



A PARALLEL WORLD AMID DIPLOMATIC STALEMATE: THE CURRENT STATE AND CHALLENGES OF JAPAN–CHINA RELATIONS

Shin Kawashima

About the Author



SHIN KAWASHIMA

Shin Kawashima is the professor of the Department of International Relations, in the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, at the University of Tokyo. He is Visiting Professor at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken), appointed in 2026. His research covers Chinese/Taiwanese diplomatic history and the contemporary international relations in East Asia. His first book, *Formation of Chinese Modern Diplomacy* (2004), was awarded the Suntory Academic Prize in 2004. He received the Foreign Minister's Award in 2023. Aside from his academic positions, he is involved in policy think tanks, including Nakasone Peace Institute (NPI) as Executive Director of Research, and JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development as Visiting Fellow. He is Senior Associate Member of ROLES and has been committed to ROLES activities since its establishment in 2020 as a group leader of several research groups on China, Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific.

Cover image: hapelinium / shutterstock.com

The views expressed in this report are those of the author(s) alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Toda Peace Institute. An online edition of this and related reports and policy briefs can be downloaded on our website: toda.org/policy-briefs-and-resources.html



Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5F,
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku
Tokyo 160-0017, Japan

Tel. +81-3-3356-5481
Fax. +81-3-3356-5482
Email: contact@toda.org

© 2026 Toda Peace Institute

Abstract

Although Japan and the People's Republic of China normalized diplomatic relations in September 1972, current Japan–China relations are said to be at their “worst since normalization.” The trigger for the deterioration of relations is believed to have been remarks made by Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi in the Diet on November 7, 2025. Comparisons can be made with the critical juncture in Sino-Japanese relations reached in the fall of 2012. In the light of three developments since November 2025, this policy brief recommends ways in which Japan–China relations might be restored to a normal level allowing summit meetings to take place.

The current state of Japan–China Relations

Although Japan and the People's Republic of China normalized diplomatic relations in September 1972, current Japan–China relations are said to be at their “worst since normalization.” The trigger for the deterioration of relations is believed to have been remarks made by Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi in the Diet on November 7, 2025.[1]

China has demanded that she retract these remarks, but Prime Minister Takaichi has not done so. From the Japanese government's perspective, Prime Minister Takaichi was simply responding to a question regarding what constitutes a “situation threatening the survival of the nation” in the context of the right to collective self-defence, and the Taiwan Strait was merely cited as an example in that context. Furthermore, the government maintains that its response to that example did not represent a change in the Japanese government's long-standing stance.

On the other hand, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi maintains that she was not discussing Japan's Taiwan policy in that response.[2] In fact, as Prime Minister Takaichi has stated in the Diet since her remarks on November 7, the Japanese government maintains that its Taiwan policy has not changed since 1972.

However, the Chinese government claims that Japan has interfered in its internal affairs regarding the Taiwan issue by brandishing military force, and there is a significant discrepancy in perception between the two sides. The Chinese government views Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi as promoting Japan's “return to militarism” and significantly altering the course toward an invasion of Taiwan;[3] consequently, it has not only imposed various sanctions on Japan but has also suspended people-to-people exchanges. However, it is difficult to say that the Japanese government has sufficiently explained its stance and views to the Chinese side, nor can it be said to be enthusiastic about normalizing relations.

[1] Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's remarks on November 7, 2025, were made during a debate with Democratic Party of Japan Representative Katsuya Okada at the House of Representatives Budget Committee. Although the transcript is available only in Japanese, it can be viewed at the following URL: <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/detail?minId=121905261X00220251107&t=1> Accessed May 15, 2026.

[2] At the plenary session of the House of Councillors on December 3, 2025, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi stated, “Our government's basic position on Taiwan is in accordance with the 1972 Japan-China Joint Communiqué, and there has been no change whatsoever to this position.” <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/detail?minId=121915254X00720251203¤t=4> Accessed May 15, 2026.

[3] On December 19, 2025, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to a reporter's question as follows: Eighty years ago, the Japanese people were given an empty promise that “war could lead to victory,” yet they were left to bear the bitter cost of utter defeat. History and reality have proven that a return to militarism is a wrong path and is bound to be a dead end. Making a clean break from militarism and sincerely pursuing a path of peaceful development is a prerequisite for Japan to gain the trust and understanding of the international community, particularly its Asian neighbors, and it is also the right choice that serves the fundamental interests of the Japanese people. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202512/t20251219_11776886.shtml Accessed May 15, 2026.

Currently, the highest-level channel between Japan and China is between the Chinese ambassador stationed in Tokyo and Japan's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs; beyond that, the line of communication between the Japanese ambassador in Beijing and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs is essentially non-functional. Of course, exchanges related to APEC and other forums do exist, but political and diplomatic channels have narrowed considerably.

