



THE NEW TAKAICHI ADMINISTRATION: CONFRONTING HARSH REALITIES ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

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Introduction: Looming diplomatic challenges for Japan's first female Prime Minister

In October 2025, Japanese politics took a historic step with the inauguration of Sanae Takaichi as Japan's Prime Minister. As the first woman to hold the post, there are strong expectations for the Takaichi administration's policies, particularly among the youth and women in Japan. According to a public opinion poll released by Japanese broadcaster TBS on November 2, the Takaichi administration's approval rating reached 82 per cent, a figure that far surpasses the initial approval ratings of the Ishiba, Kishida, and Abe administrations, which were in the 50–60 per cent range.

Immediately after taking office, Prime Minister Takaichi held meetings with the leaders of the United States, South Korea, and China. In a meeting with President Donald Trump during his visit to Japan in late October, she emphasized her image as a successor to former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. They agreed to deepen relations across many fields, including military and defence, as well as economic security and trade, with President Trump expressing high regard for Ms. Takaichi.

Furthermore, during her visit to South Korea, Prime Minister Takaichi met with President Lee Jae-myung. They agreed to continue a pragmatic Japan–South Korea relationship to address shared security challenges, and reaffirmed the importance of shuttle diplomacy. In her meeting with China's President Xi Jinping, she confirmed the importance of the 'strategic mutually beneficial relationship' between Japan and China and candidly conveyed Japanese concerns regarding the Senkaku Islands, the situation in Taiwan, and the safety of Japanese nationals in China. Many Japanese experts voiced approval for Prime Minister Takaichi's diplomatic stance shortly after her inauguration, with some suggesting her diplomatic approach will help sustain her high approval rating.

However, the Takaichi administration, despite its good start, faces significant challenges that this paper aims to address. As the world enters the 'G-Zero' era, marked by the absence of a global leader, and with intensified US–China rivalry and rising geopolitical tensions in Northeast Asia, the diplomatic course the Takaichi administration takes will be a crucial factor in determining Japan's security, economy, and its standing in the international community. The diplomacy conducted by Takaichi in late October leaves no doubt that the administration will prioritize the relationship with the US, making the Japan–US Alliance the cornerstone of its foreign policy (the Abe line). However, to maximize Japan's national interests in the increasingly complex international environment, simply following the Abe line is insufficient. Given the structural weakness of an unstable domestic political base, the Takaichi administration requires a multi-faceted and resilient strategic diplomacy capable of overcoming these constraints and confronting the harsh realities of the international stage.

This paper will first confirm the clear direction of the Takaichi administration's foreign and security policy as inferred from her cabinet appointments. Next, it will delve into the structural challenge of the Takaichi administration's political vulnerability and explore the expectations and concerns of key international actors (the US and China) regarding this fragility. Finally, it will offer specific policy recommendations on how the Takaichi administration should execute a robust foreign and security policy to protect Japan's national interests under unstable political conditions, focusing particularly on diplomacy with South Korea to avoid undermining the critically important Japan–US–South Korea security cooperation.

The clear direction of foreign and security policy as indicated by the Takaichi cabinet formation

An analysis of the Takaichi Cabinet appointments in October reveals three clear political and policy messages: stable governance, strengthening the Trump connection, and promotion of conservative policy.

SECURING POLITICAL STABILITY AND UNITY

The appointment of Shinjiro Koizumi, who contested the LDP leadership election in October, as Minister of Defense, and Yoshimasa Hayashi as Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications, is a clear attempt to prevent party division and stabilize the Takaichi administration's foundation from the outset. Incorporating key rivals into the core of the government is a pragmatic calculation to minimize political instability and demonstrate continuity and stability in foreign policy to the international community.

CONTINUITY IN US DIPLOMACY, STRENGTHENING THE TRUMP CONNECTION, AND EMPHASIS ON ECONOMIC SECURITY

The selection of key cabinet members for core diplomatic, economic, and security positions indicates a strong awareness of the impending 'Trump risk'. Reappointing Toshimitsu Motegi as Foreign Minister is a pragmatic step to maintain and strengthen excellent relations with the US without compromising Japan's national interests. Motegi has extensive experience negotiating directly with the US, notably as Minister in charge of Economic Revitalization during the signing of the Japan–US Trade Agreement in 2019 (under the first Trump administration) and subsequently as Foreign Minister. He is seen as possessing negotiation skills and connections to the Trump administration and its circle.

