⁴⁸ and reiterated Abe's statement that "a Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency".⁴⁹ Besides these as an ultra-conservative politician, she has always been critical of China and Chinese foreign policy activities and has sought to support Japan–Taiwan relations, and she was a regular visitor to the Yasukuni Shrine.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted very quickly to Takaichi's election, stating in a statement that they hope she will respect the four strategic documents and the political obligations arising from them on major issues, including history and Taiwan.⁵⁰

The 'bomb' exploded on 7 November 2025 when Takaichi said at a parliamentary committee meeting that the use of "military force by China on Taiwan such as a naval blockade would likely constitute a 'survival-threatening situation' that would force Japan to respond".⁵¹ The Chinese response was immediate, Xue Jian, the consul general in Osaka, posted on X on 8 November: "The filthy head that recklessly sticks itself in must be cut off without a moment's hesitation."⁵² While the consul general is famously known for his sharp online posts and wolf-warrior-like approach,⁵³ the tensions continued to rise in between the two sides.

Economic tensions between the two sides have already begun to escalate. China, as usual, first acted through its tourists, which is a common economic pressure tactic and can be effective against Japan: in the first 10 months of 2025, more than 8 million Chinese travelled to Japan, and since the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs specifically recommended that its citizens cancel their trips, more than half a million plane tickets were cancelled within a few days. And since the holiday period was approaching being particularly

⁴⁶ *LDP's Takaichi Seeks Japan's Possession of "Nat'l Defense Forces"*. [online], Kyodo News, 26.08.2021. Source: english.kyodonews.net [21.10.2025].

⁴⁷ *Previewing Japan's Leadership Election and Implications for U.S.-Japan Relations*. [online], CSIS, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 28.09.2021. Source: csis.org [21.10.2025].

⁴⁸ *President Lai Meets Japanese Diet Member and Former Minister of State for Economic Security Takaichi Sanae (excerpt cross-strait relations)*. [online], Mainland Affairs Council of Taiwan, 28.04.2025. Source: mac.gov.tw [21.10.2025].

⁴⁹ Pollmann, Mina: *How Will a Takaichi Administration Approach Japan's Taiwan Policy?*. [online], The Diplomat, 08.10.2025. Source: thediplomat.com [21.10.2025].

⁵⁰ AFP News: *China Urges Japan To "Honor Commitments" As It Seeks To "Advance Ties" Under New PM Sanae Takaichi*. [online], The Eurasian Times, 21.10.2025. Source: eurasiatimes.com [21.10.2025].

⁵¹ *Takaichi: Military Attack on Taiwan Would Justify SDF Support*. [online], The Asahi Shimbun, 08.11.2025. Source: asahi.com [21.12.2025].

⁵² *Japan Protests Chinese Envoy's Beheading Post Tied to Takaichi*. [online], The Asahi Shimbun, 10.11.2025. Source: asahi.com [21.12.2025].

⁵³ *Chinese Diplomat's 'Beheading' Post Sparks Japan Protest*. [online], BBC Monitoring, 10.11.2025. Source: monitoring.bbc.com [21.12.2025].

important for Japan, this was a severe blow to its economy. Another unsurprising move was the ban on importing seafood – this happened once before in 2023 when China stopped buying Japanese products in protest against the release of contaminated water from the damaged and decommissioned Fukushima nuclear power plant into the sea. It was almost predictable that these would be China’s first steps in the event of tensions. In addition to all of this, boycotting various targeted products and sectors important to the Japanese economy, such as the cultural sector, is also an option, and the same can be said about the already implemented tariffs – naturally, acknowledging the fact that Japan could take similar measures. A complete trade disruption would not be beneficial for either side, but China’s actions and assertive communication indicate that Beijing was prepared for such a possibility and is likely confident that its economic strength will allow it to emerge victorious from such a tension.

As another symbolic step, Japan’s last two pandas will return to China at the start of 2026 and China refused to answer Japanese request to extend the lease,⁵⁴ leaving Japan “Pandaless”.

For China, this is the red line, Taiwan’s international recognition: any move aimed at changing the current status quo or abandoning the One China principle would cross this red line. Among other things, the Chinese constitution states that Taiwan is part of China, and any step, or in this case diplomatic gesture, that endangers this status is considered a threat by the Chinese side. Not only the prime minister’s statement, but also the awarding of Frank Hsieh Chang-ting, a former Taiwanese prime minister, was a step taken by Japan in early November that further fuelled Chinese criticism. However, it must be emphasised again that Takaichi did not come as a surprise to China; her ideological stance and critical approach toward China were well-known. So, this comment, not even a speech, even if it was ill-considered, is not out of character for Takaichi, and the escalation of the situation to this level, with responses and verbal criticism flooding Chinese communications and social media, was somewhat surprising and, in fact, surprisingly rapid. This also raises the question of whether China was perhaps prepared for such a confrontation and tension with Japan.

What is next for the China–Japan relations?

