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Ishiba looks to Beijing but will this time be different?

Key takeaways

- After Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi visited China in December, Tokyo is preparing to host Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in February and possibly President Xi Jinping later in 2025.
- Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru has signaled his commitment to improving the relationship with China, similar to Japan's approach during the first Trump administration.
- However, the shift to a more overt "dual hedging" strategy by Japan would face significant obstacles.

The Japanese government is preparing to host a visit to Japan by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in February, which could be a preliminary step ahead of a possible state visit by President Xi Jinping later this year. Wang's visit, following soon after visits to China by Japanese Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi and outgoing national security adviser Akiba Takeo in December and November respectively, signals that there may be more momentum in repairing the Japan-China relationship in 2025, as both governments prepare for the uncertain impact of the second Trump administration.

Xi has only visited Japan once since assuming China's leadership, but never on a state visit; his sole visit was in 2019 to attend the G20 summit in Osaka. Then-prime minister Abe Shinzō had been working towards hosting Xi in 2020, but the state visit was postponed first due to Covid-19 and then due to a worsening bilateral relationship that made a visit by Xi politically difficult for Japan's leaders. If it were to happen, it would be an indication that the two governments, despite ongoing structural challenges, recognize the need for a more constructive relationship.

To be sure, the Ishiba government is proceeding cautiously. During his visit to Beijing in December, for example, Foreign Minister Iwaya emphasized the importance of increasing cooperation and communication, but also pressed Beijing on the need to resolve several areas of concern for Japan, including relaxing restrictions on imports of Japanese fisheries and threats to the safety and security of Japanese nationals in China (including not only violence against Japanese nationals but also the use of counter-espionage laws to detain individuals). Iwaya also expressed Japan's concerns about China's growing military power and its activities in the East and South China Seas and the Taiwan Strait. That said, the two governments continued to build on the [gradual progress](#) made in improving relations over the past year, with both announcing in late 2024 that they would relax visa requirements for each other's nationals.

Towards dual hedging?

The question now is whether Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru is preparing to pursue a similar course of action towards China as Abe did during Donald Trump's first term or whether he is seeking something more ambitious. While Abe drew close to Trump, he also began a sustained campaign of diplomatic outreach to China immediately after the 2016 US election as he worked to stabilize the bilateral relationship and find new areas for economic cooperation. There were, however, limits to how far Japan's outreach to China could go; Tokyo's fears of Chinese military power and its determination to preserve its alliance with the United States meant the Japanese government would aim for stability in the bilateral relationship but no further. Now, with Trump hinting at potentially disruptive changes not only to global trading rules but also US security guarantees and its commitment to upholding post-1945 international norms, the Ishiba government could adopt something like the "dual hedging" strategies pursued by, for example, Southeast Asian countries, which would mean a more concerted effort to strengthen Japan's relationship with China (though it would also mean ongoing investments in Japan's defense capabilities and its relationships with other security partners through the region, as well as with the US).

Ishiba, who has said that Japan is "not truly independent" due to the nature of its relationship with the United States, may be more intellectually prepared for a "dual hedging" strategy than other Japanese leaders. In a television appearance on 29 December, he expressed his determination to visit China, saying, "A relationship of trust between leaders cannot be established superficially, so it is necessary to [meet] repeatedly." He is sensitive to military threats – in the same appearance he said the "adventuristic use of force" is absolutely unacceptable – but nevertheless has evinced a greater willingness to pursue a strategic reset with China than perhaps any Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leader since Fukuda Yasuo in 2007-2008.

Regardless of Ishiba's inclinations, however, he would still face significant obstacles to a broader strategic shift. First, whatever misgivings Japan's foreign policy establishment has about the incoming US administration, the relationship with the United States will remain Tokyo's top strategic priority, as there is no ready substitute for US military power in maintaining deterrence in East Asia. Unless and until Washington takes

actions that signal to Tokyo that it can no longer rely on US security guarantees, Ishiba and his government will seek ways to preserve and strengthen the US-Japan relationship, working with sympathetic members of the administration and Congress to defend Japan's equities. To be sure, Tokyo will be watching closely for any signs of strategic abandonment by the United States, but it will be careful not to invite Washington's distrust (which could make abandonment a self-fulfilling prophecy).

Second, Ishiba will have less freedom to pursue rapprochement with Beijing than Abe, a bona fide China hawk with solid support from the right wing, had. Not only is Ishiba politically weaker than Abe, he also is distrusted by the LDP right, which already cast suspicion on Iwaya's visit to Beijing (some lawmakers have complained that he made concessions on visas for Chinese nationals without consulting with the party) and warned that Ishiba could harm Japan's relationship with the United States. LDP lawmakers have already questioned Ishiba's ability to manage the relationship with Trump, and they would be quick to point to an enthusiastic approach towards cooperation with China as a sign of his poor skills. At this point, there is not a consensus within the LDP, let alone within the political establishment more broadly, in favor of a meaningful strategic pivot.

Finally, it is unclear whether Beijing is prepared to take the kinds of steps that would enable Tokyo to commit more fully to a dual hedging strategy. Xi has subtly hinted that he sees Ishiba – whose mentor, Tanaka Kakuei, engineered the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Japan – as a potentially valuable partner for China. When he met Ishiba in Peru in November, Xi referenced Tanaka and used a quote from the philosopher Mencius that Tanaka too had cited, interpreted as a sign of Xi's interest in working with the Japanese prime minister. But it remains to be seen whether this is merely a “charm offensive” aiming for superficial changes to the relationship or whether Beijing is prepared to take more concrete actions that could reduce Japan's fears of China's military power or potential economic coercion. Without the latter, Ishiba's outreach towards Beijing will likely look similar to past efforts: the two governments may resume high-level communications and talk about building a mutually beneficial relationship, but it will be highly vulnerable to backsliding at the first sign of activity that highlights the threat China poses to Japan's national security.

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