This goal is further confirmed by the appointment of Ryosei Akazawa as Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). Akazawa played a key role in the negotiations over the Trump tariffs under the Ishiba administration. METI is at the forefront of economic security policy. This appointment signals a strong intention to deepen cooperation with the US in economic security, particularly in establishing coordination mechanisms for supply chains of strategic materials like semiconductors and critical minerals. These appointments clearly demonstrate that the Takaichi administration places the Japan–US Alliance as the cornerstone of its foreign policy.

CLEAR ARTICULATION OF CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL BELIEFS

Seiji Kihara, who shares Takaichi's political beliefs, was appointed as Chief Cabinet Secretary (the de facto number two), and the conservative Kimi Onoda was appointed Minister in charge of Economic Security. This suggests that the Takaichi administration is not merely a pragmatic, administrative cabinet but intends to strongly inherit and strengthen the conservative values and policies of the Abe administration in areas such as historical recognition and security policy. Appointing a conservative figure to lead economic security, in particular, suggests the potential for a strong ideological drive in policies such as preventing the leakage of critical technology and reducing dependence on specific nations.

While these appointments indicate a clear direction for the Takaichi administration's foreign and security policy, they also hint at the structural weaknesses the government must overcome.

The Takaichi Administration's greatest challenge: Political vulnerability

The success of Takaichi's diplomacy hinges on her ability to overcome the structural problem of 'political vulnerability' which fundamentally hinders the execution of stable foreign policy.

FUNDAMENTAL INSTABILITY OF A MINORITY COALITION GOVERNMENT

As a minority coalition with the Japan Innovation Party (Nippon Ishin no Kai), the Takaichi administration may find that the passage of key decisions and important legislation—especially those central to Japan's foreign and security policy, such as defence spending increases or security-related bills—will require meticulous coordination with its coalition partner and potentially cooperation from parts of the opposition. This situation introduces chronic instability to the administration, risking a return to 'politics of indecision'. This stands in stark contrast to the Abe administration, which executed a robust foreign and security policy backed by a stable majority, and creates serious international doubt about Japan's policy continuity.

RISK OF DOMESTIC DIVISION DUE TO CONSERVATIVE TILT

Prime Minister Takaichi's move in October to strengthen ties with more conservative political forces like the Sanseito (a new conservative party) based on her political beliefs could become a future cause for concern in government management. While this solidifies support from the conservative base, it also raises concerns about a shift to the right among the centrist factions that should form the core of Japan's government, as well as the liberal populace. Ultimately, this may make a broad domestic consensus on foreign and security policy difficult due to political polarization. This carries the risk of blurring 'Japan's will' to the international community. Furthermore, the coalition partner, Ishin, may express differing opinions on the Takaichi administration's conservative security policies, potentially causing delays in policy implementation.

It is also worth noting that while Prime Minister Takaichi is required to pursue realistic diplomacy mindful of the national interest, her conciliatory posture toward the US and pragmatic stance toward South Korea could potentially draw dissatisfaction from her conservative supporters (though some supporters may be understanding). Takaichi advocates for a strong Japan, but if she shows a compromising attitude in, for example, tariff negotiations with the Trump administration, she could face criticism of being weak-kneed from hardline conservative supporters. It is plausible that Prime Minister Takaichi may be forced to navigate a difficult course in this narrow space.

JAPANESE POLITICAL SITUATION MIRRORING THE 'G-ZERO WORLD'

Due to successive national election defeats and the dissolution of its previous coalition, the LDP is no longer maintaining a stable political foundation. The Japanese Diet, lacking stable leadership or a majority, is in a 'salad bowl' state where diverse opinions clash. The 'G-Zero World' (a world without a dominant leader) as conceptualized by political scientist Ian Bremmer, is casting a shadow not just on the international order but also on Japan's domestic politics. Regardless of which administration is formed, the Japanese Diet continues to be a 'salad bowl' environment, and the 'long-term, stable partner' that the US desires is absent.

Japan from the perspectives of the US and China: Complex expectations and concerns about vulnerability

How do the world's major actors, particularly the US and China, view the emergence of the Takaichi administration? Both nations harbour a complex mix of expectations and concerns regarding Japan's political vulnerability.

