



J A P A N

F O R E S I G H T

18 March 2026

## Critical test awaits Takaichi in Washington

### Key takeaways

- Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae arrives in Washington Wednesday for a high-stakes summit with US President Donald Trump.
- While Takaichi had sought a summit with Trump to seek reassurance before Trump's trip to China, she will now have to talk face-to-face with Trump as he seeks assistance for the US-led war against Iran, assistance that domestic circumstances make it difficult for Takaichi to offer.
- For the summit to be a success, Takaichi has to avoid a public rift with Trump, but in a larger sense underlying tensions in the bilateral relationship will continue to dog her premiership.

---

Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae will arrive in Washington Wednesday for an official visit with US President Donald Trump on Thursday, 19 March, her first trip to the US since becoming prime minister in October 2025.

This visit, which the Japanese government has sought for months with an eye towards ensuring an opportunity for Takaichi to speak directly with Trump before he travels to Beijing for a summit with Xi Jinping, was always going to be challenging for the prime minister. Notwithstanding her cordial meeting with Trump in October – when he praised her as a “winner” – within the government and ruling parties there has been uneasiness over the emerging gap between Washington and Tokyo over China and the potential that a Trump-Xi meeting could widen the gap and undermine deterrence in East Asia. At the same time, it was going to be a meeting shaped by US demands for Japan to do more: spend more on defense (including arms purchases from the US) and support for US forces in Japan, invest more in the US as part of the 2025 US-Japan trade and investment agreement, and open Japan's economy more to US exports. Takaichi's landslide electoral victory in February has if anything contributed to more pressure on

Takaichi on all fronts, in that the Trump administration, satisfied that Takaichi now faces fewer of the domestic constraints that, in Washington's eyes, past prime ministers have used to justify inaction, will have a harder time refusing US demands across the board.

But if the summit was already going to be challenging, the US-led war against Iran has complicated it in two ways.

### **Iran tops the agenda**

First, the US government's attention is now firmly on the war effort in the Middle East and Trump is judging US allies in Europe and Asia by their willingness to support it. Takaichi has the poor luck to be arriving in Washington at a particularly sensitive moment for all US allies. The fact is that Takaichi cannot offer the backing in the Strait of Hormuz that Trump is seeking. Domestic political constraints remain salient, including both public opinion – the war is overwhelmingly unpopular in Japan, with support for the US-led war in the single digits – and Japan's national security legal framework.

Indeed, this crisis has highlighted the degree to which the 2015 codification of the Abe government's reinterpretation of the constitution to permit the exercise of the right of collective self-defense was in fact limited. As Abe Shinzō and members of his government emphasized in 2015, the new laws would not enable Japan to aid the United States in any and all circumstances. Japan could not support a preventive war and the government must demonstrate that the conflict is either a "survival-threatening situation" or that Japan is on the brink of being attacked. While the Takaichi government has avoided making a legal judgment about the nature of the war, it would face a significant outcry – including from within the LDP – if it were to deem the war consistent with international law, thereby permitting actions outlined in the 2015 laws.

The fact remains that while Takaichi and the LDP want to strengthen Japan's armed forces, they remain overwhelmingly focused on Japan's security and the military balance in East Asia. Neither the government nor the LDP have evinced much appetite for spending political capital to clear domestic hurdles and send the Self-Defense Forces into a warzone, though she may face some countervailing pressure from the right wing, arguing that doing whatever it takes to keep the US committed to Japan truly means doing whatever it takes, including going to war. In fact, the conservative *Sankei Shimbun* made this argument in an editorial earlier this week.

The prime minister is trying to avoid having to say no outright to Trump but also has little to offer. She may try to repeat what Abe did in 2019 when tensions mounted in the Strait of Hormuz – sending some Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) ships to the region on an intelligence-gathering mission but not to participate in coalition activities in the Persian Gulf. But while Abe was able to secure Trump's blessing (and Iran's tacit understanding) for that action, it may be more difficult to gain Trump's understanding this time, given the severity of the conflict. It is conceivable that this kind of half-hearted gesture might be more poorly received than not sending anything.

## A Japan that cannot say no

Beyond the direct friction over the war itself, the war essentially amplifies all of the challenges that the Takaichi government already faced with the Trump administration, in that a refusal to support Trump's war against Iran could limit Takaichi's ability to resist US demands in other areas, for example in greenlighting investment [commitments](#) as part of the bilateral investment framework, with a second round of projects expected to be announced Thursday. Tokyo also may have a harder time navigating the evolving shape of US trade barriers, as it seeks to convince the Trump administration to reintroduce the concessions it made on the IEEPA tariffs invalidated by the Supreme Court to the new Section 122 tariffs as well as any potential trade barriers that could result from newly launched Section 301 investigations that include Japan.

At the most basic level, Takaichi's visit – which will include a working lunch and dinner in addition to the official meetings, but reportedly not a joint press conference – can be successful if she avoids a public blowup with Trump akin to the Oval Office meeting between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy last year. She needs to maintain the positive optics from her summit with Trump last year to dispel some of the concerns about the bilateral relationship that have clouded her preparations for the Washington visit. But even if she has a superficially successful summit, the current structural [reality](#) of the relationship – Japan needs the US more than the Trump administration needs Japan – means that her leverage over the US is limited. This will be an enduring source of strategic vulnerability, since the Japanese government may not feel fully confident in US deterrent power (particularly with the US preoccupied with Iran for the foreseeable future), but also domestic political vulnerability for Takaichi as lawmakers – and not just in the opposition parties – question the asymmetry in the US-Japan relationship.

---

### Tobias Harris

Founder and Principal  
Japan Foresight LLC  
[tobias@japanforesight.com](mailto:tobias@japanforesight.com)  
+1.847.738.4048

---