The Japanese point of view

Based upon the first few weeks of Takaichi’s administration, we can talk about a clear approach towards the U.S. and a worsening of relations with China, but in the background, it’s worth examining further aspects as well, because in the changing international environment, the “Abesita” foreign policy may not be sustainable. This is even more worth emphasising in light of the new American National Security Strategy. Indeed, based on the new document, Washington expects greater efforts from both Europe and

⁵⁴ Campbell, Joseph: *Japan’s Last Two Giant Pandas are Headed to China and Fans Just Can’t Bear It*. [online], Reuters, 16.12.2025. Source: reuters.com [21.12.2025].

Japan – while offering little in return. This was visible through the trade relations as well, where although Japan was able to secure 15% tariffs for itself, compared to the previously imposed 25%, but they had to agree to a 550 billion USD investment package that Japan is required to invest in various financial forms during Trump's term.⁵⁵

What we can expect is a continued critical foreign policy toward China, but the Japanese leadership might become more cautious here due to China's countermeasures, especially given the unpredictability of American foreign policy. It seems almost certain that a complete decoupling from Chinese markets cannot be a realistic alternative for the Japanese economy, Japan might be “interested in the diversification of supply chains and manufacturing locations” while exploring their own capabilities by researching within the EEZ and highlighting the economic relevancy of deep sea mining.⁵⁶

Japan will be interested in further building and strengthening the alliance systems with regional actors such as Australia or Indonesia – and will therefore be willing to fulfil the economic commitments expected by the Americans (such as the 550 billion USD investment). This will likely manifest in further arms cooperation with the United States or in infrastructural investments in the energy sector, it is also likely that domestic capabilities will increase, and even the emergence of European actors could become a reality.⁵⁷

“For Japan, the United States remains its main ally, but within the framework of a changing international environment, it is redefining its defense role and developing its defense capabilities. According to recently released documents, Japan needs to develop the ability to launch an independent counterstrike without relying solely on American security guaranties.”⁵⁸

American arms purchases were already discussed during the two countries' consultations in the summer of 2025,⁵⁹ and the American side confirmed at the October meeting that Japan would, among other things, purchase additional weapons, while the integration of military systems⁶⁰ is also visible⁶¹ but there has been no confirmation from Tokyo on this matter so far.

Regarding following Abe's line, we need to talk not only about the economy but also about the regional-global worldview. Alongside *Abenomics*, Japan's geopolitical interests have also strengthened and are being represented more forcefully. The Free and Open

⁵⁵ Desrochers, Daniel – Lefebvre, Ben – Hawkins, Ari: *Trump Wants Japan to Fund His Government's Ambitious Spending. What's in It for Them?* [online], Politico, 03.10.2025. Source: politico.com [21.10.2025].

⁵⁶ Goreczky, Péter: *Decoupling or Diversification? Dilemmas of India, Japan, and Australia in Shaping Economic Relations with China.* [online], KKI Policy Brief, 01.07.2021. Source: hiiia.hu [21.10.2025].

⁵⁷ Marrone, Alessandro (2025): *The New Partnership among Italy, Japan and the UK on the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP).* *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 25(3).

⁵⁸ Csicsmann, László: *Japán, multipolaritás és az átalakuló világrend* [Japan, Multipolarity and the Changing World Order]. *MKI Elemzés*, 2025/4. Source: hiiia.hu [21.10.2025].

⁵⁹ Johnson, Jesse – Tang, Francis: *Trump Says Tokyo Agreed to Buy U.S. Defense Gear, but Questions Remain.* [online], The Japan Times, 24.07.2025. Source: japantimes.co.jp [01.11.2025].

⁶⁰ Gossrow, Ethan: *Japanese Destroyer Finalizes Tomahawk Missile Integration.* [online], Naval News, 31.03.2026. Source: navalnews.com [15.05.2026].

⁶¹ Watson, Kathryn – Walsh, Joe: *Trump Touts “Very Fair” Trade Deal with Japan as He Meets New Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi.* [online], CBS News, 28.10.2025. Source: cbsnews.com [01.11.2025].

Indo-Pacific Strategy adopted back in 2016 was partly created in response to China and prioritised the freedom of navigation in the broader region across two oceans, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, focusing on Southeast Asia but also highlighting the economic opportunities in South Asia and Africa.⁶² Regarding regional security challenges and Japan's assessment of them, it will be necessary to monitor not only the Southeast Asian region but the entire Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, in addition to arms imports, we can likely expect to discuss Japanese financial and military support directed toward this area. In this context, it might also be worth closely monitoring Japanese foreign policy regarding other major powers in the region, such as India, Indonesia and Australia – even in the context of more significant economic cooperation. In this regard two interesting news emerged, on the one hand, cooperation with Australia has become more active,⁶³ and on the other hand, Japan has begun to show interest in the European Union's SAFE initiative⁶⁴ – which was partly created due to the declining American interests.

Regarding regional presence, it can be said that:

- Monitoring regional waters and trade routes, with a greater presence and military exercises, could characterise Japanese military policy, and it also appears within this regional context that the Taiwan issue seems to be a key concern for Takaichi at the moment.
- And looking a bit further afield from the region, Japan's global role could also become more important, considering not only the naval base in Djibouti but also the competition between Japan and China highlighted in the analysis, as well as the economic potential of the African continent. In this regard, development policies can be interesting, which have been running in parallel, learning from each other, but with changes in Japanese foreign policy, for example, the importance of TICAD (Tokyo International Conference on African Development) in Africa could also increase, continuing the race with China and FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation), once again highlighting that Japanese foreign policy steps could increasingly be defined by steps and a race against China in the future.