THE US: EXPECTATION FOR THE CONTINUATION OF THE ABE LINE AND CONCERN OVER LONG-TERM STABILITY

The US was likely relieved by the Japan–US summit in late October, which confirmed Prime Minister Takaichi's close relationship with former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (having served as Minister in charge of Economic Security under his administration) and her commitment to strengthening ties with the Trump administration and continuing the Abe line.

However, the US is not without its anxieties regarding the Takaichi administration, particularly concerning its political fragility. Today's US is not the global leader of the past, but one focused on maintaining superiority over its strategic rival, China, positioning Japan as its most critical partner in its China strategy. Therefore, the US naturally harbours fears about the long-term stability of the Japan–US relationship with a minority government as its counterpart.

When Donald Trump was elected US President in the fall of 2016, widespread concern about Japan–US relations existed in Japan. However, the Abe administration was able to maintain a good relationship with the first Trump administration because it maintained a stable political foundation, with the LDP and Komeito party in a strong coalition. However, the current LDP is politically fragile, having lost consecutive national elections and ended its 26-year coalition with the Komeito. The stability of the current coalition with Ishin is uncertain. The Trump administration will desire a counterpart that prioritizes its relationship with the US and possesses a robust political base in order to maintain US confidence in the priority of the Japan relationship within the Trump administration.

CHINA: EXPECTATION FOR A WEAKENING OF THE PRO-US LINE AND CONCERN OVER UNPREDICTABILITY

China hopes that Japan's political vulnerability might serve its own interests. The biggest expectation is the weakening of Japan's pro-US line. A prolonged period of political instability, marked by minority or short-lived administrations, creates an absence of the long-term partner the US desires, making it difficult for Japan to consistently pursue a hardline stance against China based on the Japan-US Alliance. A delay or stagnation in Japan's security policy decision-making process—caused by coalition breakdowns or internal party struggles—would be a favorable situation for China, which desires a setback in both Japan's defence build-up and the deepening of Japan–US cooperation.

Furthermore, a politically vulnerable administration may be forced to prioritize approval ratings and domestic consensus, making it more likely to show flexibility (or concessions) in its relationship with China in pursuit of economic benefits or short-term diplomatic achievements. China will view this unstable political situation as an opportunity to apply leverage in economic and specific diplomatic matters, advancing its own interests. Conversely, China also harbours concerns. The primary anxiety is the unpredictability and instability of Japanese diplomacy. A situation where administrations frequently change or policy objectives waver would hinder China's ability to formulate a medium-to-long-term Japan strategy, making strategic forecasting difficult. Related to this, even if a government prioritizing economic stability in the China relationship were formed, domestic political chaos could lead to a swift replacement with a government that clearly articulates a pro-US stance. This complicates China's own diplomatic steering regarding Japan.

Applying this to the Takaichi administration, despite the Japan–China summit in late October, China is still scrutinizing its policy toward Tokyo. While both countries affirmed the continuation of the Strategic Mutually Beneficial Relationship, China is likely planning a strategic response to Japan, having also drawn up scenarios where the Takaichi administration might adopt policies unfavourable to China.

Policy Recommendations:

The pillars of strategic diplomacy required of the Takaichi Administration

The Takaichi administration faces the extremely difficult diplomatic challenge of defending Japan's national interests on the frontline of the US–China rivalry while burdened with the ‘Achilles’ heel’ of an unstable domestic political base. In this context, the government must pursue a diplomatic strategy that overcomes domestic political constraints and simultaneously achieves a robust Japan-US Alliance and strategic peripheral diplomacy, thereby maintaining international trust.

1. SECURE CONTINUITY AND RELIABILITY IN JAPANESE DIPLOMACY WITH A UNIFIED JAPANESE VIEW

The Takaichi administration's greatest weakness is the risk of being internationally perceived as lacking continuity. To overcome this, it must **establish a diplomatic core and execution system that transcends domestic political instability**. Precisely because it is a minority coalition, the administration must forge a ‘minimum common denominator for national interest’ in foreign and security policy, not only with its coalition partner Ishin but also with parts of the major opposition parties like the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ), to guarantee policy continuity. Specifically, the government should aim for agreement between the ruling and opposition parties on fundamental national security policies such as increased defense spending and the possession of counterstrike capabilities. A framework for discussing major diplomatic issues (stability in the Taiwan Strait, economic security vis-à-vis China, etc.) should be established between the ruling and opposition parties to communicate a unified Japanese view to the international community. This is essential for sending the message that ‘the core of Japan's foreign and security policy will not change regardless of the administration’, thus maintaining the trust of the US and other allies.

