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Landslide election victory lets Takaichi confront China on her terms



The resounding victory by Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party in Sunday's general election has sent a strong signal that Takaichi is likely to be around for some time, giving her the bandwidth to adhere to her strategy of putting the onus on Chinese President Xi Jinping to reengage with Japan. | POOL / GETTY IMAGES / VIA BLOOMBERG

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Feb 10, 2026

China's bid to pressure Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi in order to force her hand following her unprecedented remarks that Japan could intervene militarily in a Taiwan crisis has fallen flat, with the LDP's stunning election victory. Sunday giving her the needed p  1 capital to confront Beijing on her terms.

Voters, undeterred by apparent Chinese economic retaliation for the November comments, endorsed Takaichi's unyielding stance toward Beijing, delivering her Liberal Democratic Party the most seats of any political party in the Lower House since the end of World War II.

The results sent a strong signal that Takaichi is likely to be around for some time, giving her the bandwidth to adhere to her government's strategy of putting the onus on China to reengage with Japan — something the prime minister herself alluded to Monday night.

"A stable political foundation also provides significant strength for advancing robust diplomacy," she told a news conference.

But, with Takaichi's first visit to the U.S. for a summit with President Donald Trump set for March 19 — and Trump's trip to Beijing for a meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping reportedly planned for the first week of April — observers say Japan-China relations will remain in a holding pattern at least until after those events.

Beijing's pressure backfires

The ongoing dispute between China and Japan began following Takaichi's remarks in parliament on Nov. 7 that the Self-Defense Forces could be deployed under the right to collective self-defense in "worst-case" scenarios, such as a Chinese naval blockade of Taiwan, which the prime minister said would constitute a "survival-threatening situation" for Japan.

The comments, the first by a sitting prime minister to detail a specific case of how Tokyo might respond to a Taiwan Strait crisis, triggered outrage in Beijing, which claims Taiwan as its own and has vowed to bring the democratic island under its control, by force if necessary.





Chinese tourists wear kimonos as they visit Sensoji temple in Tokyo's Asakusa district on Nov. 15. | AFP-JIJI

Beijing quickly ratcheted up the heat on Tokyo, turning to a toolbox of informal coercive tools — warning tourists not to visit Japan, reimposing a ban on seafood exports and hinting at a return of restrictions on Japan-bound exports of the rare-earth minerals — part of an apparent bid to push down Takaichi's approval ratings and force a retraction of the remarks.

But Takaichi has remained wildly popular, with many voters in the runup to the election praising her refusal to back down in the face of Chinese pressure.

Indeed, her decision to call Sunday's snap election — and the stunning results of that vote — seem to have caught Beijing flat-footed. China's official Xinhua News Agency had earlier labeled it a "political gamble" and claimed that the election, which it termed "a surprise attack" had "triggered widespread concern and discontent across Japanese society."

"China clearly determined after Takaichi's remarks in November on a Taiwan contingency that it would test the resolve of the new prime minister, and see if it could mount a campaign of pressure ... to see if it could divide the Japanese public opinion from the governing elites," said Christopher Hughes, a professor of international politics and Japanese studies at the University of Warwick in England.

"However, China's approach has thus far failed, or, in fact, backfired, as Japanese voters have approved of Takaichi's willingness to stand up to Chinese pressure," he added ^

While the prime minister has refused to retract her remarks, she has also repeatedly emphasized that the door to dialogue remains open, saying Monday that communication “is ongoing at various levels.”

“My policy since becoming prime minister has consistently been to build a constructive and stable relationship with China,” she said the same day. “Precisely because concerns and challenges exist between Japan and China, communication is crucial.”

‘Wait-and-see mode’

The official response in Beijing, however, has been frosty.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian on Monday renewed a call at a news conference for Takaichi to retract her remarks and said that China’s policy toward Japan “will not change because of one election.”



U.S. President Donald Trump speaks to Chinese leader Xi Jinping as they shake hands after talks at Gimhae Air Base in Busan, South Korea, on Oct. 30. | AFP-JIJI

Experts say the reality is that — regardless of Takaichi cementing her grip on power — China is in no hurry to engage in dialogue.

“There is some expectation that China may adjust its approach in light of the apparent strength of the Takaichi administration’s political footing, but fundamentally, Beijing is likely to remain in a wait-and-see mode at least through the spring,” said Ryo Saha, professor at the University of Tokyo’s Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia. ^

According to Hughes, China “will very likely see no reason to shift its stance towards Japan until after the outcomes of Takaichi’s visit to Washington in March to see Trump, and until after the Xi-Trump summit in Beijing in April.”

While Takaichi will be aiming to preempt any surprises from Trump in his talks with Xi, observers say China will almost certainly look to drive a wedge between the allies — or hope that Trump does this work for them at the summits, both of which will be riddled with pitfalls.

The Japanese leader will be expecting at least some expression of support from Trump in Tokyo’s row with Beijing, but could instead find herself responding to demands for increased U.S. investment and boosted defense spending.



Prime Minister Shinzo Abe shakes hands with Chinese leader Xi Jinping during their meeting at Beijing's Great Hall of the People, on the sidelines of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meetings in November 2014. | REUTERS

Looking to Abe

After those summits, experts believe avenues for Sino-Japanese dialogue could open up in a scenario that would be eerily reminiscent of the diplomatic dance more than a decade ago between Xi and Takaichi’s late mentor, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Abe, who visited Tokyo’s war-linked Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 — exactly a year after taking office — and soon after successfully carried out a plan to radically imp



chilly ties, took a two-pronged approach to dealing with China that saw him meet Xi on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in November 2014.

Diplomatic sources have said that Xi's decision to meet Abe, who had solidified his grip on power, stemmed from a realization that he had little choice but to engage with a Japanese leader who was likely to be in power for the long haul.

"Takaichi seems to be wanting to do something similar to Abe when he visited Yasukuni in 2013 and he was able to demonstrate his revisionist credentials to supporters that Japan would not allow history to be used as diplomatic leverage against it, and then to seek a more pragmatic relationship with China," said Hughes.

This time around, though, Takaichi appears to be indicating that more diplomatic groundwork could be done to soften the impact of any Yasukuni visit.



Then-Internal Affairs and Communications Minister Sanae Takaichi speaks to reporters after visiting Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo in October 2014. | REUTERS

Asked just hours after her party's election victory Sunday if she would go to the shrine, Takaichi said she was working "to create the right environment" for a visit. China views the shrine, where Japan's 2.5 million war dead are enshrined — including Class A war criminals — as a symbol of its wartime atrocities.

"If Takaichi follows Abe's precedent, there is a high probability that she will visit Ya  i Shrine within the first year of her administration," said Sahashi.

That timing would likely fall in late October — “an unfortunately poor alignment on the diplomatic calendar” — just before China hosts an APEC leaders’ meeting in the city of Shenzhen, he added.

Questions remain over how a thaw could be initiated.

“Japan could respond positively if China signals a shift in posture after the spring,” said Sahashi. “However, it is difficult to envision domestic political conditions under which Takaichi herself would send conciliatory signals — such as retracting previous statements or dispatching a special envoy.”

Going forward, said Hughes, China may simply have to accept, as with the early stages of the second Abe administration, that “it has to do business” with Takaichi, who is likely to be in her post for the foreseeable future.

KEYWORDS

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