Looking back, Sino-Japanese relations reached a critical juncture in the fall of 2012, when the Japanese government nationalized privately owned land on the Senkaku Islands. At that time, relations were not normalized until the fall of 2014—nearly two years later. So, when comparing the situation since November 2025 with that of 2012, what similarities and differences can be identified?[4]

Similarities between 2012 and 2025

The author believes that while there are several similarities between the two periods, there are also differences. One similarity is that, first, when China criticizes specific Japanese politicians (in this case, the prime minister), the criticism begins even before the specific incident or event that triggers it and then escalates after that incident or event occurs. China's criticism of Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda had already begun before the conversion of privately owned land on the Senkaku Islands into state-owned land in September 2012. The same was true for Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. Even before Sanae Takaichi became president of the Liberal Democratic Party and Prime Minister of Japan, Chinese media had described Japan's political landscape as increasingly "right-wing" and criticized Ms. Takaichi, then a member of the Diet, as a right-wing lawmaker.[5]

Second, China tends to exaggerate the significance of certain incidents or events, publicizing them both domestically and internationally to strongly condemn the other country, while using this to alter the status quo. Between 2012 and 2014, while strongly condemning Japan, China ultimately allowed its government vessels to routinely 'intrude' into the territorial waters and contiguous zones surrounding the Senkaku Islands. The first time a Chinese government vessel entered the Senkaku Islands' territorial waters was on December 8, 2008; prior to that, no Chinese government vessel had ever entered the Senkaku Islands' territorial waters.[6] It was China that altered the status quo, and to suppress various domestic movements in Japan protesting this Chinese alteration and to maintain the status quo, the Japanese government purchased private land on the Senkaku Islands and converted it into state-owned land. However, despite having altered the status quo itself, the Chinese government accused Japan of doing so, organized anti-Japanese demonstrations, and condemned the Japanese government. Meanwhile, China established a 'new normal' in which its government vessels routinely 'intrude' into the territorial waters of the Senkaku Islands. By the time the Japan–China summit was held in the fall of 2014, this new normal—in which Chinese government vessels routinely intrude into the territorial waters and contiguous zones of the Senkaku Islands—had already been firmly established.

It remains unclear exactly what kind of 'new normal' China intends to create after November 2025. However, China regards the East China Sea and the South China Sea as marginal sea, but in recent years it has been seeking to further strengthen its control over these two bodies of water. Historically, rights in the East China Sea were divided along the 'median line' with Japan, but in recent times, Chinese activities crossing that line

[4] Shin Kawashima, "Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's Remarks and Japan–China–Taiwan Relations—The Logic Behind China's Unyielding Position", *JIIA website*, January 14, 2026. <https://www.jia.or.jp/eng/report/2026/01/20260114-01.html> Accessed May 15, 2026.

[5] Even before Representative Sanae Takaichi became Prime Minister, Chinese media outlets had published various articles criticizing her as a right-winger; for now, please refer to the following: https://www.guancha.cn/international/2022_08_06_652637.shtml Accessed May 15, 2026.

[6] "The numbers of China Coast Guard and other vessels that entered Japan's contiguous zone or intruded into territorial sea surrounding the Senkaku Islands", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100857530.pdf> Accessed May 15, 2026.

have become increasingly prominent. Furthermore, the ‘exercise’ conducted by China at the end of December 2025, involving more than 2,000 fishing vessels (mainly from Zhejiang Province), also poses a significant threat to Japan. Although this took place on the Chinese side of the median line, thousands of vessels suddenly formed a straight line to create an ‘inverted L’ shape before dispersing again.[7]

Furthermore, a new development in 2025 is that China has established a fleet of three aircraft carriers, and it has become the norm for them to operate beyond the First Island Chain—which stretches from Okinawa to Taiwan—and to conduct activities between the First and Second Island Chains. It appears that China is currently establishing a ‘new normal’ for the 2020s, with military vessels operating routinely east of the Japanese islands. This ‘new normal’ is characterized by the integration of military and non-military activities. While oceanographic surveys are permitted under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, when conducted frequently around Okinawa or Taiwan, concerns arise about their connection to military activities. China’s activities in this gray zone are also a defining feature of this ‘new normal’.

Differences between 2012 and 2025

When comparing 2012 and 2025, there are several key differences. These relate to the technological transformations of the past decade or so, as well as changes in China’s domestic politics. First is the diversification of sanctions China imposes on Japan. The list is endless: suspension of seafood imports, drastic restrictions on tourists, trade restrictions on dual-use goods under security provisions, and curbs on rare earth exports. This is likely the arsenal of sanctions China has built up over the past decade or so.

