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Takaichi: A Prime Minister With a Backbone and Common Sense

Takaichi understands that Japan's strategic interests depend on a close relationship with America.

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Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi (C, front row) poses during a photo session with members of her cabinet at the prime minister's office in Tokyo on Oct. 21, 2025. Jia Haocheng/AFP via Getty Images

Commentary

Polls suggest Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's ruling coalition is headed for a strong victory in the upcoming election on Feb. 8. From a national security perspective, this would be good for Japan and for the United States.

Takaichi is one of the very few Japanese prime ministers in the last 30 years to take office with a decent knowledge of national security and what Japan needs to do to defend itself. She also understands the malevolent nature of the Chinese communist regime and the threat posed to Japan.

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Will a decisive win give Takaichi a stronger hand in diplomacy, particularly with China?

A solid election victory will, of course, strengthen Takaichi's position in diplomacy and foreign affairs. But Takaichi has already taken a firm approach toward China following Beijing's tantrum after the prime minister noted Taiwan is important to Japan's national security.

And Takaichi has not backed down or made conciliatory gestures toward China—as if Japan had done something wrong—as Japanese administrations usually do.

If she wins big, Takaichi will be even less likely to retreat in the face of Chinese intimidation. And opposition attacks on Takaichi's "tough on China" stance will lose steam, since, by definition, the public mostly supports her actions.

Beijing deserves credit for increasing Takaichi's popularity and for allowing her to demonstrate firm leadership so soon after taking office. The Japanese public (far more "anti-China" and pro-defense than is Japan's political class) has always responded well to strong, well-articulated leadership—on the rare occasions they are exposed to it. Takaichi is showing such leadership.

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Would Takaichi undertake a more confrontational stance toward Beijing?

Probably not. She doesn't need to. Takaichi is already looking after Japan's interests by improving national defense and economic security, and also bolstering the U.S.–Japan alliance while linking up with other free nations to strengthen overall defense.

What Takaichi is doing is prudent and common sense. It is not confrontational.

The Chinese communists think that anyone trying to defend themselves from Chinese aggression and pressure is being "confrontational."

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Would a tough stance force China to re-engage with Japan?

Maybe eventually. But the Chinese regime's strong stance against Takaichi suggests that Beijing is unlikely to back down in the near term. Instead, it will keep attacking Takaichi with vile language, trying to stoke regional fears of (imaginary) Japanese "militarism," and also pressuring Japan via the People's Liberation Army Navy, Coast Guard, maritime militia, and fishing boats constantly intruding in Japan's maritime territory.

And the Chinese and Russians will also apply pressure together.

The Chinese communists will also try to split the U.S.–Japan alliance, though likely with little success. Indeed, Takaichi understands that Japan’s strategic interests depend on a close relationship with America. Like former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, she realizes that without the United States, Japan cannot adequately defend itself or its interests against Chinese aggression.

Fortunately, Japanese and American geopolitical interests also generally correspond, and the Japanese public overwhelmingly supports the U.S.–Japan defense treaty.

Would Takaichi’s defense policies become more hawkish?

No. As noted, Takaichi is doing nothing unreasonable. And the efforts to improve Japan’s defense are all being done in the context of a strategic defense, and with the United States. Japan lacks the capability—such as manpower, weapons, and hardware—or the desire to threaten its neighbors with aggressive, offensive action.

As for Takaichi being “hawkish”: If “hawkish” means she is taking commonsensical and long-overdue steps to improve Japan’s military, I suppose that’s appropriate language. But the word is invariably used to describe behavior that resembles that of Japan in the 1930s. That is wrong and dishonest. She is doing what any national leader would be doing to protect her country.

What will be Takaichi’s immediate security priorities in the days after her election victory?

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Takaichi will need to find and allocate funds for national defense and, most importantly, address the Japan Self-Defense Forces’ (JSDF) longstanding problem of attracting new recruits. Ensuring the JSDF can operate jointly and effectively with U.S. forces is another priority.

Expanding defense production and economic security—especially when it comes to critical minerals, and reducing China-dependent supply chains—are other essential tasks.

It’s still early, but compared to the 19 prime ministers I’ve seen since coming to Japan in 1993, Takaichi could be one of the very best for Japan—and for the United States (and every other free nation).

Hopefully, Washington recognizes what it has with Takaichi in charge of Japan. Among major U.S. allies, Japan is the only one that is taking its defense seriously and not cozying up to the Chinese communists.

America could use a few more such countries and leaders.

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