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Regional trip shows guiding principles of Takaichi diplomacy

Key takeaways

- During her Golden Week travel to Vietnam and Australia, Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae not only inked new agreements with strategic partners but also provided new insight into her government's approach to foreign policy.
- In updating the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept for a new era, Takaichi, in contrast to the late Abe Shinzō's focus on connectivity, emphasized "resilience," matching her focus on increasing Japan's self-reliance and autonomy.
- It was also notable how little Takaichi had to say in her meetings with her Vietnamese and Australian counterparts about a role for the United States in Asia, an implicit confirmation that Asian powers may no longer be looking to Washington for leadership in strengthening regional cooperation in the face of China's growing influence.

Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae has returned to Japan following a Golden Week trip that included stops in Vietnam and Australia. Although the trip was relatively short, it nevertheless provides valuable insight into how the Takaichi government is approaching foreign policy.

First, in Hanoi the prime minister delivered an address outlining a new vision of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), updating the concept articulated by the late Abe Shinzō a decade ago. In her address, Takaichi made clear that in her regional diplomacy **she wants to export to Japan's regional partners the approach she is pursuing for Japan's own national security, bolstering autonomy and self-reliance in an increasingly dangerous region.** "It is essential," she said, "for countries in the region to acquire 'resilience' and capability to have freedom to decide for themselves across the economic, social, and security domains so that they can determine their own future in the complex interdependent relations." If the watchword for Abe's original vision

for FOIP was “connectivity” – he wanted to ensure that the greater Indo-Pacific region, extending to Africa where he first unveiled the concept, would be open for trade and investment – “resilience” is Takaichi’s. This approach also shaped the agenda in her bilateral meetings with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. During these meetings, they signed a new “Joint Declaration on Economic Security Cooperation,” which serves as “coordinated, strategic guidance to advance our bilateral cooperation on economic security in a manner that enhances both strategic autonomy and indispensability, and strengthens economic resilience in the Indo-Pacific region as well as the international economic order.” The declaration not only calls for improved bilateral policy coordination but active cooperation between governments and with businesses to promote investment in resilient supply chains for “key goods such as energy, critical minerals, food and other important industrial and manufactured goods.”

Second, with the Hormuz crisis still ongoing, **energy diplomacy has grown in importance alongside Japan’s efforts to work with like-minded partners on critical mineral supply chains.** The Partnership On Wide Energy and Resources Resilience (POWER Asia), announced at a virtual summit of the Asia Zero Emissions Community (AZEC) in April, is now the flagship platform for Japan to support Asian partners in their efforts to secure crude oil and petroleum products in the near term but also diversify away from Middle Eastern suppliers and towards alternative sources of energy over the longer term, towards which Japan pledged JPY 1.5tn. In Hanoi, Takaichi and Vietnamese President To Lam confirmed that POWER Asia’s first project will be crude oil procurement for a Vietnamese refinery, backed by the Nippon Export and Investment Insurance (NEXI) corporation. Likewise, Takaichi and Albanese issued a separate joint statement on energy security, pledging to ensure stable flows of energy between Japan and Australia (liquefied natural gas, coal, and refined fuel products) and work together to promote energy security across the region. Energy diplomacy is certain to remain a major pillar of the Takaichi government’s foreign policy agenda as China uses the Hormuz crisis to boost its exports of clean energy technologies.

Third, in these initiatives it is apparent that **Japan’s approach to Asia is becoming increasingly decoupled from its partnership with the United States.** The second Trump administration, whether because it is preoccupied with other issues, is stubbornly focused mainly on bilateral relationships, or because its Asia policy appears to have narrowed to the simultaneous focus on security in the “first island chain” and the pursuit of a deal with China, has evinced little interest in regional cooperation. The Quad, mentioned in passing in the Japan-Australia economic security declaration, appears to be fading; the group has yet to have a leaders’ summit since the start of the second Trump administration. While Japan has for more than a decade sought to articulate a leadership role for itself in the region, these efforts were generally integrated with efforts to keep the US engaged in the region; the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for a Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) was, after all, a fallback after the US withdrew from TPP. What Takaichi showed in both Hanoi and Canberra is a Japan prepared to advance its own initiatives for promoting the security and independence of its regional partners with at most passing references to the United States. It seems significant that in updating FOIP, a concept that the Abe government had proudly convinced both the first Trump and Biden administrations to adopt as part of their thinking about Asia policy, Takaichi made no mention of a part for the US in advancing this vision. This extends to security cooperation, particularly with Australia, with

the two governments advancing their “quasi-alliance” to a level unmatched by any of Japan’s bilateral relationships save its alliance with the US. Whether this qualifies as a hedge or “Plan B,” the Takaichi government is not waiting for US regional leadership to reappear. The strategic review of the government’s three national security documents over the coming months will likely provide a more systematic articulation of this approach.

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