2. PRIORITIZE JAPAN–US–SOUTH KOREA SECURITY COOPERATION

Recent Japan–South Korea relations have been on a positive trajectory, driven by the shared threat of North Korea's nuclear and missile development and the growing momentum to prioritize Japan–US–South Korea security cooperation. Therefore, Prime Minister Takaichi must prioritize the benefits of Japan–US–South Korea cooperation. During her tenure as Prime Minister, she should **refrain from visiting Yasukuni Shrine and avoid bringing historical issues to the forefront of diplomacy**. This is not a judgment on Takaichi's personal conviction but a necessary choice for ‘Strategic Diplomacy’.

The US places a high value on Japan–US–South Korea cooperation in dealing with China and North Korea, and is extremely averse to historical issues between its allies which might hinder cooperation. Japan should avoid actions which impede trilateral Japan–US–South Korea cooperation and cause the US to lose trust in Japan.

Even more seriously, there is a risk that Takaichi's actions could create ‘dual dissatisfaction’ for the South Korean government under President Lee Jae-myung. The first dissatisfaction, naturally, stems from the historical recognition issue caused by the Yasukuni visit itself. The second dissatisfaction is deeply rooted in President Lee's unique political background. Since taking office, he has actively worked to maintain a stable and functional relationship with Japan, suppressing his strong anti-Japanese convictions due to the severe security environment South Korea faces and the domestic political necessity of securing support from younger and moderate segments of the populace. The Takaichi administration must handle historical issues with the utmost caution.

Japan should further strengthen dialogue and cooperation with South Korea in areas where national interests directly align, namely security and economic security. Recognizing the North Korean threat as a common concern, **practical cooperation should be advanced by deepening ties between defence authorities**, institutionalizing and increasing the frequency of joint exercises, and establishing a new Japan–South Korea High-Level Economic Security Dialogue to stabilize the supply chains of strategic materials like semiconductors and critical minerals. This will maximize the functional value of the Japan–South Korea relationship and prevent historical recognition issues from dominating the overall relationship.

3. STRENGTHEN DEVELOPMENT OF ASIA AND GLOBAL SOUTH ‘VALUES DIPLOMACY’

Precisely because the Takaichi administration maintains a conservative diplomatic tone, it must seek to strengthen relations not only with countries sharing liberal values but also with Asia and the Global South, pursuing Japan's national interests through multi-faceted cooperation. This is an indispensable strategy for countering China's growing economic and military influence and securing Japan's diplomatic space.

The administration should **strengthen cooperation with ASEAN countries and strategically reorganize Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) and infrastructure investment**. Support should be provided in a package that combines high-quality infrastructure investment (GX/DX-compatible infrastructure, decarbonization technology) with human resource development, thereby contributing to the economic security of ASEAN nations. Coupled with policy support to encourage the diversification of Japanese companies' production bases, this should help upgrade ASEAN's industries and strengthen the overall supply chain in Asia.

Furthermore, to enhance Japan's diplomatic influence, it is necessary to strategically reconstruct ‘Values Diplomacy’. The promotion of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) must not remain a purely military/security concept but must be linked to addressing the pressing issues faced by the Global South, such as climate change, pandemic countermeasures, and development aid. This requires Japan to demonstrate in a multi-faceted way that it is indispensable for the stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region, thereby increasing its diplomatic presence.

Conclusion: The ‘paradoxical strategic diplomacy’ of the Takaichi Administration

The Takaichi administration is compelled to conduct diplomacy amid the adversity of an unstable domestic political base. To navigate this ‘paradoxical situation’, it must rigorously practice the suppression of personal political convictions and strategic judgment for the maximization of national interests.

The foreign and security challenges facing Japan cannot be solved in the short term. For the Takaichi administration to execute a robust diplomacy without using the constraint of unstable domestic politics as an excuse, it requires leadership and, above all, a strategic will to prioritize the national interest. At this historic turning point, the international community is closely watching what kind of strategic diplomacy the first female Prime Minister will unfold. It is no exaggeration to say that her skill will determine the future of Japan.



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