The Chinese point of view

The Chinese position seems simpler to present, but it is also less favourable for the development of relations – however, to understand it, we need to take a step back. In the first half of 2025, Washington once again resorted to tariffs to resolve economic disputes with China. However, Beijing did not back down and entered a trade war, which the parties were forced to suspend in May under an agreement that “was not a compromise but rather a reflection of the victory of the Chinese strategy”⁶⁵.

⁶² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan s. a.

⁶³ Dominguez, Gabriel: *Japan and Australia Launch New 'Strategic Defense' Framework*. [online], The Japan Times, 07.12.2025. Source: japantimes.co.jp [21.12.2025].

⁶⁴ *EU Confirms Japan's Bid to Join Security Action for Europe Defense Fund*. [online], Defense Mirror, 13.12.2025. Source: defensemirror.com [21.12.2025].

⁶⁵ Vörös, Zoltán – Eszterhai, Viktor: *The Price of Retreat – the Lesson of the US-China Trade Agreement*. [online], John Lukacs Analyses on Global Affairs, 2025/6. 22.05.2025. Source: uni-nke.hu [27.07.2025].

China's economy was already capable of entering a trade war with the United States, and Beijing's swift reaction to Takaichi's remarks shows it is willing to assert its dominance regionally as well. If this is the case, China's responses are not ad hoc but well-considered steps, in which case Japanese foreign policy interests will be in the crosshairs of continuous Chinese criticism – whether it concerns the East China Sea, the South China Sea, or even the Indo-Pacific region.

Although pragmatic interests would also demand the continuation of economic cooperation from China's side – particularly due to the uncertainties surrounding the American and European markets – Beijing's interests and red lines related to Taiwan will be more important. As we have repeatedly emphasised the Japanese approach to the past, the same must be done regarding China: the nationalist-ideological dimension is an excellent tool for the Chinese Communist Party to cover up certain domestic political and economic difficulties.

Conclusion

Abe's follower, Sanae Takaichi, must address the structural challenges of the Japanese economy, resolve domestic political instability, which after the 2026 February election seems to be solved, and preserve the country's strategic autonomy in a fundamentally changed and uncertain international environment. Her premiership is undoubtedly historic, and her hard-line stance could leave its mark on China–Japan relations, with the next period potentially being defined by the duality of historical disagreements and economic ties. Her more critical statements and stance toward China could be overridden by economic and trade considerations, furthermore, we have seen that global events have already impacted the fluctuating quality of the relationship between the two sides.

For Tokyo, maintaining autonomy and pursuing a balanced foreign policy could be a primary consideration – the question is whether it's possible to combine Takaichi's ideological approach with at least pragmatic elements, if not completely abandon it. For decades, Japanese foreign policy has been defined by its alliance with Washington, guaranteeing security but limiting the possibility of developing independent manoeuvrability. The direction of American foreign policy during Trump's second term, the containment of China's global rise and assertive actions in the region, and the parallel militarisation of the Indo-Pacific region are forcing the Japanese leadership to take a more active stance on foreign policy events – a situation where economic interests require regional stability and pragmatic cooperation with China, while security considerations necessitate close cooperation with the United States. Takaichi's political rhetoric so far has been strongly ideological, focusing on national identity, constitutional reform, and strengthening regional defence capabilities. This approach, as we have seen, aligns well with the historical narrative of the Japanese right wing, but it generates conflict due to the real power dynamics in the region – specifically, the events in the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait should be highlighted here, where rhetorical confrontation could lead to escalation. A pragmatic approach, meaning preserving and maintaining the increasingly important regional economic relationships, participating in and taking on a role

in regional-multilateral forums, would allow Japan to assert its own regional interests, maintain the security guaranteed by U.S. cooperation, and avoid becoming economically vulnerable. The China–Japan relationship is not just a geopolitical issue, but also an economic one. While reducing dependence on China may be a goal for Tokyo regarding the deep integration between the two sides, jeopardising trade relations cannot be an option. An overly ideologically based foreign policy could harm the country's trade interests and technological position.

The “two-faced” policy of recent years (security guaranties from Washington, economic pragmatism with Beijing) is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, and Japan will need to develop an autonomous, balanced foreign policy. By moderating its ideological approach, this could allow the island nation to define its own interests amidst the competition between the two superpowers and be able to shape the political structure of the region.

Primarily, given the ideological-historical confrontation between the two countries and the rapid escalation, as we have already tried to emphasise, a regional rivalry may be in the background. While China is already capable of waging a trade war with the United States and forcing the Americans to the negotiating table, it also seems to want to assert its dominance in the region.

For China, the red line remains the Taiwan issue, and Beijing will continue to modernise its military, bringing it closer to potentially changing the island's status in terms of military capabilities. The dispute between the two sides, in addition to having similar ideological levels, is also fuelled by regional strategic considerations on the Chinese side.

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