Second is the thoroughness of its domestic and international propaganda. Having already acquired advanced technologies such as AI, China is conducting a thorough propaganda campaign that reaches down to the grassroots level of society, condemning Prime Minister Takaichi and intensifying criticism of Japan by linking it to the Taiwan issue. Since the 2025 issue was related to Taiwan, the level of criticism is extremely high, and it is being treated as a matter of ‘national security’ and ‘core interests’. However, unlike in 2012, no anti-Japanese demonstrations have occurred in China in 2025. Within China, demonstrations and other forms of public protest are viewed as dangerous because they can cause political and social turmoil, regardless of the reason, and organizing them is difficult. In other words, demonstrations have become harder to carry out due to the thorough enforcement of social control.

Third, propaganda targeting Japan has become even more thorough than before, with large-scale infiltration campaigns being carried out in Japanese. However, it is important to note that China’s infiltration efforts toward Japan are no longer merely propaganda; they have developed a tendency to attempt to divide Japanese society itself. This is a characteristic phenomenon of recent infiltration campaigns by Russia and China aimed at dividing societies.

Fourth, while both in 2012 and 2025, China accuses Japan of militarism and criticizes it over historical issues, there has been a shift in the specifics of these accusations. By 2025, China will label Japan as a ‘new type of militarist state’, criticize Japan’s security policy, and emphasize that the San Francisco Peace Treaty regime is invalid, thereby raising questions about the status of Taiwan and Okinawa. In other words, it can be seen that historical issues and China’s foreign policy have become integrated.

Of course, Japan’s security policies have evolved between 2012 and 2025 due to changes in the international environment, particularly shifts in the nature of the Japan–US alliance. However, China’s criticism of Japan in 2025 differs from that of 2012 in terms of content, volume, and methodology, and has increased in scale.

[7] “Formations of thousands of Chinese fishing boats stir worries in Japan”, *NIKKEI ASIA*, February 19, 2026. <https://asia.nikkei.com/politics/international-relations/japan-china-tensions/formations-of-thousands-of-chinese-fishing-boats-stir-worries-in-japan> Accessed 15 May, 2026.

Developments since November 2025

What are the consequences of this situation? The most serious issue is that, first, with the restriction of people-to-people exchanges and the blocking of information within China—combined with the fact that it has become increasingly difficult to gauge the situation in Chinese society from within Japan—the understanding of facts and the perception of the situation among those discussing Sino-Japanese relations on both sides have diverged to the point where they seem to exist in parallel worlds. The discourse on Japan–China relations in the Japanese-speaking world and that in the Chinese-speaking world have become so different that it is hard to believe they are discussing the same events. This poses a major obstacle to normalizing relations.

Second, it appears that both sides have given up on dialogue. China criticizes Japan, while Japan fails to provide sufficient explanations regarding China's suspicions. Neither side is making moves to improve relations; instead, each, based on its own perception of the facts, continues to criticize the other without showing any willingness to normalize relations, creating a situation that appears to be complete non-communication. As indicated by a survey by the Genron NPO while Japanese sentiment toward China is extremely negative, over 60 per cent of respondents believe that Sino-Japanese relations are important for Japan. In China, however, not only has sentiment toward Japan deteriorated significantly in recent years, but the view that Sino-Japanese relations are important for China has also declined substantially.^[8] This likely stems from the fact that the Japanese economy is playing a decreasing role in the Chinese economy, as well as from the fact that, within China's foreign policy Japan is positioned as a dangerous entity that threatens China's 'national security'. Textbooks on international politics generally state that, when enhancing deterrence, it is a prerequisite to communicate one's intentions through diplomatic negotiations and other means. If this situation continues, it is foreseeable that the security dilemma between Japan and China will escalate further.

Third, communication between Japan and China has stalled not only at the government level but also at that of the private sector.^[9] This is evident in the fact that study abroad programs and academic exchanges with Japan have been virtually suspended within China (including the suspension of new state scholarships and the halting of procedures for visits to Japan). Furthermore, economic exchanges are also being significantly curtailed. In 2012, economic exchanges were still proceeding to a certain extent. Even earlier, during the early 2000s—a period often described as “cold politics, warm economics”—economic exchanges remained active despite the complete freeze in political relations. However, from the fall of 2025 to the present, politics and economics have been moving in lockstep. This is evident not only in China's imposition of sanctions on Japan under the security provisions of the WTO and other agreements in response to economic security concerns, but also in the curtailment of people-to-people exchanges.

[8] For the Genron NPO Japan-China Public Opinion Survey, see the following link: https://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion_polls/ Accessed 15 May, 2026.

[9] From 2012 to 2014, there were efforts at the political level to normalize relations between Japan and China, and attempts were made, in collaboration with the business community and others, to achieve this normalization. Shin Kawashima, “Japanese Diplomacy and the “Improvement” in Sino-Japanese Relations”, *Asia Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 1, January 2019. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26642269> Accessed 15 May, 2026.

The future outlook for Japan–China relations

As described above, Japan–China relations are currently in an extremely strained state, and no breakthrough toward improvement is on the horizon. Although some former cabinet ministers visited China in early May 2026, this has not led to any new developments. Furthermore, with the APEC summit scheduled for November in Shenzhen, various preparatory meetings are being held in China, the host country, and personnel from Japan have been dispatched to attend them. Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Akazawa's visit to China is part of this effort. There is also some limited private-sector exchange. However, considering the visits to China in May 2014 by a parliamentary delegation, former prime ministers, and the LDP's vice president, it must be said that progress toward normalizing relations has been sluggish.

However, maintaining good relations with neighbouring countries is the foundation of national security, and continuing dialogue while enhancing capabilities is essential to strengthening deterrence. China's economic power is already more than four times Japan's, and its military superiority continues to grow. While strengthening relations with the United States and like-minded nations is important for Japan's national security, it must not neglect dialogue—not only to enhance deterrence, including through dialogue with China—but also to convey its own policies and intentions. Currently, there is an atmosphere in Tokyo that suggests there is no need to explain its policies and intentions to Beijing. This must change. On the other hand, there are also aspects where China avoids dialogue with Japan. To bring China back to the table for dialogue and conversation, it will likely be necessary for Japan to promote dialogue through a unified effort by both the public and private sectors.

Policy proposals

The immediate goal should be to restore relations to a normal level where summit meetings can take place. What can Japan do to achieve this? First, the Japanese government must provide appropriate explanations regarding China's concerns. Even if the Chinese side does not accept them, it is important to demonstrate a willingness to explain and to share those explanations with third countries. In particular, regarding Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's remarks on November 7, 2025—for which the Japanese government has not even released an official English translation—there are questions about the government's willingness to explain. Second, political figures, including members of the Diet and bureaucrats, should spare no effort in making visible 'efforts' to knock on China's door. At the very least, it is important to demonstrate that Japan takes the initiative to reach out. Japanese lawmakers should overcome their fear that if they reach out to China, they will be viewed domestically as 'pandering to China' and risk losing their seats in future elections. That said, parliamentary elections have just been held, so it could be argued that this is a politically feasible period for visits to China. Third, in sectors with close ties to China—particularly the business community—it is necessary to maintain trade and investments as usual. In fact, even under these circumstances, exchanges between Japan and China in the socio-economic sphere do continue.

However, while seeking to normalize relations through high-level exchanges, we must be careful not to easily accept changes to the status quo by China, as happened with the realization of the 'new normal' around the Senkaku Islands in 2012.

On the other hand, Japan may also expect many conciliatory moves from the Chinese side. China's current stance is extremely hardline; it is propagating a distorted image of Japan—such as labeling it "neo-militarist"—that is far removed from reality. Furthermore, with major personnel changes looming in 2027, China must conduct its policies with caution. Under these circumstances, it is unlikely that China will revise its stance of demanding that Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi "withdraw her remarks" or that voices calling for the normalization of relations with Japan will emerge from the Chinese side. Nevertheless, even if only a little, some people in China are willing to engage in dialogue with Japan. From Japan's perspective, it is necessary to continue efforts to normalize relations—while grasping any opportunity for conversation or dialogue and simultaneously explaining the content and intent of its policies to the outside world—in order to safeguard its national interests and ensure a stable security environment in East Asia.



THE TODA PEACE INSTITUTE

The Toda Peace Institute is an independent, nonpartisan institute committed to advancing a more just and peaceful world through policy-oriented peace research and practice. The Institute commissions evidence-based research, convenes multi-track and multi-disciplinary problem-solving workshops and seminars, and promotes dialogue across ethnic, cultural, religious and political divides. It catalyses practical, policy-oriented conversations between theoretical experts, practitioners, policymakers and civil society leaders in order to discern innovative and creative solutions to the major problems confronting the world in the twenty-first century (see www.toda.org for more information).

CONTACT US

Toda Peace Institute

Samon Eleven Bldg. 5 th Floor
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0017, Japan

Email

contact@toda.org

Sign up for the Toda Peace Institute mailing list

<https://toda.org/policy-briefs-and-resources/email-newsletter.html>

Connect with us on the following media.

YouTube: @todapeaceinstitute3917

X (Twitter): <https://twitter.com/TodaInstitute>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TodaInstitute>